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APOCALYPTIC ACTS: RHETORIC, ETHICS, COMMUNITY, AND FUTURITY

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by

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Abstract

“Apocalyptic Acts: Rhetoric, Ethics, Community and Futurity”

This study examines the rhetoric of apocalypse in contemporary politics, theory, and literature. By tradition, apocalyptic discourse has anticipated a catastrophic interruption that would bring forth a culminating event. The catastrophic event detailed in apocalyptic writing typically forecasts a devastating end-time that engenders ethical judgment—a conclusion that opens the possibility for a renewed sense of community and futurity.

The scope of this interdisciplinary study includes a diverse group of thinkers that ranges from Kenneth Burke, Jacques Derrida, Friedrich Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze to the literary work of William S. Burroughs. Throughout the dissertation, I engage the paradox of catastrophe as it appears in the divergent notions of apocalypse: in political matters (the Death Penalty); in contemporary philosophical thinking (Burke, Derrida, and Nietzsche); and contemporary literature (Burroughs).

I believe this study contributes to the ongoing discussion between rhetoric and contemporary philosophy concerning ethics. I also foresee this project opening pedagogical opportunities to examine the challenging, paradoxical, and threatening rhetorics of fundamentalism, extremism, manifestos, and proposals for communities and futurity.
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Introduction: Apocalyptic Acts: Rhetoric, Ethics, Community, and Futurity

To know—that is the best way to put a stop to the movement of meaning.

Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*

This project will analyze the legacy of the term apocalypse in its many catastrophic actualities. To define further this projected topic, I emphasize the crisis of catastrophe not for bombastic pretense hoping to inflate the project’s exigency. Unlike other genres, even if a preliminary typology can be applied to this alarming writing, apocalyptic discourse has traditionally anticipated an extreme crisis of judgment, justice, disaster, revolution, and perfection. And throughout this project, I will trace the legacy and transformation of these themes not only in literary and philosophical works, but also the rhetorical effects of these discourses in contemporary sociopolitical contexts. To extend this preliminary outline, I use the term apocalypse in its traditional conceptual context but also in a more metaphorical sense that conveys a shattering disturbance. Approaching a threshold, my initial emphasis on an apocalyptic catastrophe intensifies a decisive climax that traditionally marks a culmination, a catastrophic overturning that completes all by revealing the presence of truth. The legacy of apocalyptic eschatology is well summarized by Derrida when he notes that “with multiple and profound differences, indeed mutations, being taken into account, the West has been dominated by a powerful program that was always an untransgressible contract among discourses of the end. The themes of the end of history and the death of philosophy represent only the most
comprehensive, massive, and gathered form of this” (Of An Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy 20).

Derrida's summary concentrates many difficult, intertwined issues that outline the project’s extent. First, taking a short course on a complex historical transformation, the pattern of futurity anticipated within the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly the New Testament expectation of a parousia, is transformed into a general cultural perspective of historical rehabilitation and temporal progress. This eschatological, messianic sense of historical progress however is also influenced by a pervasive pattern of Platonist ontology, an outline that remains one of the governing stakes of Western thinking. In other words, religious eschatology merges with a teleological orientation, infusing a messianic sense of history with the ideals of perfection and unity. Summarizing this teleological pattern, Frances Carey extends Derrida's earlier summary regarding the end-orientation that guides the West, with his exemplification of the importance of The Revelations to John within western culture.

[O]f all the books in the Christian canon, it [Johns] underpinned the Western concept of linear, teleological time, defining the meaning of history in terms of its relationship to eternity, and, by analogy, the purpose of all human lives whose meaning likewise lay in their end. (6)

Therefore, to relate Carey's summary more directly to the project’s direction, this study will first analyze a teleological, symbolic, and the ensuing rhetorical orientation that is terminally directed toward the ideal of finality.

All said the term apocalypse is a confusing word that resists easy determination; therefore, several of these elusive terms stated above need clarity and a context. First, the terms etymology is derived from the Greek apokalupsis and the Hebrew gala, which refers to
disclosure, unveiling, uncovering, and revealing. Yet the terms uncertainty is telling. For example, type the word into a research engine and the result is a multiplicity of themes addressing various extremes. And those extremes of the extreme, if modifying a superlative term could ever establish any logical precision, range from snowboards, professional wrestling, and onward to global destruction. Such an extent leads to the just slightly exaggerated claim that nearly anything extraordinary, climactic, and final is often represented as apocalyptic. An overstatement drawn to this conclusion: either in some magnificent transformation or chilling destruction, the term traditionally implies the anticipation of a culminating upheaval.

However, my analysis of the catastrophic extends beyond the varied traditional conceptualizations of a final revelation of truth or an utter disaster. Beyond this conceptualization, my interest in crises turns to the term apocalypse as metaphor for a form of disclosure, while also trying to distance this reinscription from the traditional connotations of revelation presupposed by the term. Sustaining the intensity of an upheaval, I also use the term apocalypse throughout the greater extent of this project to signify a catastrophic interruption, an advent that discloses the arrival of something singular: the unaccountable and the impossible. In this sense, the apocalypse anticipates a shattering intrusion from the outside or an opening. About these abnormal singularities, the crises brought forth by these interruptions are not revelations in the traditional sense, but catastrophes that shatter the horizon of meaningful identification and the promise of eschatological truth. Derrida explains this rather counter intuitive experience of encounter with a disjunctive sense of temporality when he notes that such a catastrophic crisis would “be an event that opens to an end without end” (Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy 35). All concepts are at risk when pushed to these
extremes, which is a place that seems beyond all limitations. And the shock of this encounter no doubt leads to an important question: How does one experience such an impossible catastrophe?

Yet for Derrida, Deleuze, Nietzsche, Nancy, Burroughs and others, it is this experience of the catastrophic, an expropriating end without end that opens the possibility for the future. A coming forth that is defined as a pure future to demarcate an indeterminate differend. All these disjunctions gather to form the thesis's major issue: How will the future be different? An odd question since it chances the obvious; nevertheless, a question that advances the problems encountered throughout the larger portion of this project.

I generally refer to the figure apocalypse as it has been re-inscribed in contemporary philosophy to thematize issues of difference, becoming, ethics, and futurity outside the closure of metaphysics. From this perspective, the thesis’s second, and more comprehensive movement, details the renewed apocalyptic tone recently adopted in contemporary philosophy, borrowing the title of Derrida's influential essay. Within the contemporary philosophical context outlined earlier, the term apocalypse is revised from the more familiar theological setting and re-contextualized as a metaphor that signifies the delimitation of western metaphysics.

I argue in the beginning chapters that an end-orientated eschatology guides the traditional understanding of apocalypse is an effect of the metaphysical text, the primary formation that guides philosophy, establishing the laws and fundamental principles of thought itself. Thus, in a difficult turn that establishes the double movement that I have summarized, the apocalypse of the traditional apocalypse would be the catastrophic opening of this end-oriented enclosure, which is formed by an array of theological principles that govern the unity of representation that constitutes western metaphysics. A government that restlessly tries to enclose all that withdraws from the circumference of its enclosure, suggesting a fearful desire before an excess that must be
reconciled: an elusive incapacity, an unanticipated contaminant, a trace, a supplement, an other. The apocalyptic advent of radical play referred to by Derrida begins initially with the deconstruction of the authority of the theological master-name, followed by differing of differences that opens the proliferating "adventure of the trace" (*Of Grammatology* 9). Undermining the primary metaphysical concepts of foundation, unity and order, the apocalyptic force would be the active, moving discord of different forces, and of differences of forces without any intrinsic determination of foundation and meaning (*Margins of Philosophy* 18).

Yet, we might pause and question the effects of such rhetoric? Lately, apocalyptic discourse generally conceptualizes the extreme realm, and, thus is often dismissed as the fevered discourse of the mystic, the utopian, the doomsayer, and the deranged, all that seek some form of ultimacy. Perhaps with the remains of the twentieth-century yet to come, our prudence should resist such immoderation, after surviving a millennium of disastrous beginnings and endings. Throughout this project, I will follow the different forms and movements of this anticipated interruption named apocalyptic. While tracing these movements, my objective eventually concentrates on the event of a singular future unsupervised by the telos of unity or finality. Finally, such an event actuates the problem of difference so currently important contemporary within philosophical and social thought.

In asking the question, will the future be different? I begin this project analyzing the end-orientation presupposed in the concept of fellowship that upholds the legacy of community in western culture. In the chapter “Community, Assimilation, and the Unfamiliar,” I begin with Kafka’s parable *Fellowship* to exemplify the precariousness of commonality. This chapter analyzes the rhetoric that warrants the term community and dialogue in contemporary philosophy and social theory, and asks whether commonality is an obvious form of identification? Who is
this assured we so convinced of its fraternity and commonality? To concentrate the previous question, this chapter questions the stakes of a common identity and social consensus that remains shadowed by difference of the other fellow. The questions concentrated in Kafka’s parable leads to an analysis of Edmund Spenser’s dialogue A View of the State of Ireland. Within Spenser’s dialogue remain important philosophical, cultural, and social ideals that remain our historical legacy. This legacy is particularly exigent today as the politics of community is warranted by the disturbing principle of identity and tradition of our experiences. The troubling, apocalyptic outbursts of ethnic partitioning and cleansing remain not just social aberrations but problems deeply invested in the philosophical tradition of the west. Consequently, such outbursts have provoked a reevaluation of the concept of community in contemporary continental thought following some of the most violent attempts throughout the last century to constitute a fellowship of identity.

I continue the analysis of apocalyptic end-orientation as it is expressed in the work of Williams Burroughs. In “The Force of Appalling Conclusions: Rx Silence,” I analyze Burroughs’ addiction to writing as “an absolute necessity.” Writing, for him, is an antidote for the terminal effects encoded in the Word that monopolizes all users in a state of evolutionary suspension. Burroughs defines language as a viral toxin replicating its outcome on the human host. Not surprisingly, then, his novels are massive diagnosis, detailing toxilogical conflicts wrought with multiple levels of cellular and psychic violence. Since language’s viral condition naturally produces antitoxins, Burroughs’ writing chances to exploit these counteragents. I focus on the theme of consumption as Burroughs writes within the threat of language to escape the static code of this program.
In “Responding to the Promise of Justice in Dead Man Walking,” I turn to unaccountable apocalyptic act. This chapter begins with Tim Robbins’ film Dead Man Walking an adaptation of Sister Helen Prejean’s book (of the same title) detailing her spiritual witnessing for death-row inmates and her criticism of capital punishment to analyze the origins and possibilities of our ethical future. The film illustrates through sharp juxtaposition the many differing perspectives on capital punishment. Focusing on these juxtaposed counterarguments, the early stages of the chapter will rhetorically analyze the film’s attempt to move the audience through difficult encounters. These conflicts provide an opportunity to expand on the laws, warrants, legal opinions, and public opinions about capital punishment. Beyond rhetorical analysis, this chapter analyzes the legacy of just restitution influenced by Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality. According to Nietzsche, debt is the basis of morality. In the future, he envisions a community that would mercifully discharge the debtor, thus overcoming the justice of indebtedness. Such an innovation is significant in the context of the film because the economy of just restitution is reactive leaving victims to replace pain and loss with different. Regarding the thesis’s topic of apocalypse, I use the concept to evoke a catastrophic sense of ethical vertigo produced by Nietzsche’s proposal in the Genealogy of Morals. There he offers there an ethics of responsibility that is unaccountable since his proposal exceeds any basis of representative justice.
Chapter 1:
Community, Assimilation, and the Unfamiliar

Fellowship

We are five friends, one day we came out of house one after the other, first one came and placed himself beside the gate, then the second came, or rather he glided through the gate like a little ball of quicksilver, and placed himself near the first one, and then came the third, then the fourth, then the fifth. Finally we all stood in a row. People began to notice us, they pointed at us and said: “Those five just came out of that house.” Since then we have been living together; it would be a peaceful life if it weren’t for the sixth one continually trying to interfere. He doesn’t do us any harm, but he annoys us, and that is harm enough; why does he intrude where he is not wanted? We don’t know him and don’t want him to join us. There was a time, of course, when the five of us did not know one another, either; and it could be said that we still don’t know one another, but what is possible and can be tolerated by the five of us is not possible and cannot be tolerated with the sixth one. In any case, we are five and don’t want to be six. And what is the point of this continual being together anyhow? It is also pointless for the five of us, but here we are together; a new combination, however, we do not want, just because of our experiences. But how is one to make this clear to the sixth one? Long explanations would almost amount to accepting him in our circle, so we prefer not to explain and not to accept him. No matter how he pouts his lips, we push him away with our elbows, but however much we push him away, back he comes.

— Franz Kafka

1.

I want to introduce this essay on Edmund Spenser’s early modern dialogue View of the Present State of Ireland with a contemporary question influenced by Franz Kafka’s epigraph: What are the principles that presuppose an understanding of community? I have purposely stated the question of belonging as “an understanding” rather than “what are the principles that we presuppose as . . .” After all, who is this we that so easily gathers identity within the common usage? I begin with a question to maintain uncertainty, which indicates a responsibility to greet the unfamiliar, all the while knowing very clearly that the concept of community naturally
presumes some common measure of familiarity. Yet as Kafka’s allegory implies: What presupposes the propriety of those familiar experiences we name our own?

Spenser’s dialogue is undoubtedly challenging, a challenge that has drawn an enormous amount of recent critical analysis from literary critics and historians. Still, a general difficulty persists. Michael Donnelly summarizes the difficulty quite well when he notes that the View is quite “anomalous in the Spenserian oeuvre,” a rather strange dialogue that seems uncharacteristic of the poet’s humanist image (1). The challenges certainly begin with the troubling difficulties of an argument that concludes with the stark political necessities of enforced famine, massive relocation, and ethnic cleansing. Furthermore, the anxious burden of justifying this dire program expresses itself in a tone that would be thought intemperate even by many of Spenser’s contemporaries (McCabe 116). More important than the dialogue’s dire tone of determination, there is a continued resonance of enforced cultural assimilation and genocide that haunts our contemporary world forewarned by arguments of pathology and apartheid. However, a glance at recent political news would indicate that these forewarnings are repeatedly ignored. I believe the challenge that the View evokes dwells in the traditional lineage of the concept of community. Thus, we cannot so easily dismiss Spenser’s dialogue as merely an early modern problem; nor can we dismiss it as another diatribe in the long-standing tradition of racial screeds. The political problems that the dialogue engages foreshadow current conflicts, specifically the politics of ethnic integrity, a program so often referred to by the euphemism “ethnic cleansing.”

Spenser’s dialogue exemplifies the anxious intolerance that results from a foreign encounter between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In the View, Ireland resembles Kafka’s “sixth fellow,” not because the Irish demand inclusion within the commonwealth; quite the contrary,
their intractable resistance demands independence. Rather, Ireland represents what Michel Foucault theorizes as a “heterotopia,” a boundary space that exists in juxtaposition to the normative commonality of an established political community (“Other Spaces” 24). The heterotopia actualizes a “counter-site,” an extreme “elsewhere” that establishes by contrast the primacy of normative recognition. Ireland is an extreme that persists as an unnatural place of evil and disorder, a place that resists the law of similitude and, thus, challenges the righteousness of sovereignty. Unlike the “together[ness]” in Kafka’s allegory, which is based on exclusion that repels alterity to establish propriety, Spenser’s dialogue presumes that identification and assimilation of alterity are necessary to confirm the national identity and integrity of the English commonwealth. The dialogue’s apocalyptic tone is anxious only in its resolve to enforce a radical program of reform that would domesticate and civilize the brutish habits of the Irish. The assimilation necessary to reform the Irish body politic and unite an English commonwealth continues the anxious recoil of Kafka’s fellows, a threatening problem that is finally eased by reproducing normative identity through the ongoing process of cultural equivalence embodied in the law. Yet the “sixth fellow” continually seems to return. He haunts the familiar experiences of our communities. He interrupts the social consensus of our lawful agreements. He weakens our confidence in an ethics of universal goodness. He disappoints our well-intended pluralism. Again and again, “back he comes.”

I view the dialogue as an example within a comprehensive structure of violent assimilation inherent within conceptual identity of community, a view that is influenced by contemporary thinkers Jürgen Habermas, Alphonso Lingis, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy as they encounter the conceptual limits that haunt being-in-common. I certainly risk irresponsibility toward the period’s historical specificity by bringing a contemporary viewpoint
to bear on the dialogue’s dire conclusions, one that perhaps patronizes the political conflicts of the early modern period with twenty-twenty contemporary insight. But it is really not hyperbolic to claim that the work of Nancy, Derrida, and Habermas gathers its motivation and direction from the catastrophic outcome of World War II, a conflict that introduced the possibility of global destruction, but also another unprecedented outburst that witnessed the most systematic effort to purge differing ethnic and cultural communities from existence. Some lingering remains of nostalgia for enlightened progress might persuade us to blame these disasters on a corrupted reason or fascist absolutism that has long since destroyed itself. But ongoing efforts of ethnic cleansing and apartheid persist despite these disasters. I focus on Spenser’s text not simply to analyze patterns of discrimination toward the Irish. Moreover, the dialogue exemplifies the fundamental absolute of unity that is inherent within the concept of community, an absolute that demands inclusion but is haunted by the necessity of exclusion.

Within the boundaries of community, I draw on the View as a precaution for rhetoricians so faithful to the possibilities of rational dialogue. My assertion should not be understood as a relentlessly negative point; rather, the issue is directed against the faith in the possibility of pragmatic social consensus. Alphonso Lingis succinctly directs my claim when he asks, “How do we engage those who offer us nothing in common?” (10). For many rhetoricians and theorists, Habermas has negotiated the impasse that Lingis presents by providing a universal pragmatics attentive to the other. However, I believe that his theory intensifies the very problems that he expects to overcome. In short, his enlightenment project of restoring a rational community is actually complicit in the violence it intends to overcome.

2.
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The view of Ireland that Spenser proposes must be framed in the larger historico-political movement of colonization, which is activated by two ideas that constantly interacted throughout the Renaissance: the ethos of modernism as well as the revolutionary reformist spirit of the Reformation. The ethos of reformation is implied in Spenser’s call for a rehabilitation that is a complete “new-framing” of Ireland. Such a revolutionary vision finds its fervor in the renewal called for by the Protestant Reformation. Luther’s dismissal of Rome’s magisterial authority introduced the primacy of the individual conscience. Without the ecclesiastical mediation of the papacy, the purified church was reformed on the authority of God’s justification in faith alone. The radical force of the Protestant reform was not merely satisfied that abuses in the church must be corrected, but more radically charged that the Roman Church itself, even if perfected by its own ideals, was wrong in principle. In sum, the Reformation aimed not to restore the medieval church but to overthrow its dominion. And in its place a new church was founded on the priesthood of all believers. The Reformation made the necessity of purification an individual issue of personal conscience and one of temporal historical responsibility. Therefore, within the concomitant issue of purification and reform, the Reformation redirects the eschatological structure of religion as an end directed toward the secular matter of historical rehabilitation. Foucault’s remarks about the modern pastoral caution us against the absolutism that underlies any historical rehabilitation that longs for a sign of salvation in this world. As he evaluates it, “the search for a morality that is acceptable to everyone in the sense that everyone should submit to it, is a goal that seems ultimately catastrophic” (“Subject and Power” 206).

Thus within this milieu of reform, Foucault’s example of the heterotopic space is not necessarily an unmarked boundary, but it draws forth the possibility of colonization, conversion, and completion. As he notes about the Puritan societies of North America, the trait of a
heterotopia is to create another “real space, as perfect, as meticulous [and] well arranged that conforms with the deformed and degenerate” (25). To return to Kafka’s parable of community contextualized within the ethos of reform, the “sixth fellow” is a source of aggravating attraction, and not because of his persistent challenge to the contingency of their association. Rather, the other fellow becomes a candidate for membership completed through the conversion of civilization. Yet when this conversion is resisted by the “sixth,” or, in Spenser’s case, the brute, this anxiety traumatizes the ideological resolve of the community and the nation.

The movement of Reformation is fundamentally toward purification that progressively cleanses, revealing God’s saving destiny in the totality of his perfection. Merely a passing understanding of the Old Testament or more generally classical culture would indicate the importance of purification as a restorative, but also as a constitutive principle of a community. This eschatological history of restorative possibility motivates Spenser’s heterotopic designs to complete the “opportunity to make a perfect reformed Common Wealth of that kingdom which was never like in the former state to be reformed” (Spenser 133). Ultimately, the desire to relentlessly colonize heterotopic spaces is symptomatic of Nietzsche’s typology of the “bad conscience” in the Genealogy of Morals, a pathological condition that tries to qualify for immanence by being clean and cleaning the world around it of the evil, the dirty, and the annoying; in this way they establish themselves as the one that desires purity, even if they themselves are impure.

The view that Spenser proposes of Ireland must be framed in the larger historical-political issue of Counter-Reformation occurring in the late sixteenth century. By the middle of that century the Catholic Church, renewed by a deepening of its religious life, and by an uncompromising restatement of its dogmas and discipline, had devised also the political
machinery for a counteroffensive against Protestantism. In the machinery of enforcing religious belief, beyond the Jesuits, no engine was to be so powerful as the apparatus of state or political sovereignty. Where Catholics retained control of governments, people became Catholic. Where Protestants retained control of governments, Catholics remained minorities. Thus, religion was a real source of political resistance, where faith knew no frontiers and overlapped all political boundaries. And it was the clash of governments, namely—in war and colonial adventures—that influenced the trends of European religion to work itself out. For England, the counterreformation was particularly threatening. As a bulwark of Protestantism, but an island of only four million people, it was surrounded by the hostile colonies of Scotland and Ireland and further imperiled by the threat of its perennial enemy, France. However, the most decisive threat to England was Spain ruled by Phillip II, who was fervently committed to the Catholic reform of Europe.

Schematically, within this rather volatile period of international politico-religious struggle of countering reformations, England’s position as a rampart of English Protestantism became vulnerable to the crusading designs of Spain. Foremost, during this period of international intrigue, Ireland became more than a colonial nuisance; it became an important focus for Tudor foreign policy (Palmer 139). Not only was the Catholic presence, and by consequence allegiance to Spain, a major concern for England, but Ireland’s geographical position threatened English enclosure and attack. The rumors of Spanish intervention in Ireland loom heavily over the English for most of the sixteenth century, and these suspicions were certainly well founded. As early as 1529, long before any direct Spanish intervention (intervention that began in 1578 with Fitzgerald landing in Smerwick with “600 men in the pay of the Pope” and in 1588 with Drake’s defeats of the Armada), the Spanish saw the annexation of
Ireland as a means of conquering England (Palmer 108). As Juan Salces notes, the Irish frequently solicited Spanish aid in an attempt to vanquish the English:

On 24 February 1529, the Spanish monarch, Charles V, wrote a letter from Toledo to his private chaplain, Don Gonzalo Fernandez, in which he asked him to set off to Ireland, to the estate of the Earl of Desmond, as quickly as possible. Charles V was giving an answer to a message from the Earl that had been brought to Spain a few weeks earlier by one of his principal nobles, an officer by the name of Galfididus. The mission of the king’s private confessor was to inspect the military forces, which the Irish Earl had just put into the service of the Spanish Crown. This “present,” which was received with the utmost joy (since, after all, Spain had begun to suffer from the effects of the Lutheran Reformation), was accompanied by a message that, in due course, would change Spanish military strategy during the troublesome years of the second half of the sixteenth century (186).

Historians have questioned both the seriousness of Spain’s annexation goals and its reputed support for the Catholic cause in Ireland. Nonetheless, the combined threat of native rebellion and foreign invasion led to immediate policy changes toward the colony by the Crown1 (Palmer 53). The threatening anxiety represented by the combined religious and political maneuvers of the Counter-Reformation led England in 1539 to a massive intensification of troop deployment and coastal defense (53). The specific concentration of military force in Ireland cannot be underestimated, for equally rebellious Scotland remained overlooked as a potential site of foreign influence. Historians mark this period of military development as a reconsideration of foreign policy toward Ireland, identifying it as a hostile place of “foreign intrigue” that had to be conquered for national security, rather than merely assimilated for humanist reform (Brady 33).

Within the View, Spenser obliquely dismisses the legitimacy of legendary assumptions regarding Spain as the origin of the Celts presented in the Irish Chronicles. The rhetorical effect delimits the historical warrant for legitimate Spanish annexation, which was the primary reason for repeated petitions from the Irish.

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1 Historians such as Brendan Bradshaw (1979) have questioned the seriousness of Spanish intervention in Ireland.
The designs of Tudor foreign policy not only suggest an international defensiveness, but also over the course of the century the specific attitude toward Irish social reform became increasingly severe. In general, in order to situate Spenser’s recommendations in the View, I want to explain England’s turning away from foreign policy of cultural assimilation toward one of aggressive conquest. Many historians generally agree that for the greater part of the period, the primary objectives of governmental reform in Ireland were to domesticate the rebellious native families and eliminate the treachery of the Anglo-Irish Pale (Canny, Brady, Palmer). Reform entailed redefining and domesticating a largely tribal society to a more centralized form of government and private property. Therefore, transforming Irish society would entail adopting English forms of land tenure and inheritance along patrilineal lines, as opposed to the Irish custom of tanistry. Most important, the social restructuring would mean the end of “clientage,” a deeply entrenched patronage network organized around the practices of coyne and livery (Brady 17). Eliminating an enduring social practice that was ostensibly graft and extortion threatened the private interests of conventional wealth and authority esteemed by both the Old English Pale and the Gaelic Irish Lords. Throughout this period of concerted reform dating from 1640 to 1680, recurring matters of private interest—a euphemism for greed—often undermined the extent of governmental policy progress. Despite periodic rebellions and local antagonisms throughout most of the century, the English remained confident in the institutional reconstruction of government, a measure that could remediate the Irish by making them “fit to the laws” (Spenser 37). Such a confidence was warranted by the presumed natural civility and virtue of English culture; thus, through a process of patient assimilation the efficacy of Common Law would make the “Irish answerable to English rule” (44). The essentially conservative reform process was ordered by the basic assumption of extending the established governmental structures headed by
the royal governors. Since the reformers were primarily English Pale lawyers and administrators, the most loyal to the English community, the English were confident in their advocacy and trusted that it was simply necessary to enlarge “Dublin’s governments control over the whole island through the employment of the same instruments and procedures which worked with such sufficiency in England itself” (Brady 28).

The ambitious challenge of governmental reform developed in 1540, however, met serious opposition and resulted in struggles that finally undermined the English policy of constructive reform and detente. In quite a short course on an extremely complex history of colonial trial, the Dublin administration became a source of criticism by many of the same Palesmen who had sought civil reform (32). Direct grievances to the Crown by critics left the viceroy’s representation questionable. Ciaran Brady sums up the dissolution:

It was this imputation that the Dublin governors were reneging upon their principal obligation to respect the rights of subjects under the reformed Irish constitution that made the conflict between the Palesmen and the governors particularly rancorous and personal from the outset. To the governors, those who complained against them were simply malcontents, political intriguers and eventually “arrant papists”; to the complaints the governors were profit-seeking adventurers and freebooters, men who had taken the land of Ireland out of contract. (33)

The basic intransigence of some Pale factions, concerned with nothing more than colonial acquisition, made reform difficult and political corruption inevitable (Palmer 109). The combined problems of Pale impropriety and continual Gaelic rebellions left English administrators wary of assimilation. Nicholas Canny argues that by 1580 English foreign-policy strategists began rethinking strategy, deciding rather to begin “cut[ting] its losses in Ireland and concentrat[ing] on its involvement in domestic and continental involvements” (17). Such reconsideration, however, was not one of dismissive neglect toward the colony. Based on the known collusion with the Spanish and the unregenerate quality of political culture, the sovereign
attitude became more hardened toward Ireland as an evil place of Catholic recovery. To use the Spenserian axiom, the “force of the greater strength of reform” was turned toward the unrelenting goal of submissive conquest (Spenser 47). Brady again summarizes this dramatic policy change:

Yet while they retained the conventional extensive of the scope of reform, these administrators adopted a radically different attitude toward its mode of implementation. Because the establishment of the English rule in Ireland was now more urgent than ever, but because neither the Gaelic Irish nor Anglo-Irish could be counted upon to further its establishment by cooperation and accommodation, reform would have to be imposed on Ireland by force. Thus an increasing number of provincial governors and administrators argued that it was necessary and legitimate for them to enforce their authority, and the authority of the law, by coercive means when persuasion failed. (35)

Spenser’s dialogue enters the political context as a decided advocate of policy changes toward Ireland, “exhorting” his intended audience to recognize the inherent flaws of assimilation (Canny 18). Through the dialogue’s disputation, the classic genre of philosophical reflection, the author proposes the available reform alternatives to suggest the justice necessary to regenerate Ireland. It is Spenser’s objective to forsake any optimism in the constructive virtue of Common Law by the dialogue’s conclusion, thus persuading the reader of the necessity of programmatic conquest. Spenser personifies the vying political strategies of assimilation and conquest through the characters Exodus and Irenius. Outlining the range of opposition in the dialogue, Spenser’s Exodus represents the conventional assurance in the efficacy of government to engender “love, goodness and civility” (Spenser 47). In contrast, Irenius disturbs any recourse to the commonplace virtue of civility, justifying the need for the “sword” as the only good means of repressing “licentiousness barbarism” (47). Their dialogue actuates a crucial ethico-political question: “Can there be any evil in any laws”—a question troubled by persistent corruption in Ireland (37). But more important, this is a question that Spenser poses to establish the dialogue’s
radical premise: that at present there are no laws capable of civilizing this degenerate culture, a claim most troubling to an audience confident in liberal reform. For Spenser, Common Law is a failure not because the law is flawed, but because the law lacks specificity. Further, the reader’s ethical disappointment is compounded throughout the dialogue as Spenser extends the disturbing argument that Common Law has actually advanced widespread treachery. The use of Common Law as a means to circumvent justice should indicate the extreme vulgarity of “becoming Irish,” a pathology of viral contamination infecting all who are exposed. The infection of the body politic is particularly clear in Spenser’s outrage toward the hybridity of the Anglo-Irish Palesman who have become more Irish, vexing themselves by denigrating their own nature. Spenser represents the corruption of the Pale particularly by the impropriety of speaking Irish over the native tongue, for it is “unnatural that any people should love another’s language more than their own” (105). To grasp what surely appears to be a perverse argument of reform, it is necessary to examine the logical specificity of the author’s critique as it reached in the dialogue’s movement.

In sum, the radical reformation that Spenser advises is necessary because Ireland is simply unfit for civility. In Exodus’s view, the symptoms of Irish corruption are numerous, and viewed from a humanist perspective the whole of Irish nature, society, and culture personifies barbarism. Because of the nation’s “salvage” state, the only possible manner of reform is a total reformation—cleansing this damned site—clearing it away for habits of civility. For Spenser’s intended audience, those in favor of traditional reform, the argument’s logic develops through

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2 The propriety of natural language in the View as it relates to the propriety of the nation suggests the work of Derrida. For him, the primacy of the proper is substantiated by a structure of ontotheology.

3 The list of grievances against the Irish is lengthy: their agricultural means, heretical and primitive religion, mixed and corrupt genealogy, corrupted language, general lawlessness, incestuous marriages, wasteful use of resources, violence, laziness, filthiness, excessive grief at funerals, thievery, clothing that augments thievery, and surely the Pogues and green milkshakes, if not more.
several difficult advances of disputation regarding the inherent quality of English culture and law. Early in the dialogue, extending an organic metaphor of “planting” the law in Ireland, Exodus poses the seemingly reasonable argument for the traditional discipline of the halter:

I cannot see how that may better be than by the discipline of the laws of England; for the English were at first as stout and warlike a people as ever the Irish, and yet, you see, are now brought unto that civility, that no nation in the world excelleth them in godly conversation and all the studies of knowledge and humanity. (47)

His argument responds to Irenius’s explanation that details the background of England’s own enculturation to the law brought on by the Norman Conquest. According to Irenius, the English accepted the law brought with William’s conquering primarily because of the sovereign’s forceful resolve. As he continues, the government imposed by the Normans was established and further reinforced by the sword’s power. Arguing by comparison for the resolve necessary in Ireland, Irenius claims that in conquering “they followed the execution of them with more severity and was also present in person to overlook the magistrates and to overawe these subjects with the terror of the sword and countenance of his majesty” (46). The saddle of the halter was different for the Irish, however, because their subjection was “otherwise affected” by less pressure (46). Thus, to follow the popular psychological narrative of the “troubled child,” Ireland is less disciplined and more delinquent in comparison to England. The crucial distinction regarding the comparative argument about the fitness of the Irish rests on the England’s prior comportment to government before the Norman Conquest (Brady 42). Therefore, if I understand Spenser’s argument, he is claiming that the English had habituated a measure of constitutional law that prepared them for governance. The habituated capacity for civil government allowed the English to accept and assimilate the differences without undue disorder, while dominating
presence of authority dismissed any rebellion. By contrast, the tribal society of Ireland without
the essential “disposition” toward a civil culture and lacking any mediated force of the sovereign
is fundamentally unfit for English reform (46). By consequence, Irenius’s remarkable claim that
“the laws ought to be fashioned unto the manners and the conditions of the people to whom they
are meant, and not to be imposed upon them according to the simple rule of right” appears
logical, since Irish culture is utterly lacking in propriety (128). Thus, the severe program of
“moderation and temperance” called for by Irenius is the moral penalty necessary to reform a
habitually degenerate culture (47). As he cautions Exodus, the process of reformation is a
complete restructuring of nature: “For it is not so easy now that things are grown to change the
course, to change the channel, and turn the streams the other way” (46). Ultimately, Spenser’s
view of the utmost necessity is the need to distemper an “unruly” horde, breaking them of their
constitutive social orders, and, finally, bring them to virtue like Solon educated the Athenians
(47). To the reformist Exodus, fearful of radical uprooting, Irenius justifies the necessity of
purgation: “For it is vain to prescribe laws where no man careth for keeping them, nor feareth the
danger for breaking of them. But all the realm is to be first reformed, and the laws are afterwards
to be made for keeping and continuing it in that reformed estate” (133). Within the organic
structure that provides the architectonic of Spenser’s view, either planting or transplanting the
civility of culture is impossible until the barren ground of Ireland is renewed for fertility. Ireland
as the proper name of disorder must disappear to become otherwise, the representation of
Englishness in Ireland within the assimilating monism of the same.

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4 Ciaran Brady (1989) argues “fitting the law to specific conditions admits a disturbing claim that English law is
constructed and not an organic entity that developed and expanded throughout the history of the community.” Thus,
the law is relative and “imposed by the powerful” (43).
Not surprisingly, historians have remarked that Spenser’s critique of political reform had contemporary precedents, generally corresponding with other civil administrators who suggested more aggressive measures of subjection through governmental intrusion (Canny, Brady, Palmer, McCabe). The recommendations of an array of civil administrators such as Richard Beacon’s *Soon His Follie* and William Herbert’s *Croftus sive de Hibernia*, are examples of treatises that defended the compelling need for a more defensive force to discipline the Irish (Brady 37–38). Largely, Spenser’s dialogue underlines an apology for his supervisor Lord Grey, justifying his administration of the Munster famine and the brutal resolve deployed in the Smerwick executions. For Spenser, Grey is an exemplary figure, representing the measure of principled righteousness necessary to correct the “present state of things” (Spenser 106). It is Grey’s unyielding moral earnestness that influences some of Spenser’s more disturbing passages concerning the rehabilitation of Ireland’s “fatal destiny” (35). These terrifying passages not only mark the singularity of the author’s prescription for reform but also the moral vigor of one who has witnessed the effects of its design. The rhetorical force of depicting the Munster agony is considerable, urging the audience toward a purgative hardness necessary to sustain the dire, but necessary, conclusions. No final critical analysis will penetrate the resignation or anxiety that Spenser confronted in Munster, at once repelled by the suffering of enforced starvation but firmly resolved that sacrifice is the necessary course of reformation. The perversity of Spenser’s view lies in these grim details:

Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them. They looked anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts carrying out of their graves, they did eat of the dead carrians, happy were they could find them, yea and one another soon after in so much as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves, and if they found a plot of water cress or shamrocks, there they as to a feast for the time, yet not able long to continue therewithal, that in the short space
there were none almost left and a most populous and plentiful country suddenly left void of man or beast . . . (143)

Like an Old Testament figure that must yield to the unintelligibility of Yahweh’s wisdom, Spenser, too, must overcome the inexplicable horror of enforced famine by resolutely accepting that there is “no other means” for Ireland (110). The civilizing conquest of Ireland is an issue of providential duty, resignified within the biblical authority, as the Irish are figured within the lineage of the “cursed seed of Essau” (107). Paul Stevens notes that Spenser’s primary source of ethical authority in the Faerie Queene and in the View is the influence of Old Testament Wisdom literature, with its emphasis on the omnipotent authority of Yahweh’s justice (158). The famine that Spenser imagines is a means of cleansing the Irish of their stubborn ways is similar to Yahweh’s treatment of Job and the evil communities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Within a discourse of reform and continual purification, Spenser presupposes that there is nothing so natural as establishing order and nothing so unnatural as ignoring it (158). Within this intensely religious historical period, the author is compelled to enact the destiny of the biblical covenant in Ireland, necessitating the reinvigoration of apocalyptic destiny, a merger of morality and politics for the New Jehovah, witnessed by the severe reformer Grey, who invites comparison to the great Old Testament figures, faithfully steadfast in Yahweh’s wisdom. Spenser designs the scene of pathological malignancy deploying an organic structure, and I want to analyze these tropes on the figural level of argumentation.

To view the heterotopic scene of disorder and corruption, Spenser introduces the quintessential opposition between nature and culture, contrasting the original natural climate of the Irish countryside, in opposition to a nomadic community without the habits of civility. Nature
is detailed in its primordial purity, an untainted pastoral topology denigrated by the proper name of evil—Ireland. Spenser writes about the wholesomeness as,

[the] most beautiful and sweet country as any is under heaven, being stored throughout with many goodly rivers, replenished with all sorts of fish most abundantly, sprinkled with many sweet islands and goodly lakes, like little inland seas, that will carry even ships upon their waters; adorned with goodly woods, even fit for building of houses and ships so commodiously, as that, if some princes in the world had them, they would hope to be lords of all the seas, and ere along for all the world. . . besides the soil itself, most fertile, fit to yield all kind of fruit that shall be committed thereunto. And lastly, the heavens most mild and temperate, though somewhat more moist than the parts toward the west. (55)

The effect of this description is not merely to depict an Edenic landscape of intrinsic beauty or of inherent natural resources. Rather, the structural ideal of perfection is reopened within the heterotopia by reference to the symmetry of organic nature. While Spenser’s remarks seem conflicted, at once figuring Ireland as the “most beautiful,” while also castigating it as “savage soyl,” the castigations do not suggest an original toxicity but rather degeneration fomented by the viral Irish rot. Thus, a corrupted community contaminates an orderly nature; nevertheless, the essential substance of nature remains the potential ground of reclamation, providing fit sustenance for a reformed community.

In persuading the audience to accept the invasive rehabilitation that he foresees, Spenser extends the dialogue’s organic trope through figurative appeals to the pathology of the Irish. The “strong hand” recommended by Exodus is figured comparatively to the responsible doctor confronted by the desperation of a terminal patient proceeding with aggression (133). Following the Spenserian analogy, the medical code of ethics prohibits the “physician to wish his patient dead, rather [it] demands to apply the best endeavor of his skill for his recovery” (36). Thus, the harsh “diet” prescribed in the author’s diagnosis necessitates a complete purgation of the body politic indisposed to recrurative capacity (37). To restore a healthy ecology where civilization can
be transplanted, the strong hand of the sword must attack like a surgeon’s scalpel removing the malignancy for a healthy recovery. Spenser’s reformation medicine repeatedly predicates a radical cutting away to the essential roots. As he argues figuratively about the corrupted Irish nature,

[F]or all the evils must first be cut away by the strong hand before any good can be planted; like as the corrupt branches and the unwholesome boughs are first to be pruned and the foul moss cleansed and scraped away before the tree can bring forth any good fruit. (134)

Finally, only through the eradication of evil will the wild fruit of Ireland be palatable and domesticated to English tastes. Once Ireland recovers from the disease of brutishness and continual “warring,” it will be disciplined and thus ready for the halter of civilization, which would be an enculturation that concludes with programs that are not far from the earlier reforms that Spenser found misdirected. Ultimately, the author’s view presumes that reformation can begin only by the necessity of destroying absolutely what Ireland signifies.

Poised before infinite perfectibility of God’s call to purify and the humanistic goal of moral virtue, Spenser must cut away all that has implanted itself within nature in a cleansing purification. In this rhetoric of pathology, England represents a branch in the organic growth of the Reformation and progressive humanism that is threatened by the viral offshoot, Ireland. The necessity of extermination as an end that purifies and restores the promise of community is deeply rooted in Christianity influenced by the Old Testament, a legacy that gave power to the Reformation. Within this dialogue, reform can mean nothing other than submission to the word of God and the virtuous political ends of a humanist commonwealth.
Faced with Spenser’s advice, a contemporary reader might conclude that the political determinations are simply another episode in the ongoing colonial project. In sum, the English appear oppressive in their socio-cultural domination and the Irish appear oppressed by English domination. With this summation, this episode might lead to this conclusion: Irish good, English bad. Another judgment might as easily conclude that the dialogue exemplifies the acceptable limitations of social consensus. After all, the View proposes the available means of building a lawful commonwealth, advice that observes the conventional political wisdom and cultural traditions within the historical context. In his confrontation with difficult political matters, should we condemn Spenser for being a good statesman-humanist? I believe that both of these evaluative courses fall short of the many problems that lie beneath the dialogue’s presuppositions, principles that outline the conceptual legacy of community. How is it that the common and the familiar a continually troubled by difference? Alphonso Lingis offers a very telling question, when he asks: How do we identify with those who offer us so little or nothing in common?

Lingis’s troubling question has been addressed by Jürgen Habermas's model of communicative rationality, a consensus model of collective ethical reflection. Influenced by the Frankfurt School, he recognizes that utilitarian, instrumental reason dominates the ethico-social horizon of thought. However, unlike Adorno, Habermas believes positively in the Enlightenment promise of a community directed by progressive rational communication linked to normative ideals.

The basis of Habermas's theory is founded on the argument that within our linguistic practices there remains a normative guideline that represents a grammar of deep rationality. For
him this position was made evident in his presumption that human nature has the capacity for recognizing the truth through purposeful communicative activity. The process of reaching the truth necessitates an unconstrained dialogue built on the mutual commitment of others to make good their truth claims. For Habermas, the ultimate veracity of truth statements must satisfy “the good life” (1989, 273). The good life is reached through the process of communicative rationality that is established through a network of intersubjective engagement, where the claims of each subject is mediated in reference to the perspective of the other:

Only the communicative model of action presupposes language as a medium of uncurtailed communication whereby speakers and hearers, out of the context of their preinterpreted lifeworld refer simultaneously to things in the objective, social, and subjective worlds in order to negotiate common definitions of the situation. This interpretive concept of language lies behind the various efforts to develop a formal pragmatics. (150)

A subject recognizes difference in the variation of the other's subjectivity, synthesizing perspectives in reference to the truthful horizon of the lifeworld. Yet determining the validity of true statements that define the characteristics of this "good life" is rather complex and troublesome because these principles are not given through an ethical discussion, but instead lie beneath all discussion. The life world is a trans-cultural grammar of reference that regulates the norms guiding the rational movement of communication. As the condition of possibility for any meaning, the lifeworld remains in "the background of the participants -- as an intuitively known, unproblematic, and unanalyzable holistic background. The speech situation is the segment of the lifeworld tailored to the relevant theme; it both forms a context and furnishes resources for the processes of mutual understanding" (298). The impasse of difference that Lingis’ presents, then, is seemingly overcome because any legitimate intersubjective communication must first respect the rational presuppositions of the other in a process of mutual understanding that determines the
validity and establishes a consensus for contextual knowledge. As a guarantee of cooperation, Habermas has specified that: “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in practical discourse” (Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action 66). More important, a consensus of approval is reached by discussion that neutralizes the forces of interest and reification so that the persuasive power of the unforced-force prevails. Habermas has reconstituted a dialectical system of consensus that connects the context bound historical moment with universals in a movement toward truth. Finally, the Habermasian community is commanded by the imperative to make reason reasonable, an accomplishment, ultimately, that may intensify rather than relieve the problems of community.

Yet, in the View, the subaltern Irish has no participation, and is evaluated exclusively from a lifeworld that presupposes English and humanist values. And while that the View is surely constrained, limited to a very interested consensus, I believe that Habermas’s trust in the power of unconstrained dialogue is here shown as wishful or worse dangerous. The threat to his theory of consensus lies in the importance placed in the lifeworld as a ground of propositional logos. As the ethical background of communicative rationality, the transcendence of the lifeworld emerges in a double-gesture established first in a rhetorical move of affirmation, which is then validated through the authority of grammar (Meyer 18). In other words, the universal projection of a lifeworld is a duplicitous movement that reconstitutes and validates an already constituted knowledge. I believe that it would take a tremendous amount of power—force that would not result from mutual understanding—to realize the humanist/reformation worldview that substantiates the dialogue. The ethics informing unity, virtue, and morality implicitly expressed in the organic figure of nature is never open to interpretation because it is the norm structured as
an ideal that provides the context of meaning implied throughout the View. Universal pragmatics is tautological because the ethical background that guides normative commitments to communicative rationality is simply an idealized consensus that presumes the discussion in advance. Thus, the Habermasian community is myopic, a circumscribed we enclosed within an anthropomorphic horizon of normative meaning. It begins with the familiar to finally recognize itself.

While considering the tautological basis of consensus, we should also consider other problems of deliberation within Habermas's work. Namely, in what neutral field of concern would the force-of-an-unforced-force emerge? In examining this neutral field, it is questionable whether it is indeed possible to remove the force of argument from the rhetorical figures and context. My point is that rather than reducing coercion, Habermasian negotiation seems to increase coercive force. The power necessary to produce agreement and social change seems more likely to occur by marshaling and intensifying force that would overpower an existing normative consensus rather than promote cooperation. Anthony Cascardi insightfully cautions us about the Habermasian consensus: "it remains unclear whether 'intersubjectivity' represents anything more than the mutual domination of subjects" (273).

The domination that extends over Habermas's universal pragmatics is the reflection of Hegel's legacy, a system of unification in which any form of difference is absorbed within the domination of an absolute (273). For Hegel, the self-enclosed subject turns outward to the other to assimilate its difference to further extend self-recognition. Dialectics is a consumptive system of compliance that must appropriate the other within the realm of the familiar. Rather than cooperation, the Hegelian needs to dominate the other by assimilating its difference to itself. In sum, the mediation of self and other within the Hegelian system produces a community of
mastery in the conflict of commanding all within the authority of the familiar in the ongoing historical movement of the absolute: a cultural dominance that is exemplified in the View by a politics presupposed by the necessity of submission to the propriety of humanism, an absolute that is a actually a euphemism for the assimilation of difference.

The legacy of the community formed by being-in-common is established on the principle of assimilation governed by an absolute that consumes difference. This foundational order is exemplified, according to Jacques Derrida, in Plato’s Statesman by the weaving that crafts the symploke. Here the architectonic of weaving is the orienting metaphor characterizing the king’s prudent political perception to unify. In Dissemination, Derrida reads the symploke’s formation as an exemplary indication of the deeply embedded necessity for unity not only within our philosophical tradition, but also in the community that it presupposes. However, the important consequence of a woven, unified pattern is that any strand that resists conforming to the structure’s common pattern must be excluded. A designed exclusion marks philosophy’s fundamental limits, but a pattern of conformity establishes the principle of community itself.

Plato’s paradigm of an orderly polis begins with the craftsmen’s work, a craft of braiding the most pliable and supportive material into an object. By contrast, the king’s responsibilities exceed the challenges of the weaver, because the achievement of political unity and cohesion must confront conflicts of multiple perspectives, differing values, incompatible abilities, inflexible positions and more. The crucial issue for Plato, and also for Derrida, is that the king forms this cohesiveness by a labor of negating oppositions, plying the resistant strands into conformity. Emphasizing the point of expertise and necessity, Derrida understands Plato arguing comparatively that a sensible artist would use only compatible materials; however, the statesman’s art requires more difficulty. Difficulty implies the decision to cut: the statesman
must discard those opposing strands failing to conform. Beyond establishing a fundamental mechanism of hierarchy, the consequence of Plato’s arrangement for Derrida is that “dialectics [itself] is basically the art of the symplekse,” a device that bonds all heterogeneity into a formative unity (Dissemination 122). Derrida’s point is that order itself, the structure of the “entire history of the concept of the structure” has always organized itself within the coherence of a total form (Writing and Difference 279). Ultimately, the structure that presupposes structure itself is fundamentally ordered by unity, a pattern where all differences and resistance are brought together in assimilation. At last, I believe the conceptual legacy of community emerges within this foundational structure, a design that directs the principle of community toward eschatological culmination. In the writing of Jean-Luc Nancy we encounter the consequences of such a direction, where assimilation relieves itself in consummation.

Nancy’s writing cautions us that the Holocaust, Stalinist purges, and countless other atrocities were not momentary political outbursts that exploded in the 1940s; the conflict of community rages on and the contemporary names Khmer Rouge, Somalia, and “ethnic cleansing” serve as indexes for the consumptive energy within community. In writing the "most painful problem of the modern world: the conflagration of community,” Nancy bears witness to the fascism and totalitarianism of the past century that eradicated communities by the same principles that upheld the concept of community itself (1). In fact, Nancy believes that the concept of community is nearly exhausted as a result of an immanent absolutism that orients the Western episteme.

Nancy believes that the concept of community is nearly exhausted as a result of an immanent absolutism that orients the western episteme. More important, Nancy understands that such a foundational absolute constitutes an impossible logic that engenders permanent conflict.
The absolute must be the absolute of its own absoluteness, or not be at all. In other words: to be absolutely alone, it is not enough that I be so; I must also be alone being alone—and this of course is contradictory. The logic of the absolute violates the absolute. It implicates it in a relation that it refuses and precludes by its essence. This relation tears and forces open, from within and without at the same time, and from outside that is nothing other than the rejection of an impossible interiority, the “without relation” from which the absolute would constitute itself. (4)

The point of this highly abstract definition is that any form of an absolute pretends to be utterly non-relational. Specifically, the primacy of an absolute is actually a violent hierarchy predicated on denying any relational difference. The tearing forth of an inner essence noted by Nancy is the structural necessity of a relationship that is sublated within a reserve that maintains authority and institutes its own transcendence. As he implies, an absolute must exercise authority over another; otherwise, it remains alone and exposed as a contradiction.

The conflicted logic of “absolutism” is an economy that sets forth an impossible desire for “immanence” projected toward an ideal essence that is finally lacking. The conflicted basis of any form of absolute immanence becomes clear when we refer to contemporary examples of communities based on ideals of authenticity and integrity. They remain in continual conflict—torn from within and out—attempting to realize an impossible goal. The preliminary stakes of Nancy’s deconstructive writing is an important contribution that establishes a relationship between the philosophical grounds of absolutism and the political emergence of totalitarianism.

For Nancy, the human subject “is set in relation” with an image of the absolute, and naturally the investment is conflicted because there can be no relationship “between two or several absolutes” (4). The monad named the individual is alienated separated from oneself and from others and in this isolation longs to discover its inner essence. This condition of separation inevitably institutes a political realm to settle the “unappeasable combat” that results from the
confrontation of isolated individuals drawn toward immanence (5). And the View exemplifies the ongoing conflict of mutual dominance diagnosed by Nancy.

Nancy’s analysis is most significant when he identifies how the alienation of “being-separate” is transformed into nostalgic perspective when individual alienation is overcome with the idea of reforming a “lost or broken” unity. In this transformation of the absolute, immanence is actualized in an organicist form ordered by a nostalgic longing,

for a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy. (9)

For Nancy, Christianity is a mythology that embodies and transforms the relational impossibility of the absolute through unification. When transcendence becomes immanent, community is established through communion. In Christianity the nostalgia is not for a lost age, for it begins fallen in Genesis and lives on the messianic promise of a redemptive future that will bring forth an eschatological culmination. From Nancy’s perspective, the eschatology of the Christian ethos influences an ideal of community drawn toward a completion in ecstatic communion. At last, a union that reaches toward a totality that Nancy believes is the legacy of modern forms of totalitarianism.

In conclusion, I believe the political stakes of the dialogue are grounded in eschatological presuppositions that inform the humanistic valences assumed normative throughout the View. Specifically, I refer to eschatology, not entirely in the traditional sense of an end or last things, but more so as form of closure, a unified order governed by what Nancy refers to as a "nonrelational" unified absolute. The substance that grounds the humanist influences throughout the dialogue is a unified organic basis of a nature that authenticates the laws of natural habits and
proper governance. A unified organic basis where propriety of tradition is perfected under the proper name of English customs and laws, an order that enforces communion and represents anything that resists this order as improper and evil. In this dialogue of pathology, a Reformation sense of historical rehabilitation intermixes with the moral civility of humanism with the hope of purifying and converting this heterotopic force of disease.

Spenser sense of cure seeks finality. But community cannot be an end in itself because it will end.

It will end because only the familiar will come.

It will end because we will finally know nothing other.

It will end in itself.

If community has any future, as Nancy has indicated, that posterity will be an unfamiliar work.
Chapter 2:

Responding to the Promise of Justice in *Dead Man Walking*.

We have to think differently—in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: to feel differently.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Daybreak 103

Early in Tim Robbins’ film *Dead Man Walking*, a prison chaplain warns Sister Helen Prejean that she doesn’t know what she’s getting into by offering spiritual counsel to death-row inmates. Oddly enough as a rhetoric and composition instructor, I frequently offer similar advice to students facing the execution of enormous ethico-moral topics such as capital punishment, abortion, and the like. While there are perhaps more manageable topics, certainly among the general goals of higher education and rhetorical studies is engagement with issues that exceed a student’s initial understanding. Simply put, education understood in the broadest and ideal sense should provoke a strange meeting that leaves one unsettled. Yet ongoing disorientation often ends in frustrating confusion; utterly perplexed students habitually respond to confusion by returning to the memorable shelter of longstanding beliefs. At worst, these essays are often nothing more than monologues feigning position statements. Or more precisely, adolescent rants that are adapted from talk-radio shows and political commentary on television that encloses the horizon of political discussion and diminishes the complexity of ethico-political dilemmas. In the name of responsibility, moral clarity lately means feeling so simply righteous about one’s irresponsible ignorance. Accounting for student resistance to the complications of an ethical and rhetorical context, however, may be more difficult than just a summary assessment that a student
is poorly influenced, stubbornly blinded, or just plain lazy. Perhaps these one-sided monologues indicate rather a resistance to the unsettling disorientation of confusion, a fearful disturbance one encounters in passing beyond the embodiment of a fundamental ethical perspective. Rather than avoiding confusion, I sense that this uneasy disturbance might be the beginning of an encounter that brings forth a formative ethical response.¹ Following the prison chaplain's concerned advice for Sister Prejean noted earlier, and coupled with the force of her book adapted by Tim Robbins film *Dead Man Walking*, I have cautiously begun rethinking my earlier composition recommendations. For willing students, “getting into something you don't know” regarding matters of ethics, morality, and public policy is an issue of responsibility, a concept frequently used in the most unknowing, predictable ways, but nevertheless, one that ought to provide the fundamental basis of ethics itself.²

Throughout this chapter, I want to examine the ethico-moral problem of capital punishment as it is exemplified in Robbins’ film *Dead Man Walking*, by concentrating on ethico-moral matters of responsibility, forgiveness, and suffering. Robbins’ film adapts Sister Helen Prejean’s book (of the same title), a work that more thoroughly details the challenge of enacting the social project of Christianity, a calling that leads her to politicize her vocation as a spiritual witness for death row inmates and as a spokesperson against capital punishment. In an interview, Robbins noted that he simply wanted to portray the back ‘n forth of the very difficult social problem. The film’s shifting contrasts—back ‘n forth—certainly portray the many conflicts of personal, social, and legal responsibility as they are focused specifically on Sister

¹ On a lighter note, a student noted on a course evaluation that she enjoyed the course once she got over hating it. The explanation for this comical transformation was that the course material undermined many of her deeply held beliefs.
² See the website *Curriculum on the Death Penalty* developed by the Death Penalty Information Center and Michigan State University for high school students and teachers. ([http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org.](http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org))
Prejean’s own ethical vocation. Her duty projects a confidence, but this poise is challenged by a sense of threatening uncertainty. She often appears naive, confused, disturbed and a bit overwhelmed by the conflicts of responsibility that result from such ugly violence. One of the film’s strengths is the expression of the incredible suffering felt by all those who encounter the offense of murder. Sister Prejean seems strained and compromised by the difficulties of meeting all her responsibilities to those that suffer. The confusion of ethical responsibilities is exemplified in her befuddled response to a victim’s father “I’ve never been involved in anything like this before.” Her concern for the plight and dignity of convicted murderer seem ridiculously misdirected and inappropriate, particularly to those victims who have been violated so painfully. As a parent victimized by the loss of a son, Walter Delacroix wants from Sister Prejean some reasonable explanation why anyone would care for such a repellent man without first comforting those who have been offended by him. What kind of values would justify such care? Love your enemy? Turn your cheek to an offender? What foolish audacity! The Gospel accounts of Jesus’ loving care for sinners seem to have all the practical presence of an uplifting child’s tale when these legends are confronted with the actuality of Matthew Poncelet’s viciousness. Why should anyone waste care on someone who has cruelly ruined so many lives?

The act of murder appears unpardonable and results in a disturbance that tries to account for an unrecognizable loss. The Christian command to care for the wretched in remembrance of

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3 In her introduction to her book Dead Man Walking, she describes her early response as naive. “I’ve heard that there are two situations that make interesting stories: when an extraordinary person is plunged into the commonplace and when an ordinary person gets involved in extraordinary events. I’m definitely an example of the latter. I stepped unsuspectingly from a protected middle-class environment into one of the most explosive and complex moral issues of the day, the question of capital punishment. It began ten years ago when I wrote a letter to an inmate on death row and the man wrote back. Thus began a ten year journey that led me into a Louisiana’s execution chamber and then into advocacy groups for homicide victims’ families. I began naively. It took time—and mistakes—for me to sound out the moral perspective, which is the subject of this book” (xi).
Jesus’ example will not protect Sister Prejean from the resentment of other Christians who feel betrayed by what seem to be her needless concern for “monsters,” “animals” and “God’s mistake.” Similarly, her family gently questions the odd priority of caring for a death-row inmate, when Prejean’s mother asks, “Aren’t there others more deserving of your time and attention? A prison guard succinctly questions Prejean’s seeming misdirected idealism, when he asks, “Sister what’s a nun doing in a place like this. Why aren’t you off teaching school someplace?” All said, the film asks repeatedly difficult moral questions: Aren’t there others of more value that deserve our care? How much more should we offer capital offenders beyond the law? Don’t the victims deserve as much or more care than those who offend? A devoted advocate of capital punishment, Wesley Lowe summarizes these questions of human value in an outraged tone directed toward a general social failing that he believes has neglected the responsibility to protect “decent, honorable citizens.”

Over the decades, public safety has become an insignificant, meaningless thing, not worth defending anymore, and the death penalty has been persecuted for just that reason. It has become a trend for most western, industrialized nations to treat public safety as though it were a trivial privilege that they can ignore, neglect, and deny their decent, law-abiding citizens. (Lowe)

Robbins’ camera depicts directly the gruesome brutality of rape and murder, and indirectly asks the audience whether anyone so vicious deserves any care beyond the law. From an aesthetic perspective, cinematic techniques have the capacity to illustrate conflict on a more visceral and affective level. These distinctive qualities aside, I primarily use the film because it illustrates for students the difficulties of rhetorical engagement and the conflicts of ethico-political encounter. Thus, the film provides the express topic to begin analyzing the many problems that follow from the socio-political tradition of human rights and just retribution that authorizes the law. As an exemplar, the film formalizes an ethics of counter-argument that I
would define as an altruistic responsibility toward other perspectives, a standpoint that respectfully encounters the substance of those opposing positions. An altruistic response is a form of answerability that inexperienced rhetoricians often resist in their urge for oppositional clarity. Much of the resistance is greatly influenced by the so-called political experts on television and radio programs, whose commentary reduce complex problems into simplified, orderly positions of opposition that can be easily contained in a one half-hour program. The broadcast media would have us believe that any moral ambiguity is some sign of irresolute weakness. One must be either for or against an issue. Moral clarity demands the certainty of a simple yes or no evaluation. That simple. And the influence of such simplicity is evident these days in the oppositional response taken by so many experienced and inexperienced writers.

Politically, the United States maintains a stance of moral certainty regarding capital punishment even while uncertainty characterizes the majority of public and state opinion. For instance, over the last decade, surveys indicate that nearly seventy percent of Americans support the death penalty (Costanzo 115). And while considerable support for the death penalty is evident there remains uncertainty about the law. Mark Costanzo emphasizes this uncertainty when he quotes from Gallup Organization statements reporting the trend of public opinion on capital punishment is among the most volatile in Gallup annals (116). The uncertainty is compounded further. Americans may support the death penalty yet they know very little about the system of capital punishment. Rather than any thoroughgoing, informed understanding of the complexities of justice, the law gathers public support more from a frustrated response to the fear of violent crime, high cost of life imprisonment, and faith in the long held belief of deterrence.
But even these warrants have begun losing support with an increasingly skeptical public. Even in the context of recent, brutal, premeditated violence The Death Penalty Information Center notes a public sense of restraint toward capital punishment that is distinct from government policies as they are represented in former Attorney General Ashcroft’s proposals:

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the more recent sniper shootings in the Washington, DC area might have precipitated a significant tilt towards the death penalty, but apparently that has not taken place. A recent analysis by George Gallup, Jr. following a Gallup poll in October, 2002, concluded that "recent events have had little effect" on public support for the death penalty. The poll found 70% support for the death penalty, down slightly from a similar poll conducted in May 2002. (Death Penalty Information)

Americans may know very little about the actual system, but in their ignorance the United States stand on capital punishment risks appearing cruel and antiquated in the eyes of their Allies and the rest of the First World. Among those who have called for these executions to be halted are United Nations Special Rapporteurs, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the European Union and the Council of Europe (Amnesty International). Remaining apart from a worldwide consensus recently has not deterred United States policies. Ironically enough, the United States position on capital punishment is in league with countries such as China, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, all of who have been reproached for human rights violations (Amnesty Internal). Worse yet, if this guilt by association was not damning enough, the US position finds

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4 Mark Costanzo puts this figure in context when he notes that the recent trend is just lower than the 1988 highpoint when 79 percent favored the death penalty. The support for the death penalty over the last fourteen years marks the most significant period of support since 1936 when the Gallup Organization began surveying public opinion (115).

5 Bruce Shapiro reports in his Nation article, “Dead Reckoning,” that there is a worldwide effort underway to force an end to the death penalty in the United States. To exemplify this point, he refers to the extradition case of fugitive Charles Kopp. France would not extradite Kopp to US prosecutors until assurances from the Justice Department that the death penalty would be waived. Moreover, the EU is considering sanctions against the US to follow Protocol 6 that calls for the abolition of the death penalty. Shapiro’s argument has increased credibility based on Germany’s insistence that they will withhold evidence against September 11 terrorist Zacarias Moussaouui unless it received assurance that the evidence won’t be used to gain a death penalty sentence. The Associated Press reported that Justice Minister Herta Daeubler-Gmelin said Germany would provide documents on Moussaouui to the US on the
itself aligned with two of the countries that comprise the “Axis of Evil” that demarcates President Bush’s worldview. That said, others have argued that a position of isolation outside the prevailing sociopolitical consensus is hardly irresponsible. Advocate of capital punishment, Wesley Lowe argues that isolation in the name of responsibility is not extreme; rather, such isolated detachment suggests the most principled ethical position.

As the flagship of democracy, it is the United States responsibility to demonstrate that public safety is not some trivial privilege, but an alienable human right for every decent citizen. Therefore, the USA should set the example that every civilized nation has the moral responsibility to defend the safety of their decent civilians at least as diligently as they defend national security with an army. (Lowe)

Former US Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist has extended Lowe’s expectation that US leadership should establish the world’s ethical horizon recently with more legal authority. In the court debate over Atkins v. Virginia, a case that questioned the constitutionality of sentencing retarded capital offenders to death; Rehnquist’s dissent was justified by an argument that implied the need for principled independence. About the consensus within the states and the international community opposed to sentencing the retarded to death, he writes: “I fail to see how the views of other countries regarding the punishment of their citizens provide any support for the court’s ultimate determination” (Liptak)⁶ Judge Rehnquist may fail to fully respect the consensus of the international community and various states, but it will be his failing. The Supreme Court has and will continue to listen to a consensus, particularly when a state consensus marshals enough political force. For example, former Governor George Ryan of Illinois mandated a moratorium on the death sentences and execution (on January 31, 2000) to condition that they “may not be used for a death sentence or an execution.” Of course, the actual trial of Moussaouou has shown how this pressure was ignored.

⁶ The consensus is not merely abroad. Gallup reports that 82% of the Americans polled oppose the execution of the mentally retarded. 73% oppose the death penalty for the mentally ill. 69% oppose the death penalty for juvenile offenders (Jones).
study the fairness of this policy. In appointing a Commission on Capital Punishment, he referred
to the Illinois capital punishment system as a system “so fraught with error and has come so
close to the ultimate nightmare, the state taking of innocent life” (Illinois). In the report to Ryan
(presented on April, 15 2002), the majority of the committee favored abolishing the death
penalty; however, the committee conceded that if capital punishment is continued the state
should reform the present system of executing this punishment. Concluding his term as
governor, Ryan commuted the death sentences of death row convicts in Illinois. Since Ryan’s
call for a review “many governors have launched comparable studies of capital punishment
policies, and nine states have launched comparable studies of capital punishment policies”
(Death Penalty Information). The mandate has also influenced a referendum in California and
Connecticut, where a majority of the voters questioned the fairness of the state’s death penalty
(Death Penalty Information).

Fairness is no doubt one of the most important matters within this difficult political
problem; however, this chapter is interested more in the matter of fairness itself. In other words,
by investigating the lineage of moral judgment, we may begin to understand the justness of our
conventions of our justice. An inquiry that I hope will open a discussion about the suffering that
follows the violence of capital punishment exemplified in Dead Man Walking. An opening as
well that may provide some insight into the obsessive sense of restitution that seems to enervate
American culture.

To intensify the films illustration of ethical responsibility, I am influenced by Kenneth
Burke's basic understanding of recognition conceptualized in his terms identification and
consubstantiality. These two corresponding principles of order establish Burke's dialectical
understanding of difference and kind, a correspondence that grounds his understanding of
community, communication, and politics. Burke’s understanding of these key terms presupposes a form of altruism, because identity is constantly commanded to recognize others that are different, yet similar, and thus, consubstantially joined by the substance of various interests and desires. Identification understood as sympathetic duty that joins individual identities is an important basis to explore the ethics of argument, an ethics that is illustrated quite remarkably in Robbins film. The response of Christian duty commands Sister Prejean, a calling that responds to the Christian law of love, dignity, and forgiveness for all women and men. The calling is not irresponsibly blind because there is no overlooking the responsibility for the horrible crime of murder. In Prejean’s calling, Christian love merges with Kantian moral duty in her good will toward the poor in spirit of the community.

“Thou shalt not kill” is the primary principle of exhortation that sustains a community. And for Sister Prejean, her obliged duty turns to sympathy and then to empathy as her counseling dialectically draws the convicted to confess and ask forgiveness from those whom he has wronged so irreparably. The conviction of her duty and empathy identifies a form of brutality embedded in the law itself that mocks justice and perpetuates another form of violence that the law had intended to relieve. *Dead Man Walking* certainly questions the equity of the death penalty and the morality of state execution. Without a doubt, there is no punishment or compensation that would satisfy the loss of a loved one. Nevertheless, the film’s conclusion registers a lingering pain that exceeds the failure of compensation. Beyond the initial pedagogical aims of this chapter, my argument will respond to this strange sensibility of pain that seems to continue long after the execution of the law. The film ends with the promise of faith and forgiveness, a conviction to struggle to make peace with the sense of overwhelming violation and loss. But I believe the promise of making peace remains such a struggle because
our ethics is founded on indebtedness that struggles to forgive, bitterly holding to the pain of
offense, remembering some form of retribution as the most just response. At last, the film issues
a question rarely discussed at length: Does an execution satisfy the community's moral outrage
for justice? Or does the execution of capital punishment somehow intensify the lingering pain of
retribution?

I want to identify and analyze this lingering phantom pain that is deferred at the film’s
conclusion. To identify this suffering, I turn to a physician-ethicist who has foreshadowed this
introduction: Friedrich Nietzsche. Although Nietzsche's thought is a rather uncommon ethics,
his genealogical examinations are among the most penetrating analysis of morality that is
registered by the memory of suffering. I turn to Nietzsche as a cultural physician who recognized
long ago that the phantom pain such that follows Dead Man Walking is energized by an ethics of
reactivity that produces cruelty and suffering. Nietzsche’s writing in the Genealogy of Morals
analyzes the origins of the traditional ethical heritage of modernity to identify the inversion of
value. In other words, the fundamental sense of individual responsibility is activated by a sense
of debt that provokes weakness and cruelty rather than the healthy strength of sovereignty
(Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals). In particular, Nietzsche’s self-overcoming of the justice based
on indebtedness produces an apocalyptic disturbance, a sense of ethical vertigo where
commonplace orders seem to collapse under the force of generosity conceived by him. The
Nietzschean goal of self-overcoming chances a transformation of responsibility, a conversion
that would give “irresponsibility a positive sense” (21). To state that he offers us insight into the
difficulties of justice is a needlessly prosaic summary; rather the ethical challenges that he
conceives have rarely found a healthy response. In the turning of his thinking, I believe he
identifies the possibility of new form of forgiveness.
“He Wrote to Me and I Came”

Sister Prejean became involved with death row convicts, and the conflict of capital punishment, by offering to serve as a pen pal for the Prison Coalition in Louisiana. In Robbins film, Sean Penn plays the role of Matthew Poncelet, the convicted murderer that she initially corresponds with, eventually becoming his spiritual witness. Robbins depiction of Poncelet is nuanced, challenging the audience to respond carefully to a persona that is unsympathetic but also engaging. Bravado is the style that characterizes Poncelet’s persona. A bold, inflated sense of confidence hardened by crime builds a formidable sense of self for him to inhabit. His self-styling projects strength and guile, which continually vents against so-called victims, particularly niggers, victims of past historical offense who still blame the power of others rather than face their own resentment and weakness. His unapologetic racism is a contrariness that extends to a

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7 She details her beginnings in the book *Dead Man Walking*: “When Chava Colon from the Prison Coalition asks me one January day in 1982 to become a pen pal to a death row inmate, I say, Sure. The invitation seems to fit with my work in St. Thomas, a New Orleans housing project of poor black residents . . . I’ve come to St. Thomas to serve the poor, and I assume that someone occupying a cell on Louisiana’s death row fits that category” (3).

8 Prejean's activism marks an ongoing reevaluation of her spiritual vocation, by applying her Christian faith more directly toward social justice issues. Warranted by the New Testament's force, her developed commitment to the poor is understood broadly as an obligation to those poor in spirit as well. And for Sister Prejean, the calling to care for the wretched is a demanding challenge, particularly since the two convicts that she provides spiritual witness are clearly brutal killers. If such extreme violence can actually have a qualitative sense, the crimes of Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Willie reach toward the utmost. On November 7, 1977, Patrick Sonnier and his brother Eddie kidnapped two teenagers on a date, David LeBlanc and Loretta Borque, taking them from a lover's-lane hideaway into a wooded area to rape Loretta and, then, to shoot them. Just as hideous, Robert Willie and Joseph Vaccaro, two longtime criminals, killed eighteen-year-old Faith Hathaway on May 28, 1980, repeatedly raping her and, then, stabbing her to death. Hathaway's death provoked an eight-day rampage that resulted in an additional kidnapping of Debbie Morris and her boyfriend, Michael Smith. Driving across several states Willie and Vaccaro took turns raping Morris. Eventually, they shot and stabbed Smith leaving him paralyzed for life. Interviewed on PBS Frontline program years later, Morris's reactions to the years of horrible memories of violation are unimaginably stunning.
noisy and odd defense of both Martin Luther King and Hitler. They were men of responsibility, which in Poncelet’s terms means aggressive personalities who “took charge” and “got things done.” All of these commonplace sayings are fantastic rhetorical attempts to identify a powerful force of transformation that he wishes to identify within himself. Poncelet, for example, identifies in Hitler a strong man of vision unwilling to suffer the weak. The force of his bluster is directed against any notion that he is a victim. Yet Poncelet ironically strikes out against a justice system that he says victimizes him. He may not suffer the weak but his call unknowingly invites a nun, a servant of god, and foremost, a servant of victims such as the poor and powerless that he rants against. And while his call may be the maneuvering of a wily prison-cell lawyer, he possesses a force of dignity yet to be realized outside the style fashioned by his outlaw bravado. Ultimately, all of his bluster seems defensive; an attempt to ward off the actuality of a brutal offense for which he is willing to accept only a portion of the responsibility. Robbins’ depiction of Poncelet challenges even the most sympathetic audience critical of capital punishment, by showing them the brutality of the crime juxtaposed with a criminal that does not just hide his guilt—rather he seems to flaunt the crime by showing very little remorse. In the end, Poncelet’s motivation seems very basic: His plea for a stay of execution and a new trial is simply driven by the self-interested fear of losing his own life. Although, Poncelet’s apparent self-interest is more conflicted than it appears. He may rail against victims but he seems victimized by the blame he so willingly projects.

It is this injurious, loathsome character that calls Sister Prejean and her response to him is unconditional. But why would anyone devote time to someone who has wasted so much? Sister Prejean’s primary response is inspired by the ultimate command of Christian agape, a fundamental demand that takes priority to social matters of protecting Poncelet's human and
legal rights, her objections to the violence reinscribed by capital punishment, or any sense of self concern. Jesus explains agape’s extraordinary demands and conflicts in Matthew’s Gospel, when he explains the triadic commandment of the New Testament:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God
With all thy heart, and with all thy soul
And with all thy mind.
This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it,
Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself
On these two commandments hang
All the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22: 37-40)

The New Testament understanding of agape is an exclusive call of absolute non-relation, where all distinctions are removed from the object of love. The love of self and others is a response directed from the unconditional love of God. About the demands of agape, Gene Outka writes,

[A]gape involves permanent stability. The loyalty enjoined is indefectible; neither partial nor fluctuating. No conditional demand for compensation is licit. To regard someone as a neighbor, on this usage, is to preclude from the outset that any specific judgment which signifies that he himself is expendable. No assessment of (say) his weakness or wickedness can ever lead one to ignore him as if he were some mere thing. Whatever a person does in particular never in itself qualifies or disqualifies him from such attention and care. Even when the agent does not approve of the other’s behavior it still makes sense to talk of regarding him as worthwhile and caring what happens to him . . . More generally, permanence involves persistence in the face of obstacles and continued concern for another’s welfare despite lack of personal benefit. (11)

The unconditional quality of agape that Outka defines is clarified succinctly by Reinhold Niehbur when he argues that Jesus’ death on the cross symbolizes this wholly selfless act of sacrifice for the other (44). For Niehbur, Jesus’ death was a sacrificial act of agape directed to all men and women without qualification. My point is that Prejean’s response to Poncelet’s call is not just the choice of a good deed, her initial care is a non-relational act of agape, an act of love that responds to a divine command that exceeds her own motivations. Christian life is a dramatic commemoration of this selfless, unconditional act, in which love of one’s neighbor is
revealed through the unconditional love of God. The ultimate demand of this call however seems relentless; we remain hostage to the demands of a God that seems wholly ideal without any capability for distinction among the quality of different neighbors. Can we ethically hold equal regard for every neighbor? Are all of these neighbors worth regarding the same as ourselves? My point here is that Prejean’s response to Poncelet’s call is without hesitation that is characteristic of agape, but when she meets Poncelet in person she surely hesitates before the particular task of caring for such a wretched and worthless neighbor. Robbins depicts the struggle in Prejean’s face, a conflicted expression of fear, revulsion, and yet merciful forbearance. All of these conflicting impulses are directed toward this presence of violation. Her response is not to be consumed by this force of but to “follow that which is good” (1 Thesalonians 5:15). A way to understand this conflict of ethical responsibility is found through the conversion that motivates Prejean and Poncelet’s encounter with one another. The encounter begins with Poncelet’s complicated suffering, a summons that draws the response of an unconditional obligation, a response, though that is eventually transformed into compassionate challenge that arouses the dignity of moral duty in Poncelet and Sister Prejean. Ultimately, Christian love and forgiveness converts into a social theory of morality indicative of the Kantian categorical imperative. The response of unconditional obligation draws forth the ought of the categorical imperative for both of these actors in this dialectical drama of conversion. Finally, the provocation of this imperative turns to challenge the moral law of retribution, a challenge that Robbins’ Dead Man Walking issues to the audience with the conclusion of his film.

In this drama of conversion, Sister Prejean responds to the demands of her unconditional calling, overcoming her aversion to Poncelet by recognizing her responsibility to dignify his innate human worth, a conversion that in turn solicits a disturbance in him. The dynamics of
conversion is demonstrated throughout the New Testament. *Corinthians* illustrates the rhetoric of resemblance that patterns Scripture’s understanding of humanity as the representation of the ultimate, and thus of ultimate worth.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as through a reflected mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Prejean recognizes in Poncelet this absolute dignity that has been blinded by sinful failure. However, such a theological evaluation seems so distant from the actuality of a man’s life formed by poverty, hard-luck, prison, and the violence so commonplace to those who identify themselves as one fated to remain forever outside the law. Her goal of “helping him to die with dignity” is a means of awakening self-respect through the transformative power of Christian love that awakens self-respect and exemplifies the illumination of grace itself. In dialectical terms, Poncelet identifies with Sister Prejean’s dignified example, which allows him to bring forth his own culpability in an uplifting confession of guilt.

Yet, we would be somewhat mistaken to interpret this drama of conversion solely in Christian terms. Poncelet’s conflicted sense of dignity turns away from the self-pity, transforming itself into good will indicative of Kant’s understanding of the categorical imperative. Sister Prejean encourages Poncelet to own his deeds, and this admission motivates a commanding sense of duty toward the law and those who he has violated. From this Kantian perspective, the hardened cover of prison dignity is penetrated by the freedom to respond toward another form of dignity vested in a respect for universal quality of the law. When Poncelet affirms “I hope my death gives them poor people some peace,” his commitment of responsibility is a “good will” that speaks more than just of Christian compassion (Kant 7). For Kant, a good
will is defined as a power of choice that,

is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself, and, regarded for itself, is to be valued incommensurably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it in favor of some inclination and indeed, if you will, of the sum of all inclinations. (8)

From this Kantian perspective, the peace intended by Poncelet should not be understood solely as one that results in the effect of relief for those he has offended. Foremost, the wish of peace constitutes a recognition that *ascends* to a command of duty that is accepted rather than chosen (20). Thus, accepting responsibility for the death that he has committed internalizes the universal law as it is ethically established in the command “thou shalt not kill”; and therefore, respects the necessity of his execution as one who has violated the freedom of the community. Ultimately, it would seem that the universal command of God’s law merges with the metaphysical principles of morality in this drama of conversion. Yet, the peace that Poncelet offers his victims perhaps resonates beyond his own culpability. The offering of peace, might be interpreted as a broad gesture that exceeds the specificity of the moment calling into question the necessity of retribution warranted by the universal law. Robbins ends the film with Poncelet elevated on a gurney before witnesses asking for forgiveness and wishing them peace, but also questioning the government’s moral authority as an absolute arbiter over human life.

“We Have Something in Common: We both Live With the Poor”

Poncelet contacts the Prison Coalition mainly for “legal advice” or at least the comfort of some “friendly words.” Most important, the legal advice he needs is for someone to file a petition to the Louisiana Pardon Board on his behalf. Robbins depicts a man that hardly expected a nun to do his legal bidding or providing the minimum of a few kind words. To an
extent their meeting is not so unusual, the clergy is often active in socio-political problems, but Poncelet and Sister Prejean’s introduction goes beyond the usual awkward nervousness so common to first meetings. Perhaps an imminent death allows a certain frankness that might otherwise be restrained, but Poncelet’s brashness seems intended for advantage. After just a few meetings with each other, Poncelet asks Sister Prejean directly what many of us have often thought privately about the clergy: “Didn’t you ever want to have sex or have kids.” His questions seem blunt and awkward, but they indicate more than a lack of gracefulness. The film presents his predatory sensibilities enclosed in charm when the camera draws close to his face expressing his contrived attempt at a come-on. My point is that Poncelet wants to project a commanding force of strength and charm that is intended to dominate any situation, an advantage that will challenge even those that offer to listen unconditionally to him out of charity.

Sister Prejean counters his frankness with the strength of her own honesty, a force that forms a connection with Poncelet when she relates that they both have similar background living with the poor. From a Burkeian perspective, the association formed in poverty addresses an ethical substance in Poncelet; he commands a sense of worth despite being contemptible.

But as Kenneth Burke warns us, identification does not always necessitate accord, it may as well “imply its ironic counterpart: division” (23). An act of charity brings them together, but competition ensues between these two powerful forces trying to realize some minimal justice from the consequences of an otherwise brutal incident. Their background of poverty is a sensitive issue because Poncelet quickly determines Sister Prejean has chosen to live with the poor, but was originally raised elsewhere in the upper class home of a lawyer. Poncelet’s point is to seize advantage by establishing a certain authenticity to his experience of being poor. In
other words, he grew up poor and his life has been formed by this standpoint, poverty is a perspective that she has only recently come to know directly and may never experience fully. Desperate for legal assistance but quick to command this help, Poncelet simply implies that all her kindness and courtesy may never be enough to grasp the actuality of growing-up in poverty.

This initial interchange identifies many other conflicts that outline the film. Poncelet has been raised in poverty and is proud of his upbringing, but poverty has afforded him limited legal counsel, a problem shared by many death-row inmates. Economic standing aside, poverty also connotes a sense of personal power and worth, a measure of self-dignity that continually provokes Poncelet and Prejean in this drama of conversion. In Robbins’ depiction, rendered by a series of flashbacks, Sister Prejean’s encounter with Poncelet remembers an ongoing sense of poverty that results from the brutality and baseness of violence, a painful memory that is appeased by the call of her vocation to “show mercy” (Luke 10:37). To an extent, violence is an economy produced by weakness and resentment, which, then, turns and preys on others; and it is precisely these forces that consume Poncelet, leaving him impoverished.

In a conflict of similar but competing motivations, Kenneth Burke provides a subtle analytical eye on the dynamic forces of identification. In the most summary sense, identification names the vast network of associations and evaluations formed by differing individuals that encounter one another. Identification is for Burke the primary basis of rhetoric and necessary because individuals are essentially joined yet divided. In his summary of the term, he simply defines identification as “A is not identified with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so” (20). For example, families exist because of unions that converge differing interests. And thus, individuals emerge
from families but assert a measure of independence. Likewise, families and individuals exist within larger communities united yet divergent in various desires and interests. The links of dialectical connection are extensive and all these links presume some form of relationship of influence, alteration, and transformation. At last, identification is a necessary result of essential differences, the separateness that result from the singularity of an individual’s experience formed within a group of other differing individuals.

Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man’s very essence (22).

One might mistakenly think of identification and the necessity of rhetoric from a theological perspective that assumes imperfection resulting from man’s fallen nature, as Burke ironically notes when he claims “rhetoric is concerned with a state of Babel after the fall” (23). Eden would be the name of a world without opposition and that would be an unchanging world without a qualitative future. Identification names Burkes’ philosophy of individuality and community: identity is determined by properties that individuate its singularity. Identification is best understood by examining the term individuality, which is in principle independent yet related. Furthering this general analysis of identity and difference as it locates the individual, he distinguishes identity as a transformative concept: what is proper to a thing or an individual is also divided by the many formative influences and properties that establish the individual’s formation. These differends, however, are differences in kind oriented by a common ground of consubstantiality compelled to cooperate. As Burke simply suggests, identification, consubstantiality, and persuasion are necessitated by differences—differences negotiated through relatedness. And this dialectical relationship of identification through recognition is established by language, those symbols that actively form a substance and a currency between individuals.
He directly underlines this point of recognition when he states, “Here is perhaps the simplest case of persuasion. You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language, identifying your ways with his” (55).

The question of really understanding what it is like to be poor echoes throughout the film. Initially, the identification established through poverty signifies very direct economic and legal difficulties. The demand of just retribution for a capital crime often exceeds the quality of just legal representation for defendants. The problem of quality representation should be understood within the larger context of increased criminalization in the United States. Laurence Hinman reports that “currently 1.9 million Americans are incarcerated, only Russia sentences more people to prison; and this figure accounts for a 300% increase the early 1970’s ” (Hinman). The massive strains on the legal system and the quality of legal representation provided for the poor is illustrated throughout the film, as well as the implicit racial bias and political opportunism that have led abolitionists to call for a moratorium on capital sentencing. In the film, Poncelet’s clemency attorney voices this important social fact of fairness at his clemency hearing when he states, “There’s no rich men on death row.” Without the financial means, he is granted a court-appointed attorney experienced in tax law with no experience defending a murder case, a limitation that is all too frequent rather than the exception. Mark Costanzo details at length the inequity that many poor defendants face prior to the trial.

Because very few capital defendants can afford to hire their own lawyer, they are represented by either a public defender or a court appointed private attorney. Public defenders work for state-funded offices that specialize in representing indigent clients. Fortunately, there are many dedicated public defenders who are both capable and experienced in defending people accused of capital crimes, and these defenders manage to provide effective representation despite relatively low pay and heavy workloads. But these are not nearly enough to go around. Most public defenders’ offices are located in large cities and many states have no such offices. In these states, capital defendants are represented by court-appointed lawyers: private attorneys assigned by trial judges.
The effectiveness of defense attorneys in capital cases varies wildly. Most states have a cap on spending for each capital trial. For example, Alabama pays attorneys at the rate of $20 per hour, and Mississippi pays only $11.75 per hour. Stephen Bright, a lawyer who has defended many capital defendants, reports that his pay for representing a capital defendant in Mississippi amounted to less than $2 per hour. He notes that in many capital cases, “the court reported is paid more than the lawyer appointed to defend the counsel.” Because of the unrealistic limits on the total amount of money the states allocates for the defense of a capital client, the available funds are often exhausted before the trial even begins. Appallingly, capital defendants with court-appointed lawyers are more than twice as likely to be sentenced to death than defendants with privately retained attorneys. (Costanzo 76-77)

Many argue that the appeal process counterbalances the problem of inadequate legal counsel; however, there are legal precedents that limit the appeals process. Often legal discussions of capital appeals note the difficulties of introducing matters that were not brought forth in the initial trial. In addition, a defendant must prove that the legal counsel he or she received in the initial trial was so inadequate that it violated the constitutional right of “effective assistance of counsel.”

The political problem of unequal justice for the poor is commonly contextualized by inequity and discrimination toward minorities. Not only is representation often inadequate but it is also widely held by abolitionists that capital sentencing and execution discriminates against minorities, particularly African-Americans. Keeping in mind the general trend of increased criminalization noted earlier, Hinman claims further that African-Americans in the US have a one in four chance of a jail sentence throughout their lifetime. To account for this assumed discrimination, the Bureau of Justice statistics reports that in 2000, 3593 were sentenced to death by the 37 (38 states impose a death penalty) states (Bureau of Justice). If nothing else this fact details the rapid escalation of capital sentences since 1976 when 420 were sentenced to death with the reinstatement of executions following Georgia vs. Fuhrman. When reviewing the
statistics between 1980 and 2000, however, whites were continually the predominate race sentenced to death. For example, of the 85 persons that were executed in 2000, 49 where white, 35 were black, and 1 was an American Indian. These 2000 figures typify a consistent pattern over the last twenty years: whites comprise approximately 55% of those sentenced to death compared with racial minorities that comprise the remaining 45%. Of those executed, whites comprise 56% compared with 35% African-Americans, 7% Hispanic and 2% Native Americans, Asian, and Iraqi (Death Penalty Information). Outwardly, these statistics seem to debunk the commonplace claim that sentencing discriminates against racial minorities.

Ernest van den Haag, one of the most determined advocates of capital punishment, furthers Lanagan’s point citing Bureau of Justice Statistics as evidence to argue that African Americans he notes,

Recent data reveal little direct racial discrimination in the sentencing of those arrested and convicted of murder. (9) The abrogation of the death penalty for rape has eliminated a major source of racial discrimination. Concededly, some discrimination based on the race of murder victims may exist; yet, this discrimination affects criminal murder victimizers in an unexpected way. Murderers of whites are thought more likely to be executed than murderers of blacks. Black victims, then, are less fully vindicated than white ones. However, because most black murderers kill blacks, black murderers are spared the death penalty more often than are white murderers. They fare better than most white murderers (10). The motivation behind unequal distribution of the death penalty may well have been to discriminate against blacks, but the result has favored them. Misdistribution is thus a straw man for empirical as well as analytical reasons.

For van den Haag the overall fairness of the law is secondary to the moral principle of establishing justice, a principle that is indeed blind to all extraneous matters of race and status. Justice, for him sees no mitigating circumstances beyond personal intention and the responsibility for the offense. Consequently, capital punishment is not a problem of fairness but a moral issue that must seek retribution from an offender. For him,

Punishments are imposed on a person, not on racial or economic groups. Guilt is
personal. The only relevant question is: does the person to be executed deserve the punishment? Whether or not others who deserved the same punishment, whatever their economic or racial group, have avoided execution is irrelevant. If they have, the guilt if the executed convicts would not be diminished, nor would their punishment be less deserved. To put the issue starkly, if the death penalty were imposed on guilty blacks, but not on guilty whites, or, if it were imposed by a lottery among the guilty, this irrationally discriminatory or capricious distribution would neither make the penalty unjust, nor cause anyone to be unjustly punished, despite the undue impunity bestowed on others. (Van den Haag)

When judging exclusively a person’s culpability, van den Haag’s extreme impartiality seems blind to the social influences that form a judgment. Ideally justice would be impartial, but to avoid the longstanding influence of racial prejudice toward minorities seems naive ignorant. His question, “Does the person to be executed deserve the punishment?” seems to diminish the context of mitigating circumstances that first establishes the justness of a death sentence.

Abolitionists argue that discrimination must be evaluated from a broader pattern of judgment that underlies the statistical evidence. When considering the statistics that account for sentencing and execution, it is important to note that while whites comprise the majority of those sentenced to death and eventually executed, African-Americans comprise only 12% of the U.S. population, making the 21% difference seem less significant (www.census.gov). Research supports Van den Haag’s point that justice is blind to race only in the case of particularly brutal vicious murders, otherwise race and other extenuating circumstances influence the judgment of a death sentence. Costanzo argues “racial bias seeps into the decision-making process at every juncture. It is not primarily the race of the defendant that influences decisions, but the race of the victim” (81). Costanzo’s point is evidenced by statistics that indicate dissimilarity between the 12 executions of white defendants who murdered blacks as opposed to the 174 black defendants who murdered whites (Death Penalty Information). In a recent study conducted of 502 murder cases in North Carolina, researchers concluded, “defendants whose victims are white are 3.5
times more likely to be sentenced to death than those with non-white victims” (Death Penalty Information). Likewise, a recent Justice Department review concluded “80% of the cases submitted by federal prosecutors for death penalty review in the past five years have involved racial minorities as defendants” (Bureau of Justice).

The film concentrates this general problem of discrimination against minorities and the poor by first illustrating the highly politicized context that has influenced the swift rise in capital sentencing over the last twenty-five years. The film creates an atmosphere of antagonism toward crime summarized by the ongoing political maxim “Get Tough on Crime!” Robbins obliquely presents this threatening issue to the audience in many ways. Billboards emerge from the film’s periphery promising a candidate readied for toughness. While driving, the shrill rant of talk radio shows creates a lingering hostility, with its insistent and relentless mockery of liberal “do-gooders.” On television, the familiar background noise of American domestic life, evening programming is punctuated by the promises of the Governor of Louisiana to strengthen a weak justice system. All of these messages loom over the Poncelet case urging an anxious, immediate reaction that moves public opinion for retribution. Yet get tough rhetoric often results in a hardened efficiency that advances the executions of capital offenders by politicians who are resolved to encounter violent crime with the law’s utmost force. The practical consequence of getting tough generally means that the courts resist appeals and that politicians are unwilling to offer stays or pardons unless there is some clear political advantage. In the haste to respond, the resolve that politicians so eagerly offer a threatened public may be efficient but not always fair.

The political effects of a get tough policy are not lost on Poncelet when he tells Sister Prejean in his first meeting with her that “they about to go on a killing spree here. . . The guards are taking bets on who’s next.” Generally, the privacy of executions has eliminated the public
spectacle of punishment, but news publicity remains a means of stirring the public’s emotions. The political advantage of executing death sentences to show toughness toward crime is well exemplified in Poncelet’s summation to his clemency attorney that “the day before Governor Benedict said he’s gonna run for reelection they set a date for my execution.” Getting tough suggests a resolve, but this strict determination can be selective. In the film Poncelet remarks rather cynically but knowingly that the equity of justice is a bit more than a moral issue but a system of quotas that balances discrimination. “They all ready executed a black, Tobias. Waiting for Purcell tonight. That’s two blacks. Time for a white. The governor under pressure to get a white. And that’s me.”

Throughout the film, the common sense of poverty that draws Poncelet and Sister Prejean together extends beyond the common socio-economic classification. She dutifully responds to Poncelet with sympathetic respect, but the poverty that possesses Poncelet expresses another form of diminished status. Prejean sees in Poncelet a poverty of character, the ignobility of one who suffers from a resentful form of dignity. Her response to the poverty that he suffers is intrinsically Christian, she sympathetically understands the human predisposition to sin, and as a counselor she works as a medium of God’s grace to transform his dignity. Such a transformation is affected naturally enough by the traditional Christian faith in the power of love. Yet with grace aside, their identification also develops from the active response of rhetorical appeals that challenge Poncelet’s place of dignity. In Burkeian terms, her responsiveness as counselor is a “moralizing force” that challenges him to transform the resentful economy that viciously places blame elsewhere as a means of self-protection. From this limited perspective of a “moralizing force,” I want to extend Burke’s thinking about identification by focusing on a few key encounters that induce a heightened sense of dignity and forgiveness within this drama of
conversion.

Burke begins his definition of identification with the imagery of killing, perhaps the most extreme form of transforming or just eradicating an identity. In a very complicated passage about this extreme, he writes that,

an imagery of slaying (slaying of either the self or another) is to be considered merely as a special case of identification in general. Or otherwise put: the imagery of slaying is a special case of transformation, and transformation involves the imagery of identification. That is: the killing of something is the changing of it, and the statement of the thing’s nature before and after the change is an identifying of it. (20)

Obviously, the killing retold in *Dead Man Walking* is more than mere imagery; Poncelet’s act has transformed all those that suffer his deed. Killing produces a symbolic invincibility for him, a persona formed by crossing a limit and doing the unthinkable, an act that intensifies his strength. The hard strength that possesses Poncelet is antithetical to the suffering felt by the wounded families victimized by him. His remaining presence intensifies the suffering of their loss. Their anger seems to cry “He must go for some return on what he has taken from us.” In some sense his eventual pain in execution seems not only just, but also by eradicating such a hostile presence, those victimized might actually find some relief from the memory of unforgettable grief. Sister Prejean enters this scope of hostility hoping to transform this insatiable resentment by first encountering the impoverished, self-absorbed pride that enlivens Poncelet. In the end, her influence does some killing; the transformative force of her counsel outlasts the reactive force that strengthens him.

Burke often exemplifies the dialectical basis of identification through the metaphor of mirroring, a reflexive relationship that Robbins’ direction presents quite well. The discussions between Poncelet and Sister Prejean are restricted naturally enough by the protective glass, but the prison enclosure produces a resemblance that becomes symbolic. In several scenes, Robbins’
camera moves shot, reverse shot focusing on each speaker through the interchange of dialogue. Yet even while the camera is focused on one character the image of the other often reflects off the glass partition between them creating a superimposition. When one speaks the presence of the other has priority over our address. Certainly Prejean’s words of counsel challenge his sense of dignity, but the reflected trace suggests an affirmative but demanding presence that overshadows him. Robbins’ direction implies to the audience that she has made an impression on him and he has begun internalizing the steadfast force of her presence. Identification between the two foremost occurs by modeling, she confronts his self-dignity with the challenge of her example. She exemplifies respect in the most fundamental sense of the word, she ‘looks at him’ with regard, not naive to his offense and his defensive blaming, but aware of the potential he has to realize a higher form of dignity. In simple terms, she sees something in him and he responds to her regard; it seems that in asking her for help, he must oblige this care by being responsible to her. If dignity is a matter of worth, then Poncelet’s must respond by owning the actions that seem to have possessed him, a response that compels justification before another. In these scenes, Robbins’ illustrates the ethical encounter as the moment of respect, facing the other who demands justice.

As her influence becomes more pressing, Prejean’s direct questions about responsibility for Poncelet’s awful violations begin to convert the resentful persona that has protected him from the truth of his cruelty. Her care for him is intended particularly to realize some dignity, a project Prejean’s is irritated by his never-ending defensiveness that habitually blames any-and-all for drawing him in to the tragedy that found him. Drugs clouded his judgment; those dumb kids were in the wrong place; the other guy did everything. His repeated blaming returns us to the general theme of poverty. Sister Prejean frustrated with the all of this misdirected strength,
particularly now that he could perhaps relieve a small part of the pain that he’s created, characterizes him as a victim. As one who has fashioned himself as a rebel too strong to be broken by the forces that have condemned him, he is irked by a claim that connotes weakness, disadvantage, lowliness and suggested by the term *victim*. Reacting against such identification and the force of her challenge, Poncelet’s sharp reply “I am no victim!” implies a charged resistance to a challenging threat that emasculates the power of his persona. The force of Prejean’s kind but strong presence accompanied with the challenge of her remarks penetrates him, which activates a transformative turning that brings forth another kind of self-respect in Poncelet.

The climax of this drama of conversion is clearly Poncelet’s confession of guilt to Prejean and his offering of forgiveness to the victimized parents. But the emotional dynamics that bring this climax forth are complicated. The simple argument might be that Poncelet accepts responsibility under the pressure of immanent death. Facing the end no doubt motivates a twinge of conscience that could be understood in more philosophical terms as a Kantian sense of duty and responsibility before the truth of what ought to be. Generally, such a summary seems quite right. Nevertheless, the force of the claim *victim* is penetrating because it comes from someone he has learned to respect. Initially, I am using the term respect in the traditional etymological definition of responding to the impression of another. In this rooted sense, respect names a dialectical development of personal recognition. One’s self-identity is developed in deferential regard to the authority of another, and the other’s influence gradually is internalized and transformed into a way being. When Prejean calls Poncelet a victim he is insulted by the claim of weakness. The accusation obviously challenges him, but the response is more than just a reflexive defensiveness. He has been challenged by someone that cares for him, a concern that is
more than her vocation or her opposition to the death penalty. The identification between them comes about through the force of Prejean’s sense respect for a kind of strength and dignity that Poncelet indicates but refuses to realize. All of Poncelet’s bluster about taking a lie detector test to prove his innocence seems like the last spasms of the reactive need to defend. The pressure of Prejean’s care relieves Poncelet; he realizes that beyond her religious conviction, she holds him in regard without forgetting what he has done. Through the feeling of altruistic regard, he is able to ease his defenses and turn to dignify those that he’s harmed. In very simple terms, feeling cared for creates a sense of dignity that allows him to begin honestly caring for others. Nearing his execution, Poncelet admits to his mother, who he is concerned not to dishonor, that he was indeed guilty of rape and murder because he wanted to gain the respect of his accomplice. His strength of honesty with his mother, who loves him as unconditionally as one could, is brought forth by regard by another who he feels grateful toward. In this relationship, identification is dialectically formed; respect encourages the dignity of responsibility that turns toward another for forgiveness. When Poncelet thanks Sister Prejean for “loving him” as he is led to his execution, his thanks of love refers to her honoring the possibility of a dignity and sovereignty that he finally realizes. At last, motivated by the spirit of respect and forgiveness, Poncelet offers the wish of some just satisfaction, when he ends with the “hope that my death gives you some relief.” In the end, the film seems to leave open whether there is any possible release or forgiveness from the pain of suffering when a return to suffering is the antidote. In Dead Man Walking, the ease of forgiveness is difficult; one might necessarily let go out of necessity because the film relentlessly wrenches the audience through the violent oppositions. But the actual sense of relief from suffering through forgiveness is, as Sister Prejean suggests, not just faith but ongoing work.
“I’ve Been Trying to Get You and Your Wife Out My Mind”

Taking a stand against capital punishment may mean nothing more than an argumentative position; however, to care for a death row inmate certainly demands a commitment beyond advocating a position. Yet these challenges are small when faced with justifying one’s commitment to the family of victims who have suffered from the hands that one has offered so much care and respect. In this drama of conversion, Sister Prejean responsibilities are confused and turned asunder when confronted by the parents of the children that Poncelet has wronged. It is agonizing to face someone so traumatized with anger, inflamed by the shocking cruelty that was inflicted for some ugly thrill. Provoked by their sharp criticism, Prejean visits these grieving parents haunted by their sorrow. When she remarks particularly to Walter Delacroix that she can’t get he and his wife out of her mind, the remark partially is about the qualms of guilt, but the unforgettable impression that they have left indicates a kind of invasion of sorrow that carries one away.

In the most rooted sense, suffering means to endure and carry. The film will surely demand the audience endure some of the staggering emotional grief, turmoil, and rage activated by such violence. Juxtaposition influences the film’s content and vitality, creating a context of opposition and compelling encounter. In spite of one’s stance on the problem, the film will challenge that position, forcing one to revisit their position as it is juxtaposed and often turned violently by other opposing positions. Faced with this encounter, we have little choice but to respond to these opposing demands. The absolute priority to respect the other’s experience is the primary ethical response that underlies the film’s importance, a vital demand so important for those beginning rhetoricians that provoked this project.
In favor of capital punishment? Against capital punishment? Either position encounters intense opposition. The film will demand one to recognize a justice system where the two criminals responsible for the same crimes receive quite different penalties. A better attorney, a pre-trial sentencing deal, or perhaps even wrongful accusations ends with one convict condemned to death row and the other sentenced to life in prison. Can these inevitable inequities of justice be so easily accepted or so easily ignored in resignation?

The nation and the state may argue that retribution of one’s life is the just conclusion for an act that violates a fundamental social right. Yet many will question the government’s power and moral capacity as an absolute arbiter over human life. The film juxtaposes these oppositions by illustrating how the finality of the death penalty actually lingers and haunts the convicted with delays and uncertainty that are brutal and inhumane. Critics, however, argue that the severity of a criminal’s offense really surrenders most basic human rights; thus, nearly any pain is justifiable because it is compensatory. Yet the film illustrates brilliantly how the lingering pain that encircles the administration of capital punishment actually intensifies cruelty. A disabling mourning that awaits some reprisal that never seems satisfying shatters the lives of the victim’s parents. Awaiting some compensation for a loss that never is quite restored, their lives together is upset, and the trauma often forces them to divorce. This pain naturally circulates elsewhere within the victim’s family; their remaining children frequently suffer emotional neglect, overshadowed by the lost child that consumes their parent’s mourning. Likewise, the convict’s family suffers differently from a vague personal guilt, a shame intensified by community’s indignation toward an offense that is perhaps beyond their responsibility. Ultimately, the film resists any clear resolution to the opposition that underlies this difficulty.

The position that death penalty continues a cruelty that it intended to diminish, will be
challenged, however, by the actual torture that Poncelet has imposed on a couple of innocent kids enjoying an evening in the woods. Under Robbins’ direction, the murder and rape scenes form a fragmented subtext that interrupts the main plot with the stark graphic details that register their humiliating act. In sum, these fragmentary interruptions form a rhetoric of reaction. With each successive stage of her engagement with Poncelet, she imagines, and the audience encounters, the gradual unfolding of the offense. Fragmentary parts of the rape and murders begin with stark, black and white forensic-like crime photographs, scant images that finally envelop into a full color recreation of the crime. In the film’s introduction her anxiety about entering a prison to visit Poncelet is represented by sharp juxtapositions of these forensic images that appear in rapid sequence heightening her fear and uncertainty. The juxtaposition of random images unfolds into a complete detailing of the crime as Poncelet’s defensiveness weakens under her care. These imaginative recreations do indeed activate fresh life by projecting the revulsion, pain, and anger felt by those victimized to not only Sister Prejean but also the audience who must respond to Poncelet’s plight, confronted by the utter ugliness and of all this. Whatever one’s position is on capital punishment, the film provokes the audience to sense more painfully the resignation or frustrated anger encountered with the daily register of cruelty and violence. There is probably a moment when the most patient must think “State killing or not, why should anyone care about these brutal, despicable, creeps. Let’s just be finished with such insufferable waste.”

But I wonder if such a conclusive attitude really finds satisfaction? Does execution find a sense of relief for victims and the community?

In a film that is generally faithful to Sister Prejean's book, Robbins extends her objections against the equity of justice and the morality of state retribution in the film’s conclusion. The film’s final scenes affect a sense of insurmountable frustration that lingers over the obvious sense
of loss that troubles all of the suffering families. Such persistent suffering perhaps indicates a sense that the justice realized in punishment may not offer much relief. More disturbing, the promise of punishment may not restore the community, but incite an insatiable urge for retribution that forms a life of frustrated desire for the offended.

In the film, Matthew Poncelet’s funeral is conventionally portrayed as a commemoration of forgiveness that wishes healing, too, for the shame felt by his family. As the ceremony disperses, the camera focuses on a distant witness to the service’s resolve for forgiveness. Approached by Prejean, the wounded Mr. Delacroix, the father of one of the teenagers murdered, seems utterly confused without any certainty why he is drawn so near to this ritual of closing. Funerals inspire the memory of lost one, and perhaps the service heightens for him the complicated recollections of loss and responsibility that might find some relief when Poncelet’s presence actually is buried forever.

Approached by Prejean, the bewildered Delacroix explains to her, “I don’t know why I’m here?” In his confusion, he seems overpowered by forces that only vaguely can be summarized as, “I got a lot of hate inside me!” Throughout the film, he seems uncomfortable with the pressure of anger, distressed by a threatening sensibility that seems to be consuming him. It’s as if his feelings and words of disgust return to him filling him with a viciousness that he wanted to release on Poncelet and anything that seemed associated with this source of offense. Delacroix may not understand himself, but he identifies in Prejean a force of strength that may counter what seems to be an increasingly unbearable disposition. Ultimately, the film concludes with the “work” of prayer and forgiveness as perhaps some way of overcoming the suffering that remains long after restitution. In the last scene, Delacroix and Sister Prejean meet in a parish church, and as the camera withdraws its focus from the church, the pulling away implies that any resolution
to this drama of conversion might be found there. And relief may be found there.

However, departing from the film's predominately Christian orientation of forgiveness may provide insight into the ethos that informs this unforgettable pain. Such a shift would require another kind of identification and reevaluation of the formation of ethics itself. Recalling Mr. Delacroix's lingering pain, I want to turn to a cultural physician pain and suffering—Nietzsche. One who long ago identified and analyzed the retributive hostility constitutive of western ethics, and further recognized that this pain is principally the result of enculturation into “two thousand years of cruelty.” Ultimately, the western ethos is formed by a mournful will overwhelmed by the lingering inability to discharge the painful impressions of blame and debt.

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Guilt . . . Its beginnings were, like the beginnings of everything great on earth, soaked in blood thoroughly and for a long time. And might one add that, fundamentally, this world has never since lost a certain odor of blood and torture.

—Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals 65

Unsettling

The preface to Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals begins with contradictory statement that is perhaps telling of the book’s purpose. Nietzsche announces, “We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge” (51). Western philosophical thinking, from “Socrates to Nietzsche” might be summarized as a reaction to the varied intonations of this primary declaration (Gerhardt 283). Yet Nietzsche’s tone, the conflicted, enigmatic pitch implicit in his declaration surely demands many specific questions. What is this knowledge that is so unknown to men? Is it a strange knowledge that man faintly carries, a secret barely felt and hardly known? If man lives in secrecy, alien to himself, what is the value of the knowledge that confirms his status as one of those men of knowledge? Nietzsche unfolds his analysis of the contradiction when he states
elsewhere, “How we have known how to bestow on our senses a passport to everything superficial, on our thoughts a divine desire for wanton gamboling and false conclusions” (Beyond Good and Evil 37). If we are in some sense willfully confused, superficial creatures, living on a mistaken sense, then this experience is widespread. Such a willful unknowing implies that as a community, as a society, and as a culture, we remain at once known, and yet, oddly secretive, unknown to our self and others. Thus, Nietzsche implies perhaps that we live in a common state of secrecy, deceit, and misrecognition that is necessary to protect the value of our knowledge from a threatening unknowing.

With all these possibilities, we should summarily ask, Is the contradiction that Nietzsche introduces a matter of alienation from one’s true self yet to be known? Or is the difficulty more alienating because such estrangement introduces disturbing and tragic sense of unfamiliarity? Perhaps the contradictory problem that Nietzsche introduces is not alienation in the traditional sense of lacking unity, but more the experience of strangeness that we “men of knowledge” experience when something unfamiliar threatens our momentary habits of knowing. Nietzsche likens this interruption to the shock of a “bell stroke” that awakens disorientation. What fear is occasioned with this disorientation? Stunned by the jarring shock that breaks the rhythm of familiarity, the man of knowledge feels estranged, threatened, or, perhaps, even thrilled by an invasive disturbance and momentary uncertain about the unity and vitality of things that enlivens his knowledge. In this moment, the certainty of the “I” that orients identity has no more substance than the habitual tic of a passing gesture. The network of words that affirm and assure the self, appear suspended and distant as odd labels naming a strange if not unknown body. Perhaps the force of this strange invasive disturbance, effects a sinking collapse of meaning that opens the possibility of a plurality of things that Nietzsche indefinitely refers to as ‘ourselves.’
In this disintegration of meaning that disturbs the shelter of identity, we men of knowledge are altered by an interruption of non-knowledge, an invasive force that overcomes the enclosed idea of man.

Much like the affect of the bell stroke, Nietzsche’s genealogies punctuate an unsettling disturbance that undermines the certitude of self-knowing. The force of his writing critiques the constraints that man is subjected to know himself. Weighing the legacy of subjection, Nietzsche’s evaluation will characterize the decadence that emanates from all attempts to finalize something traditionally referred to as the self and its knowledge (Conway 31). Yet this same evaluation must as well affirm another kind of suffering that result from man’s confusing “desire to know more than he can bear or contain” (Marsden 155). Under the disturbance that Nietzsche affects, this preface broadly outlines the contradictions that he diagnoses for us men of knowledge in this analysis of debt, revenge, suffering, and trans-valuation of this form of being human.

Nietzsche’s evaluative descent undergone in the Genealogy of Morals is indebted to a longstanding tradition of thinking directed by the question of self-knowledge and its ethical-moral outcome. As Robert Solomon argues summarily,

Plato gives us the perfect society; Aristotle gives us a portrait of the happy, virtuous life; Kant provides an analysis of morality and practical reason; John Stuart Mill gives us the principle of utility . . . Nietzsche, by contrast, offers us a diagnosis in which morals emerge as something mean-spirited and pathetic. (95)

The Genealogy does indeed undergo an analysis of the establishment of moral ideals, but Nietzsche’s analysis is motivated by a radical uncertainty about the quality of values that have activated traditional morality. For him, the ethical bases of moral values are base and, thus, furthering a corrupt decline. Throughout the Genealogy and elsewhere in his writing there is
pervasive rhetoric of pathology, an argumentative style that seems to contradict the idealism and possibility that vitalizes conventional philosophical treatises on ethics. Unlike traditional prescriptive philosophies, his writing compares with the diagnosis of a physician reporting on a psychosomatic infection that threatens consuming the health of humanity, society, and culture. If the decadent morality that Nietzsche examines is pathetic, we must be careful in our analysis of the affects of this suffering. Nietzsche’s writing does seem superficially hostile, yet the hostility is an outburst that provokes a concern that motivates him to write a possible antidote for the psycho-somatic symptoms that has degenerated the social and culture of contemporary life.

The health that Nietzsche foresees for the man of sovereignty is not simply the cruel elitism of nobility, but thinking that tries to subdue the economic legacy of suffering and angry vehemence inherent within the ethico-moral formation of man, the one who promises. Influenced by Nietzsche’s perspective, this portion of the chapter examines the strain of cruelty and raging anger within the legacy of responsibility that embodies contemporary ethical formation, a strain that provokes much of the continuing suffering for compensation illustrated in Dead Man Walking.

With Nietzsche, the reader meets a practitioner evaluating different forces that manifest symptoms that can be reconstituted with pressure into transformative possibilities. As a cultural physician, Nietzsche’s thinking not only evaluates the origin and growth of a massive “biological problem” that has conceived morality, but his writing experiments with possibilities that might

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9 As indicated earlier, Nietzsche’s writing might be entitled A Rhetoric of Pathology; metaphors of sickness and health provide norms of comparison throughout his work. But my use of the term physician is influenced by Daniel A. Ahern’s careful book Nietzsche as Cultural Physician.

10 Simply defined, health is strength. The strong organism is the transformative organism on the way to becoming. The organism is “only a means to something, it is the expression of forms of the growth of power” (Will to Power 692). Nevertheless, the affects of this quantum of forces that Nietzsche names strength are complicated. As we will see later in this chapter, the forces of resentment are strengths manifested by a defensiveness driven by impotency.
result in an ethico-moral overcoming. The Genealogy is motivated by a dire sense of disgust concerning the wasted creation called modern man whose will gains internal strength by giving virtue to weakness and finding satisfaction by craving oblivion. Yet Nietzsche voices this disgust hyperbolically, accenting excess, turning to “affirm something that can be called arche-ethical or ultra-ethical” (Derrida, Negotiations 223). Therefore, we should note carefully that Nietzsche’s brooding diagnoses are tempered by surges of promise that conceive of a creative, affirmative kind of spirit that activates an ethics of great health (Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals 96). It is as if the values of healthy morality, for Nietzsche, have been just momentary, long past egoistic formations that remain yet to reactivate and emerge in the form of a creative spirit who might redeem the world of its great nausea (96). Charles Scott provides more clarity to the movement of overcoming that energizes Nietzsche’s writing. He refers to genealogy as a recoiling movement projected back on the forces of ethical formation, provoking the emergence of other repressed valances within the ethical economy that forms an individual. The reactions within Nietzsche’s discourse,

Involve in its conception a coiling again of traditional ideas, a recollecting and gathering of inherited forces, a type of torsion among them that can release a torrent on non-traditional effects, such as new directions of action, collections of newly formed or reformed presuppositions, different organizations of values and thought, and possibly, beings that are different from traditional humanity . . . (Scott 17)

Rosalyn Diprose focuses on Nietzsche’s sense of “a pathos of distance” that emerges from his writing, a movement that turns from the tradition that constitutes ethical formation and development. The distance that she details extends the conflicted movement of transformation that Scott describes with the figure of recoil. The transformative distance that results from the torsion and detachment within a prevailing ethos causes an interval that renews a different relationship of identity and ethico-moral understanding of oneself and other. For Diprose, the
outcome of such an encounter and renewal interrupts the traditional intersubjective economy based on contractual equivalence in favor of an incalculable generosity. The final section of this chapter evaluates this transvaluation of the traditional belief in the accountancy of debt, mercy, and generosity introduced by Nietzsche and sustained by Diprose and other commentators when they consider the unforeseen, self-overcoming sense of strength that would renew the possibilities of mercy and justice.

Regarding the *Genealogy of Morals*, my reference to ethics might appear mistaken, particularly since the account is so clearly an evaluation of morality. However, throughout this section, my use of the term is intentionally broad. First, in the most traditional usage, ethical inquiry evaluates the conceptual ideals such as the good, virtue and the like, which is a tradition that Nietzsche’s writing furthers in his reevaluation of the *value of values*. But in a broader sense, I am influenced once again by Charles Scott’s definition of the term, when he emphasizes that ethics is an order that forms individual and cultural self-definition. For him, ethics names a socio-cultural substance that supports,

> [a] body of values by which a culture understands and interprets itself with regard to what is good and bad. In this usage, ethics is not sharply distinguished from morals, since it refers to a group of principles for both conduct and value judgment. (Scott 4)

The rhetoric of the *Genealogy* diagnoses but also experiments with problems that chance to overturn an unhealthy ethical order enlivened by nihilism. I believe that the overturning affected by Nietzsche’s writing is itself ethical in its apocalyptic force. The ethical quality of Nietzsche’s evaluations is generated by an affirmative sense of human transformation and unqualified

\[\text{\footnote{Gilles Deleuze succinctly differentiates the type of evaluation undertaken by the genealogists when he writes, “Genealogy means both the value of origin and the origin of values. Genealogy is as opposed to absolute values as it is to relative or utilitarian ones. Genealogy signifies the differential element of values from which their value itself derives. Genealogy thus means origin or birth, but also difference or distance in their origin.”}}\]
affirmation of futurity. Such an interruption and overturning of knowledge by experimentation allows some other formation to emerge within the traditional order of ethics. Such experimentation is evident in the *Genealogy’s* second essay on the internalization and spiritualization of guilt, a complex condition that he identifies with the onset of the hostility of *ressentiment* and its pathological deepening that he names the *bad conscience*. In his general diagnosis of the organization of guilt, Nietzsche reevaluates the origin of ethical responsibility based on indebtedness, an economic hierarchy that presupposes the virtue of mercy and the ideal of justice from a reactive perspective. Such an evaluation is important because it reveals the inversion and thus weakness of virtue and justice, as it remains ordered by forces of hostile cruelty that Nietzsche names *ressentiment*. When Nietzsche imagines an ethical future that overcomes the dominance of the credit economy, his reevaluation offers the possibility of another kind generous mercy to emerge that overturns law of justice enervated by the deep investment pain and hostility of reactive *ressentiment*. This ethics of credit incites the anger and cruelty suffered in *Dead Man Walking* as the film represents the pain those victimized by the aggression of murder and capital punishment.

**The Responsible Self**

In the *Genealogy of Morals*, particularly the second essay “Guilt, ‘Bad conscience’ and the Like,” Nietzsche argues that humanity emerges as a distinctive species enduring the long outcome of taming, discipline, habituation and breeding that finally produced *man*—the responsible self. The entire discipline of culture that regulates this extraordinary creature is designed to develop an identity based on self-imposed calculation and restriction. Nietzsche

(Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 2).
refers to such endowment as a “right to make promises” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* 57).

In his genealogy, and as we follow the merit of his thought in this chapter, he weighs the value of
such promises. In short, Nietzsche asks an economic question about responsibility: what does
promising cost man?

With the creation of an exceptional sense of responsibility, man becomes unique
possessing traits that differ from all other species. According to him, man is created by forces of
extraordinary restriction that at once harnessed, “suppressed” and “incarcerated” from the world
a “tremendous quantity of freedom” (87). Foremost, his expansive argument throughout the
essay focuses on the discipline that bridles a creature’s instinctive, animal will for active,
maximal feeling of power, a labor of disciplined cruelty that introduces responsibility by
impressing a sense of accountability and a taint of fear on this special creature: the “animal-
man.”

Rhetorically, Nietzsche often signifies this complicated emergence by referring to man as
a hyphenated composite. Man is not just an individual being as such, but a *semi-animal*, or “the
valuating animal as such,” which has evolved, surpassing the internalizations of obedience
necessary to please some alpha male or master. Nietzsche’s distinction should not suggest that
man is merely some elevated variant on an animal. For Nietzsche, man differs from its animal
counterpart because humanity is quite a different type of species.\(^\text{12}\) Man is the *interesting* animal

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\(^{12}\) Richard Schacht details the distinction between man and animal more thoroughly when he argues that
Nietzsche’s thinking here is guided by two basic (and very plausible) considerations. The first is that, while human
life may differ in many particular and important respects from other forms of life, it cannot be supposed to be an
affair entirely apart, differing so radically that little more than the word ‘life’ is common to them. We are after all (as
he never tires of observing) ‘a species of animal.’ If human life is ‘no longer merely animal’ life, this circumstance
itself can no only be owing to the fact that that the conditions for the respects in which it is more than a merely
animal are themselves prepared in the distinctive manner in which the constellation of our basic life-processes
has developed. Human life is still but one of many forms of life, animal even if no longer merely so. This has
important implications not only for the understanding of human life, however, but also for the interpretation of life
because he is more serious than any other species. In Nietzsche’s idiom, seriousness signifies the intensification of an internal dominion, a heightened sensibility of conscious responsibility that is spiritualized and governed by an internalized realm that we so commonly name a conscience and a soul. In general, man is more interesting because the qualities of empathy and sympathy that activate this inner region of humanity are governed by a basic sense of lawfulness. These qualities transform the species and maintain a culture; yet the problem that initially interests Nietzsche is an advanced, corrupted formation of this sensibility, a kind of mistaken breeding that has raised man in decay developing him into this ugly growth (87). Man is essentially serious and primarily reactive forces energize this seriousness, and yet this seriousness has been overwhelmed by a debilitating transformation of this fundamental energy. This chapter will delineate the many challenging power transformations in Nietzsche’s thinking that appreciates and depreciates the strength of life that activates a human being. Nietzsche’s typology of seriousness and its subsequent perversion organizes the primary argumentative force of the Genealogy, a typology summarized by his provocative claim that man has undergone such a “profound transformation” in responsibility that it has revolutionized the world (Schact 269). The revolutionary creation named man introduced into the world a deep, psychological sense of responsibility that forms a disciplined mastery so much more interesting—for good or for ill—than any other animal. If this is so, what are the forms of discipline that impresses man with such a particular sense of responsibility and mastery? In other words, how do humans come to identify themselves and respond to others? I believe we can approach these difficult questions by concentrating on the serious quality of responsibility that comes forth with the emergence of

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more generally (239-40).
the human conscience maintained by man’s memory of cruel individual development based on the economy of debt and the responsibility to avenge such obligations.

The ethico-moral quality of responsibility seems so evident that any questioning risks the obvious. Of course, responsibility presumes a personal sense of obligation to oneself and to others. In this conventional manner, self-recognition is based on an internal, lawful contract with oneself and based on the warrant of good will that is enacted in duty, accountability cooperation, and reciprocity. Nietzsche maintains this traditional understanding of ethical responsibility when he claims that human nature results from the paradoxical discipline that breeds a “sovereign,” “emancipated individual” (Genealogy of Morals 5). However, such a commonsense understanding may not be very valuable for humanity. In his estimation, the hammer work of philosophy must remold a tradition dominated by a vital error that activates within man an inverted sense of responsibility. Consequently, Nietzsche’s genealogical evaluation struggles to transvaluate the reactive forces that have come to dominate the affective and conceptual force of responsibility. In what surely seems untraditional and perverse, Nietzsche’s writing hopes to open another kind of thinking by giving “irresponsibility its positive sense” (Deleuze, Nietzsche and Philosophy 21). We will understand this transformation of irresponsible thought when we evaluate Nietzsche’s transvaluation of the conceptual lineage of responsibility, an economy of economics, embodied in the conscience of the sovereign man. Moreover, the irresponsibility that Nietzsche looks forward to provoking, may relieve the ceaseless vehemence that struggles for suppression with the conclusion of Dead Man Walking. Within the interruption of relief, we may witness the emergence of what Nietzsche affirms as another form of mercy that turns forth a

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13 If man is indeed the interesting, serious animal one might also evaluate the forces that produce laughter. Is laughter a later invention produced as an antidote to seriousness? Is laughter related to Nietzsche’s joyful
new justice, a form that violates the traditional security of knowing, accountability, rights, and right doing.

To define the type of responsibility that affects sovereignty, Nietzsche begins, as we noted earlier, with a comparative contrast between man and animal. Unlike its animal counterpart, man embodies a moralized sense of personal accountability that is foreign to the most trained, disciplined animal. Man is “bred with the right to make promises” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* 57). He is the willing and contractual animal who is accountable in the moment and promises this accountability on into the future. A man bred to promise becomes an orderly, calculable and accountable being, and these habitual orders of responsibility form a more inward, deepened psychological character that differs from the most controlled behavior of a well-trained animal. Thus, this special breeding distinguishes two kinds of disciplined responsibility: training that disciplines habits of self-management; but furthermore, these habits of restraint are bred, moralized, and spiritualized creating an entire internal, psychological seat of government that orders man’s self-dominion.

At the most basic level, Nietzsche identifies responsibility as discipline, a government that enforces regulation over the human animal’s memory with a prescribed sense of conduct that gains mastery over the instinctive drives and desires of the body. Both man and animal certainly have the capacity to internalize the command of authority that forms and regulates conduct. For example, dogs learn at birth habits of survival as well as how to behave with other animals, particularly in complicated social hierarchies such as packs. The power dynamics of the pack are never too far from the communities of the *human animal* as well. Yet Nietzsche’s comparative point is that man’s emergence is characterized by a heightened sense of responsibility that
exceeds the primary conditioning of training. Man’s training in responsibility develops an internalized moral quality embodied by a sense of personal duty governed by a conscience. A new form of respect enters the world with the becoming human of man that exceeds the confines of deference to overt power and territory. In learning respect, man becomes reflective, bound toward the other’s benefit to validate one’s own sense of worth. In a fearful moment, the dog that bites his master will not feel personal guilt or the pangs of conscience. The assignment of meaning for an animal is different. And for Nietzsche, the human capacity for discrimination is a vital distinguishing characteristic. The law of human life is precisely this capacity for interpretation and designation:

Whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous “meaning” and “purpose” are necessarily obscured or even obliterated. (Genealogy of Morals 77)

The momentary outbursts of seeming aggression by dogs are just breaches of hierarchical authority by an essentially fearful, anxious creature. Thus, the dog that disobeys crosses the boundaries of training and in doing this feels threatened by the power exerted over it by a master. By comparison, one that is as subtle as it is important, the basic training of the “partly flighty human animal” orders a “subdued,” accountable, “calculable” creature that learns to interpret personal worth from these repeated acts of respect and trust toward the other (58). The dog commands itself repeatedly in respect to the face of mastery; however, man has so thoroughly been impressed with the face of mastery that these forces are internalized, enclosed, and entirely activate the human psyche. As such, man becomes the master, and through this internalization of respect empathizes with the mastery of others. Each owes the other respect based on a sovereignty that is formed through a mastery of the law based on a justice that upheld an
economy of exchange of credit toward another. Thus, Nietzsche’s genealogy evaluates the quality of the various forces, forms, and stages of responsibility that man masters under the heading of contractual justice.

This internal sensibility of mastery governed by a conscience is, moreover, maintained by a deep-seated memory. For Nietzsche, man’s distinctive capacity to promise is fixed by the burning impressions that inscribe stability, regulation, and calculation on the instincts of an otherwise flighty animal (61). To understand the cruel responsibility made memorable by man, we must carefully explain how the introduction of language formalizes the affects of discipline that have marked man’s memory making him a distinctive but troubled creation.

In Nietzsche’s homo natura, the event of man results from a catastrophic transformation of “fundamental change” comparable to the threatening unfamiliarity sea animals encountered as they first traversed onto land (85).14 Man’s emergence actualizes the adage fish out of water. Flapping wildly in this unfamiliar situation, man’s dominating instincts for subjugation become disaffected and by consequence misplaced, misdirected, and finally, repressed (60). Nevertheless, we must not depreciate the great strength that issues forth from this extraordinary transformation. Richard Schacht distinguishes this profound deviation of instinct when he argues that the primary force of alteration undergone by man results from a “socially induced transformation” (292). Throughout his presentation on the refinement of responsibility, I believe that Nietzsche implies that increased sociality brings forth enormous pressure of response from

14 We must not presuppose that words such as transformation can be understood from an evolutionary or teleological outlook. As Nietzsche warns, The influence of “external circumstances” is overestimated by Darwin to a ridiculous extent: the essential thing in the life process is precisely the tremendous shaping, form-creating force working from within which utilizes and exploits “external circumstances”—The new forms molded from within are not formed with an end in view; but in the struggle of the parts a new form is not left long without being related to a partial usefulness and then, according to its use, develops itself more completely. (Will to Power 647)
man. Nietzsche indicates this powerful restraint of increased social pressure when he refers to the social straightjacket worn by man to reform the urges of a foregone sense of a will to power (Genealogy of Morals 59). Certainly Nietzsche’s rhetoric often seems boundlessly harsh, but I believe that one of his major points about man’s emergence as a social being suggests an enormous struggle and risk suggests extraordinary possibility more than just dire severity. As Schacht argues,

A general breakdown of the previously established instinct-structure of a form of life also has the significance of liberating it from the constraints imposed upon it by that structure; and while its survival is thereby certainly endangered, developmental possibilities open up for which it could not happen otherwise have. (274)

We can begin to understand the social workings of this conflicted transformation by just concentrating on the power of language to transform the consciousness of man. Unlike an animal that must rely on a limited group of cries and signals for expression, the issue of language intensifies man’s consciousness and deepens his affective life. The conscious self-reflection that results from language produces a temporal sense that more formally fixes the body linking the present to the past and onward to the future. The performative force of language intensifies man’s internal sense, but also affects a sensibility of personal intentions. With language, man must communicate his intentions engendering self-reflection, but also as an affect of self-reflection, he develops a sense of exchange, and thus, empathy toward others. As social conditions with others become more engaging and complicated, language encodes regulations and laws that uphold personal and group accountability. Finally, language subjects an identity to an economy of intentionality that can evaluate, assign, and forecast value from the logical basis of familiarity and difference. For Nietzsche, this ability to assign value is a form of moral responsibility that marks the event of man—the one governed by an active, internal evaluative
center. It is as if a personal recognition of the subject I issues forth with a self-conscious, sustained sense of moral obligation when promises to others result in one’s ongoing deeds now and in the future.

Humanity emerges as the contracting agent responding to a socio-moral structure that “sculpts” the body and orders the psyche (Diprose 21). To issue one’s word is tantamount to establishing one’s personal integrity. The conscious I emerges performatively, as Judith Butler has argued, when the one who promises enacts the saying (Butler 129). For Nietzsche, the sovereign has mastered training and honors this mastery with a thoroughgoing moral sense of commitment to contractual guarantees. Deleuze summarizes the internalization of mastery detailed by Nietzsche when he writes, “It is he who speaks; he no longer has to answer” (137). In word and deed, man repeats the commanding voice of discipline replicating these influences into one’s own identity. When man answers responsibly, he owns what is owed. For him, the value of values begins within the economy of debt; man’s responsibility to others emerges formatively within an economic community of commerce that are the basis of “legal obligations” (Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals 65). Value originates etymologically as a word naming the medium of exchange and the worth of a commodity. The primary economic basis of value and extension into sociocultural morality is most noteworthy when Nietzsche observes that the German shuld refers to both debt and guilt. Consequently, we see his sensitivity to how the valence of sovereignty originates with a justice of contractual investment that emerges economically in the “basic relation of the creditor to his debtors” (71). When identification is based on the contract of accountability what is most proper to one is property (Schrift 35). The ethical address to another brought forth by indebtedness is a relationship that we must return to when we evaluate a kind of sovereignty that Nietzsche imagines might overcome the legacy of
justice ordered by debt, a credit impelled by cruelty.

All said, the self-possession achieved by the strength of “power over oneself and over fate” defined as sovereignty seems merely to repeat the traditional notion of an autonomous individual (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* 60). If so, what is clearly distinctive about the sovereignty that Nietzsche characterizes? More important, how could this ideal be paradoxically the symptom of an integrity compelled by *ressentiment* and its satisfying aftermath the *bad conscience*? By comparison, the sovereignty achieved by commanding oneself to a commitment seemingly correlates with the obligation that commands the Kantian subject. No doubt, the Kantian subject is also a subject interpellated by the law’s demands? Defining the Kantian categorical imperative, Alphonso Lingis argues that the Kantian subject is subjected to *elemental imperative* that ethically commands a primary response of duty—a *promise* made toward the other (*The Imperative* 213).

The imperative image makes possible respect for the other. Respect for the other, as an entity on his own, a nature that is not simply to be ordered, as a means for one’s own ends, is respect for the law that rules in his composite faculties. To respect the law that commands in him and commands me also. (213)

It may seem odd when I compare Nietzschean sovereignty and Kantian duty when the underlying polemic throughout the *Genealogy* and elsewhere is directed against the “inverted world” of Kantian ethics. As Lingis reminds us, Kant’s ethical imperative identifies a primary sense of obligation that constitutes personal self-recognition in relation to the other’s pain. Personal recognition begins with the obligation of respect for the other’s restraint before the law. Witnessing this critical condition, mutual respect between self and other originates in an imperative that restrains the other’s desire enforcing a sense of self-regulation. Thus, the promise of good will begins with a legislative act of prudence. Nevertheless, Nietzsche believes we
would be prudent to evaluate this regulative contract in suffering. His paradoxical description may seem comparable to Kantian-like principles of individual autonomy and good will before the law, but his genealogical investigation questions the essential quality of this sovereignty achieved by suffering the debt of obligation.15 For Kant, the virtue of dignity is unique, without exchange; it is beyond any cost. But for Nietzsche, the cost of morality obliges a taxing price—a duty that man has internalized, ennobling a vehement anger and suffering that affirm moral perversion. To understand the paradoxical sovereignty of man, a dignity enforced by a vehement suffering, we must try to encounter both the costs of morality as well as the surprising ethical challenges that Nietzsche imagines for the responsible, sovereign self.

As we clarify the paradox of the sovereign subject, our descent becomes more evident when we focus on the relations of forces that affect the memory and the viscera of man with a sense of responsibility that Nietzsche characterizes as brainsickness. To begin our diagnosis, we must examine the retrograde forces that activate the will of ressentiment and its moral outcome the bad conscience. Are these forces terminal? If man’s health has any future beyond this crisis, what might constitute, for Nietzsche, a turning toward a “form of robust health” (Genealogy of Morals 58)? Regarding these questions, perhaps the paradox of the sovereign subject lies in Nietzsche’s enigmatic remark about the particular struggle brought out by this illness. For him, “bad conscience is an illness, there is no doubt about that, but an illness as pregnancy is an illness” (88). What does Nietzsche mean when he uses the metaphor of pregnancy in his prognosis of the bad conscience? Is this pregnancy the outcome of the internalization that man suffers? Encountering a crisis that seems to arouse all of Nietzsche’s writing, we must try to

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15 Evaluating the origin and tradition of moral concepts, Nietzsche remarks that these beginnings persist with an odor of blood and torture that smells true to our contemporary senses. Specifically, this pervasive cruelty remains
diagnose this critical struggle between illness, danger, gestation, and transformation signified by the phrase “pregnancy is an illness.” What might be born anew from this conflict?

**Bad Memories**

Once again, Nietzsche begins his discussion of the human memory with a paradoxical remark that surely confuses conventional understanding. For him, “man could never do without blood, torture, and sacrifices when he felt the need to create a memory for himself” (61). A preliminary evaluation of this odd remark suggests that Nietzsche is interested in a critique of consciousness, but he seems to debunk the priority given to consciousness. As such his explanation of the origin of consciousness is an account that is only part of his genealogy of morals, a kind of human being that his writing might resurrect from a terminal interiority.

The counterintuitive claim of *creating* a memory seems oddly intentional and selective, implying a personal control of a reserve over which humans often seem to have limited influence. Nietzsche suggests that within the primary impressions that comprise consciousness there is a particular form of recollection archived by imagistic orders of violence. Pain focuses the eye on the binding threat of responsibility to others, and with this ongoing suffering the “I” of subjectivity becomes more intensified, and thus, more serious and memorable. By contrast, the forgetfulness that we often experience seems more a problem of reception and concentration. In other words, the commonplace “I forgot” implies a conscious reserve too congested or unreceptive to collect and hold important stimuli. The significance that I just put on *important stimuli* suggests the formation of an interest and investment, a formation that returns to my earlier discussion about responsibility. If I understand Nietzsche, when he claims that man needed to create a memory, he is suspending for examination the forces that impress and regulate true, “even in good old Kant: the categorical imperative spells of cruelty” (65).
the composition of the consciousness. He seems to be specifying that human formation be marked by a very particular mindful reserve directed by the important sense of pain commensurate to personal obligation and debt. Often in this chapter, I have defined responsibility as the creation of an internal, ethico-moral realm, but Nietzsche’s understanding of the term also includes a sense of visceral response that forms the corporeal domain. For Nietzsche, the body is the primary reference for any evaluation of values because it contains a political structure of competing forces. The agon “between cells and tissues” actualizes an “aristocracy in the body” (Nietzsche, Will to Power 660). Thus, if I understand Nietzsche’s paradoxical claim, he argues that the ethical capacity of the sovereign self is predicated on remembering the embodiment of forces informed by techniques of pain and cruelty that are moralized and spiritualized. Therefore, the desire for a sense of responsibility is made memorable by the repetition and the incorporation of binding, painful impressions that the body remembers and continues to suffer with the creation of a “serious” psyche. The promise that begets oneself acutely responds to the recognition of an imperative made manifest by unforgettable pain. Thus, the memory is like scar tissue formed by an originary wound that remembers the searing regulations with the painful responses such as “Thou Shall Not!” “You owe this to the Father!” We face others in debt but primarily motivated to remember to value the pain that this debt costs. Nietzsche elaborates on this incorporation of discipline that is primarily negative in its denial, and by consequence, the justice of the law is internalized foremost as a threat.

Perhaps indeed there was nothing more fearful and uncanny in the whole prehistory of man than his memotechnics. “If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory”—this is the main cause of the oldest (unhappily the most enduring) psychology on earth. One might even that wherever on earth solemnity, seriousness, mystery, and gloomy coloring distinguish the
life of man and a people, something of the terror that formerly attended all promises, pledges, and vows on earth is still effective: the past, the longest, deepest and sternest past, breathes upon us and rises up upon us whenever we become “serious.” (Genealogy of Morals 61)

I believe the health crisis that provokes Nietzsche’s writing chances to overcome this complicated incorporation of subjective interpellation based on a kind of oppressive cruelty that infects man’s memory with a debilitating resistance. To an extent, the value of suffering is a difficult problem because Nietzsche states elsewhere that adherence to the law and the practice of justice should find a “stronger power seeking a means of putting an end to the senseless raging of ressentiment” (75). In other words, man, as the promising agent, has been enculturated, trained and now governs himself by contracting himself toward others. Thus, he understands the sovereignty based on the achievement of just exchanges. Nevertheless, Nietzsche also indicates that this sense of sovereignty has been corrupted, and thus, so has the socio-cultural body of ethical government. To play on Nietzschean parlance, a crisis surely has occurred that has turned things badly. If the complicated problems that Nietzsche involves can be precisely summarized, they might be outlined by these questions: What comprises the memory that man feels a need to create? How has this feeling of suffering become so cruel and so fixed in man’s memory that it makes the active power of sovereignty such a serious, unforgettable, and sickly regime?

To remain faithful to the many Nietzschean questions that I have introduced requires an examination of forces that activate consciousness. As Deleuze clearly states about Nietzsche’s perspectivism, “There is no quantity of reality, all reality is already a quantity of force” (Nietzsche and Philosophy 40). Any concept, namely man is an order of energy activated by a compound of forces, and this force of energy named man “lives to discharge its strength”
(Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 21). In Nietzsche’s evaluation, two agents that act in a conflicted concert generally govern an individual’s strength: reactive and active forces. In this economy of controlled antagonism, this concert of agents, the reactive force of support and the active force of flexibility, energizes an internal, two-fold, subjective realm that composes a psyche, a formation that clearly compares with the Freudian division of the psyche into an economy of different, conflicting drives (Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 111). Basically, Nietzsche’s evaluation of the responsible self discloses the complications of human transformation. The stakes of this evaluation examines the formation, flexibility, and finally, health of the human memory. In other words, how does a person transform the permanence of one’s primary memories as these impressions encounter the different sensations of ongoing experience? This question alone is a vital problem regarding human transformation; but more significantly, Nietzsche’s writing is primarily concerned with diagnosing the reactivity of the psyche that infects human consciousness and seizes it with pain. To begin answering these difficult problems, we should follow Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the way reactive forces overrule the government of the body diverting energy that eventually debilitates the memory making the psyche resistant to the release and transformation of forces that Nietzsche concentrates in the name forgetting.

When Nietzsche refers to memory that maintains the psychic life, Deleuze argues that Nietzsche’s concept incorporates a two-fold, interior space of differentiating forces that work in an agreed hierarchy (112). The mind is structured as a ply, a fold demarcating active and reactive forces. The primary memory is first impressed by originary traces of sensation sustained by stabilizing reactive forces that form an unconscious reserve that orients and regulates the body’s response. As Deleuze explains,
The reactive unconscious is defined by mnemonic traces, by lasting imprints. It is a digestive, vegetative and ruminative system, which expresses the purely passive impossibility of escaping from the impression once it has been received. (112)

As a reserve of impressions, the primary memory provides a basis demarcated by a tympanum covering that at once repels and sustains, “quiets” and echoes the pressure of impression (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals 57*). The moment’s force, the encounter with the new pressures requires an agent of conservation that “distributes” and embodies the pressure of new sensations. The consequences of reactive force are always to conserve and demarcate pressure from external forces.

Without a memory man would be overwhelmed by the unfamiliar, much like a newborn withdrawn from its temporary foreclosure. To function beyond the raw exposure of the moment, reactive forces reserve an experiential background that frames a schema of temporal and relational presence. With this primarily unconscious background the psyche is relieved from the pressure of responding to ongoing excitation, as if everything is strikingly new.

Without a memory each moment would be threatened by the unknown, but it seems that without the capacity to forget, man would be threatened by an equivalent form of unknowing. Explaining this Nietzschean sense of a prodigious memory, Jill Marsden argues, “failing to forget condemns one to a Heraclitean nightmare in which one would no longer believe in oneself at all” (150). For Marsden, forgetting is a concentrated name for the power of self-recognition, the creation of interior space that gathers the raw exposure of affective forces and makes these impressions the basis of the self’s subjectivity. The subject’s integrity is engendered by an order that continually creates by the principle of similarity and familiarity. We can understand Marsden’s claim about the utter disintegration that forgetting protects one from as it is exemplified by Lenny’s affliction in the film *Memento*. Suffering from short-term memory loss,
Lenny’s moments are an ongoing struggle to secure his damaged memory with some tenuous basis of personal context and temporal continuity. Photos taped to the wall and tattoos on his arms provide the schema, the mementos, which form traces and clues indicating the possibility of a past that would memorialize the integrity of self-identity. Marsden’s comments about those who suffer a prodigious memory certainly appear unlike Lenny’s disintegrated condition, but her point is that suppressing the unfamiliarity of the moment with a sense of association and continuity forms self-identity. For Nietzsche, the individual subject is formed and regulated by a reserve of reactive forces. These forces are merely a substratum of regulation; the problem remains how the subject actively forgets, transforms this formative background in productive ways. Reactive forces sustain the traces of the subconscious memory, but without some other adaptive agent, there would be no capacity for transformation. Enclosed within a circuit, the sensations of ongoing experience would respond by returning to and reinvesting the initial traces of memory. Thus, if the conservative qualities of reactive forces take command of the body, the result are an animal-like being servile to a will that obsessively remembers the traces of the same impressions so much so that there is no qualitative present (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* 58).

When Nietzsche refers to the capacity to forget, he seems to be making a normative claim about human health: the capability to sustain and discharge pressure. Forgetting is the active capacity that parts memory, dividing the unconscious “underworld” of reactive “utility organs” with a membrane that screens the different ongoing sensations into new experience. Nietzsche defines forgetfulness as a symptom of “positive repression,” and thus, an adaptive strength, not a sign of “inertia” or dimwitted neglect (57). Overall, forgetting has two important functions: it governs and transforms. Reactive forces protect consciousness, establishing a private realm of “quietness” that regulates the body so that it is not overloaded by the pressure of new stimulus,
yet the productivity of forgetting is actualized by active forces that transform primary impressions with new orders. Thus, active forces seem to deregulate the supervisory government of reactive forces that form the primary substratum of memory. Deleuze’s interpretation of this relationship of forces, again, is indispensable.

Adaptation would never be possible if the reactive apparatus did not have another system of forces at its disposal. Another system is necessary, a system in which reaction is not a reaction to the traces but becomes a reaction to the present excitation or to the direct image of the object. This second kind of reactive forces is inseparable from consciousness: that constantly renewed skin surrounding an ever-fresh receptivity, a milieu, “where there is always room for new things.” (Nietzsche and Philosophy 113)

Thus, for Nietzsche, forgetfulness is strength of flexibility and, thus, a sign of health because it is a sign of the body’s capacity to discharge and turn in a movement that expropriates a prior. At last, he states conclusively about the productive possibilities that forgetting opens, “there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no present, without forgetfulness” (Genealogy of Morals 58).

I have foregrounded Nietzsche’s basic description of human organization and supervision as an opening to begin understanding how his writing responds to the massive psychological and cultural forces that turn the constitution of contemporary human life. All of the foregrounding focuses us to our primary problem: When Nietzsche claims that man needs to create a memory that is serious, he is concentrating on an event that turns human development inward. In a state of health, the body’s forces combine to order and discharge, but Nietzsche is most interested in the event of a massive inversion of force that hardens the body’s affective memory making it prodigious and confined. In the least complicated terms, this inversion of force empowers the reactivity of ressentiment and its later outcome the bad conscience that is so important to Nietzsche’s genealogy of human suffering. Recall earlier that if the reactive forces take
command of the memory, the body is enclosed in a circuit, and this is not just a psychobiological problem for Nietzsche. Catastrophe is not too strong a term for the consequence of an inversion that has profound social and cultural effects that remain with us.

Nietzsche’s offering to ethical evaluation is his sensitivity to the inception and progression of a specific form of decadence, which becomes the dominant force activating human constitution. In his genealogical analysis of moral constitution, Nietzsche writes with measured respect about the animal-man that has transformed his standing. With the suppression of instinct that marked the emergence of a distinctly human nature, came a sovereignty executed under great strength and discipline. Throughout the Genealogy, Nietzsche personifies the noble as exemplars of this sovereignty and health, even as he suggests that their exuberant strength signifies a kind of adolescence.

In the Genealogy and elsewhere throughout Nietzsche’s writings, there are many references that seem to glorify the proud cruelty of the nobles. Facing others, the noble lives unthreatened and without antagonism for those that differ with him. The noble’s strength develops without authorization from an external reference of comparison; “the master reacts his reactions” (Deleuze, Nietzsche and Philosophy 112). The nobles are dominated by a “total feeling” of moral integrity, simply blind to calculation beyond their own willful egoism. Thus, superiority empowers their sense of goodness because they attributed themselves good not by their unegoism or self-annihilation, but from the aristocratic posture of psychological height that that informed an obvious sense that they were indeed good. Nietzsche sums up this sense of enduring confidence when he writes,

The well born felt themselves to be “happy”; they did not have to establish their happiness artificially by examining their enemies, or to persuade themselves, deceive themselves, that they were happy . . .; and they likewise knew, as rounded men replete
with energy and therefore necessarily active, that happiness should not be sundered from action—being active was with them necessarily a part of happiness. (Genealogy of Morals 38)

Continuing Nietzsche’s summation, Deleuze states, “the one who says: ‘I am good’ does not wait to be called good. He refers to himself in this way, he names himself, and describes himself thus to the extent that acts, affirms and enjoys” (Nietzsche and Philosophy 119). Using the nobles to characterize a form of sovereignty, Nietzsche forces the reader inculcated in the traditional virtue of modesty and piety to chafe at such elitist arrogance, exposing the suspicions in our own lineage to such confident outpouring of unreserved power. Nietzsche’s interest in the noble’s is not to exemplify them as the acme of moral development; withstanding their crude brutality, he is drawn to their sense of exteriority that discharges strength so freely. In the simplest terms, strength, even the strength of an enemy, is a force of attraction that turns and externalizes one self, reconstituting another formation of selves beyond oneself. Such a turning movement of discharge produces a pathos of distance that is the primary force of mastery, and such an embodiment of power thrives on increased comprehensive states of empowerment, which is the movement of self-overcoming through transvaluation (Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil 173). His measured attraction is well summarized, when he notes, “The active aggressive, arrogant man is still a hundred steps closer to justice than the reactive man” (Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals 75).

The nobles are the best example of strength that Nietzsche can identify. Yet when we consider the physics of power, a mass of great strength also masses the potential for substantial opposition. The forward burst of acceleration can be halted when oppressed by a countervailing pressure. The flexibility of tensile resiliency can tear or turn rigid under pressure. Nietzsche’s great discovery is his sensitivity toward the body’s energy, particularly the mastery of
conservative, reactive forces turning the strength of the will and enclosing the body in rigidity. As we follow Nietzsche’s diagnosis, we must identify the forces that invert man’s psyche creating a reactionary form of antagonism to emerge as man’s most responsive strength. The conservative detour and reversal of strength against oneself results in the becoming hostile of man: Ressentiment is the name that Nietzsche gives to this chronic form of hostility that has transformed sovereignty and morality as such.

The challenge now is to define the responsibility of sovereignty under the influence of ressentiment, which demands a careful explanation of how this complicated hostility has become a primary force that empowers the will and morality. This is no small matter because Nietzsche believes that no human form is immune from the multiple forces and alterations of ressentiment. In reference to the most virulent and talented cripples of this enabling impotency, Deleuze conclusively remarks about the oppressiveness and the maturity of ressentiment, when he summarizes, “we have no other ideal but the ascetic ideal” (Nietzsche and Philosophy 35). Thus, my challenging problem is to specify the many forces of this typology of illness that sustains our own identity.

The etymology of hostility itself is in conflict. The Latin root hostis signifies enemy; however, hostis bears with it the Latin root host that has various meanings ranging from sacrifice to the welcoming offered a guest. At root, the word demarcates an affective response to the force of others: one response opposes the threat of an enemy; another generously invites a guest. It is important to maintain these conflicting responses as we analyze Nietzsche’s understanding of ressentiment because the term keeps active the conflicted movement of response.

For Nietzsche, the passions of hostility and vengefulness are the most outward, telling symptoms of ressentiment. Yet when we commonly assume that ressentiment is merely the
force of reappraisal, we simplify the complex pathology of this illness. *Ressentiment* is not the reactive strength of antagonistic aggression; it detours the outburst and suppresses the discharge of aggression, returning the projected force back on the agent. What drives this tortured need to suffer self-infliction? Since *ressentiment* is an illness, we should begin our analysis of this strange aggression by concentrating on the reactive forces within the body that bear this disease. Recalling this section’s heading, *Bad Memories*, the man of *ressentiment* is enslaved because he suffers under the arrest of a painful, “prodigious” memory that is eventually moralized as a measure of pain relief. Nietzsche’s term *prodigious* is exacting because *ressentiment* shows symptoms of excessive hardness and density indicating a chronic corporeal inflexibility. These disabilities force the man of *ressentiment* to suffer from the inability to forget: “he cannot have done with anything” (*Genealogy of Morals* 58). Ultimately, the forces that allow for the discharge for forgetfulness are detoured and released inward. It is this internalization of force and the “hardening of consciousness” that disturbs the discharge, the forgetfulness of release and transformation that underlies Nietzsche’s understanding of the health of humanity (58).

The *prodigious memory*, the most formidable symptom of *ressentiment*, is ordered by a powerful inversion that detours the corporation of reactive and active forces governing the body. Recalling our introductory discussion of memory, consciousness is regulated by these forces. Specifically, the problem for Deleuze, as he reads Nietzsche, is that reactive forces block the projection of active force: the force of affect cannot be acted it can only be reacted in agonizing repetition. The entire “hypnosis on the nervous and intellectual system” originates with reactive force prevailing and converting active force to its conservative ends (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 61). The conversion of forces produces a conservative effort of enclosure that results in a circuitous, painful drive toward a hostile form of self-preservation.
To understand this problem, we must analyze how the psyche responds, stores, and restores the forces of stimulus. Nietzsche believes the psyche is a ply of sheets demarcated by a tympan that separates consciousness and the unconsciousness systems. The unconscious system is a basis of government, a *doorkeeper* that receives, houses, and regulates the force of primary impressions. These lasting imprints, as we noted, relaxes the psyche providing some “preserv[ation] of psychic order” from the incoming pressure of excitation that would activate these traces (*Genealogy of Morals* 58). In cooperation with the unconscious, consciousness within the ply demarcates the system that synergizes and adapts the traces with the ongoing, new pressures of stimulus and excitation. Deleuze concisely details the complicated relationship of forces within the psyche that result in response, discharge, and transformation.

Thus there are two simultaneous processes: reaction becomes something acted because it takes conscious excitation as its object and reaction to traces remains in the unconscious, imperceptible. (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 113)

Nietzsche refers to the brainsickness that afflicts man, and Deleuze develops this diagnosis when he argues that the major problem of affliction occurs when reaction is blocked from discharging. In other words, the problem that we have been tracing is an inversion of the *object of conscious excitation* that results from the restriction and conservation of all the forces of external stimulus. All affective force is reserved and housed so that pressure produces a binding feeling rather than the active, transformative relief of discharge. As Deleuze summarizes, reaction cannot be actively acted it can only be reacted as force is returned and internalized (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 113).

For Deleuze, the trauma of the “inverted image” results from a “functional disturbance” that arises when the government of the psyche is overcome by conservative forces that continually return and reinvest the traces (125). In the simplest terms, energy has no other
course than to recourse. Deleuze carefully details how the external object is redirected on the internalized impression.

Let us suppose that there is a lapse in the faculty of forgetting: it is as if a wax of consciousness were hardened, excitation gets confused with the trace in the unconscious and overruns it. Thus at the same time as reaction to traces become perceptible, reaction ceases to be acted. The consequences of this are immense: no longer being able to act reaction, active forces are deprived of the material conditions of their functioning, they no longer have the opportunity to do their job, and they are separated from what they can do. We can thus finally see in what way reactive forces prevail over active forces: when the trace takes the place of excitation in the reactive apparatus, reaction takes the place over action. Reaction prevails over action. (114)

When reactive forces overcome and redirect active forces an otherwise pliable consciousness hardens. The man of ressentiment, thus, cannot escape the fixation of initial traces of memory impressed and archived in the psyche. Therefore, the discharge of reactive type’s power coils and recoils again and again in continual spirals that release ever inward as the force of its velocity is exhausted in an agonizing implosion.

The inverted image is not merely a psychic malady; rather the massive inversion of ressentiment is a socio-historical force that begins with the triumph of a kind of hostility as a normative expression of morality. Bound by an inverted image, the enslavement of ressentiment is normalized by the triumph of slave morality. Recall earlier in our discussion of nobility, Nietzsche argues that the noble person “seeks its opposite only to affirm itself more gratefully and triumphantly” (Genealogy of Morals 37). Affirmation is the result of force meeting a different force in an agonistic meeting that results in the triumphant elation of distance from oneself rather than the victory of assimilating the other. However, such superfluous confidence exemplified by the free spirited nobles evokes a reaction of threatened hostility within the lowly that recognize so much more forcefully and painfully their own weakness and inferiority. The weakness of the lowly can only find a powerful force through inversion and deception. Always
evaluating by measuring height, Nietzsche refers to the lowly force of will as a spirit enforced by
a circuitous desire for contrivance—of *secret paths* and *back doors* in their frustrating route
toward negative affirmation. In Nietzsche’s mythical overview, the noble’s gay ego imbued with
trust is ultimately unknowingly “naive” to the calculated cleverness of the lowly. And it is
precisely the cleverness generally activated by hostility but particularly envy and hatred felt by
the lowly that transforms and reverses a noble, aesthetic morality into a prescriptive slave
regime.

Nietzsche believes that the inversion—the dye—of the *aristocratic value-equation* is
acculturated as the ethical influences of priestly nations acquire authority in particular cultural
societies and cultures. Beyond the triumph of monotheistic religions over paganism, Nietzsche
is primarily interested in the emergence of theocracies, covenant societies such as Judaism where
the priestly class (Sadducees and Pharisees) enforce the major source of social and ethical power.
In Nietzschean terms, the predominance of the priestly class results in the creation of the most
diseased morality because “they are the most evil” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* 33). They
formalize their own divinely inspired impotence and weakness into poisonous creeds and
inflexible dogma supported with theological importance that legitimates their own wretched
condition for themselves and their followers. Nietzsche infamously cites the Jews as an example
of a race influenced by slave morality, which accomplished through clever inversions and
negative affirmations the claim of divine selection as Yahweh’s chosen nation.

Their prophets fused “rich,” “godless,” “evil,” “violent,” “sensual,” into one and were the
first to coin the “world” as a term of infamy. It is in this thin version of values (with
which is involved the employment of the word for “poor” as a synonym of “holy” and
“friend”) that the significance of the Jewish people resides: with them begins the slave
revolt in morals. (*Beyond Good and Evil* 100)
The slave mentality gives personal strength and socio-cultural order to the reactive force of *ressentiment*. In its vitality as a socio-cultural institution or in its individual vitality as a prodigious memory, slave morality is energized by negative affirmation. That hostility and vengeance are the symptoms of *ressentiment* may seem too commonplace for us to fully estimate the perverse hatred of these responses. Slave morality is self-consciously perverse in its hypersensitivity, bound to a host that generates a feeling of self-regard for the slave enervated by *ressentiment*. Deleuze may state that the man suffering from *ressentiment* is unable to act but only react, but to clarify his statement; the point is that force constantly returns only to affirm a will painfully constrained. Constantly blocked and in pain, the slave of *ressentiment* needs some relief and, thus, seeks a force outside itself to perversely affirm a sense of self-identity.

Nietzsche concentrates this complicated effort to affirm identity when he notes that one enslaved knows oneself as an “afterthought” (39). The *afterthought*, this authority through reflection, actualizes the oppositional logic of the inverted image. In essence, the slave mentality must affirm some kind of ego that is not self-negating, but must rely on negation itself as the achievement of seeming self-affirmation. Suffering from a constitutive lack, the slave of *ressentiment* desires the force of an “opposition[al] non-ego” that it can oppose to finally “posit itself as an ego” (Deleuze *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 121). Those bound by *ressentiment* fundamentally respond by saying “no to what is ‘outside’ to what is different, what is not itself” to affirm one self (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* 36). Thus, such an identity is energized by the angry need for ongoing appropriation and terribly fearful of separation. In consequence, opposition becomes the means of self-mediation relieving the rancor of reactivity though redirection; the slave of *ressentiment* is entirely antagonistic identifying oneself by “concei[ving]” of an enemy that becomes the “evil one” (39). Such desire is relentlessly hostile
because antagonism is the only force that enlivens and yet enervates one bound by this enabling disability. Ultimately, such a bound memory restricts the possibility of producing any affirmative values: the slave of *ressentiment* is enclosed in agitation, unable to discharge, and this inability forecloses the energy that brings forth transvaluation.

The slave of *ressentiment* characterizes such hostile agitation in a particular form of vengeance. At root, vengeance presumes a form of justice that reappraises and returns for a loss that is of personal value, and thus, most proper to oneself. We might assume too quickly that such a motivating desire of *ressentiment* is an aggression motivated by reprisal, but the hostile response of *ressentiment* has a particular kind of inverted drive that motivates this aggressive force of vengeance. Dependent and yet hostile to what is different and outside itself, *ressentiment* comes forth as the feeling of a constant threat. The man of *ressentiment* lives as an angered victim that must redress what he suffers. In a constant state of anxious anger, his most affirmative response is to endlessly blame. But who is the enemy of this apparent aggression? Suffering from the threat of *ressentiment* the body fights pain with pain, but such aggression is a release that returns without much relief. Unlike those who disfigure and mutilate themselves to localize and control the pressure of anxiety, those who suffer from *ressentiment* live sadistic lives of queer, cruel, self-defense. In this state, the threatening need to defend issues not from an enemy who is hostile, but this response comes forth as a twisted way of redirecting an internal sense of pain and weakness. Recall, that the bondage of this illness results from constituting an ego ordered by opposition. Thus, the pain of weakness is given strength when the pain of *ressentiment* is projected to another who is made responsible for the binding memory. Thus, the

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16 Under Deleuze’s influence, I should note that his evaluation of *ressentiment* is also a preliminary attack on dialectical thinking as it is best expressed in the work of Hegel.
slave needs and creates an imaginary hostile world of ceaseless menace; and from this profound, anxious sense of weakness, it suffers experience itself as “a personal offence and affront” that circuitously and minimally relieves painful oppression by building a way of being that is in constant opposition to others (Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 116). Malevolence is the name for responsibility under the influence of *ressentiment*, an inversion that makes values that are energized by ugly, recriminating debt, revengeful aggression, and ugly, perverse hatred. Delueze summarizes so concisely the perspective of this intolerable self-consciousness succinctly when he states “[t]he man of *ressentiment* experiences every beauty and object as an offence in exact proportion to its effect on him” (116).

For Nietzsche, the internalization of force has devastating consequences, as the pathology of *ressentiment* constitutes the primary order of morality, culture, and society. Living in a state of angry deficiency, the victim of *ressentiment* is also motivated by the need to make gain, to gather a return to soothe this inverted identity. Thus, an investment economy of profit that can accumulate a surplus beyond the equivalence of exchange emerges with the formation of the inverted image of *ressentiment*. More important, self-recognition is subject to gaining something proper to oneself that it essentially lacks. When one’s life seems bitterly fulfilled by the presence of ongoing threat, gaining advantage secures some capital for a debtor suffering a constitutive lack of self-substance. Deleuze is remarkably perceptive when he recognizes the extent of the motivation to gain economically and spiritually since the desire for profit is not only economic but a “social and theological system, a complete system, a divine mechanism” (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 118). Influenced by this perspective, we might pause and consider the many sociocultural ideologies that constitute a worldview, which are often warranted by a
particular economic form of debt and profit that honors the most retrograde, ugly kinds of cruelty and sacrifice.

Following the turns of internalized force, Nietzsche warns that the detour of the instincts discharged within, “on oneself,” results in the *bad conscience*, a turn formed to counteract the adamant preoccupation with weakness and impotence (*Genealogy of Morals* 119). The turn of the bad conscience deepens the serious memory of man twisting hostility ever more inward. The formation of the bad conscience marks a “compulsion, an ineluctable disaster which precludes all struggles and even all *ressentiment*” (86). The bad conscience marks a turn in hostility, the vehemence directed toward the other is now returned and made more fully one’s own impotence and culpability. In this spiraling of aggression, the inversion of the bad conscience marks a turning in hostility that extends and concentrates the overt aggression of *ressentiment*, which would surely turn any socious toward a violent implosion of unrestrained warfare. The paradoxical strength of the bad conscience turns and economizes aggression making its pain more properly individualized. Most important, the bad conscience distributes pain universally. We may well interpret the Christian doctrine of original sin as an exemplary donation from those motivated by the bad conscience. Morality is consequently understood as an enclosed system of blame and fault rather than a promise before an ethical threshold that must remain open (Agamben 68-9). Therefore, the unlimited, oppositional rancor of *ressentiment* is contained and familiarized, a domestic problem of one’s own individual responsibility that other individuals share in common. Nevertheless, there always remain other others that intensify the barely suppressed rancor of the community of the bad conscience threatening the familiarity of their identity constituted by an enabling pain. Evil is the name for these outlaws.
genealogical therapy recognizes the extraordinary psychological misery found in the individual
desire to relieve the pressure of ressentiment by forming a psyche with even more depth. The
bad conscience typifies the relentless triumph of reactive forces as slave morality becomes
culturally codified elevating foremost the virtues or servility and subordination as a response to
one’s perceived guilt and indebtedness. This pathology typifies the effort of “tremendous labor”
of psychological appeasement that results in the creation of an ethical “substratum” which
establishes an accountable subject—the doer—whose conscience and soul are the source
intentional effects (Genealogy of Morals 45). Further, the emergence of this moralized subject
creates an economy of responsibility that forbears the meaningful explanation of pain created by
ressentiment. The pain of impotence is renewed as a positive value as reactive force turns ever
inward. The turning furthers the fiction of hostility, pain is understood as guilt “in a piece of the
past that must be understood as suffering as punishment” (Deleuze, Nietzsche and Philosophy
140). The pain of impotence is renewed as a positive value, with further laceration of penance
conceived as lifesaving. In Nietzsche’s sweep, the creations of the priestly class are primarily
responsible for mastering the diversion of ressentiment transfiguring pain into a life-enhancing
theology of compensation that transcends this pathological condition (127). Deleuze summarizes
this renewal of pain:

Pain is made the consequence of a fault and the means of salvation; pain is healed
by manufacturing yet more pain, by internalizing it still further; one gets to forget,
that is to say. One cures oneself of pain by infecting the wound. (30)
Suffering ongoing pain becomes the affective means of feeling responsible; the ongoing pain of reactive forces aggravates and wounds the memory’s impressions; the wounded memory compelled by restrictive agitation empowers the will to accept exhaustion as one’s own responsibility: this is the decadent movement of the slave morality that fulfills itself in nihilism. The heading bad memory signifies the government of the body by nihilistic forces, giving nobility to hostility, contempt, weakness and exhaustion as moralized values with little or no sense of their disabling consequences. At last, a highly refined, concentrated sense of vehemence is redirected to those who oppose or stand aside this morality. Since *ressentiment* and its outcome the bad conscience are identities formed by an inverted image, there must always be those that stand aside in opposition as a psychological and socio-cultural necessity for relief. Opposition is a structural necessity in this economy, but more important debt is pervasive—someone must always pay for anything and everything. Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals might be understood more directly as an analysis of the morality of blame and punishment. Ultimately, his writing presents the reader a highly nuanced analysis of anger and hatred as the most formative affect of human constitution. Living with such aggression, the most forceful consequence of the inverted image for Nietzsche is the emergence of cruelty as underlying principle of morality. In our most justified moral moments we feel it necessary to afflict pain again and again because we are hostile creatures formed in pain. And the ethical energy of Nietzsche’s writing repels in disgust at the legacy of morality that is not just a nineteenth-century inheritance, but writing that returns us to our own moral inheritance of cruelty, an endowment that remains quite alive and vital, and thus, our contemporary malady. Under pressure, we might consider the malice that may underlie the alleged fairness that guides our sense of responsibility and justice.
**Apocalyptic Affirmation**

Corruption is merely a nasty word for the autumn of a people.

—Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Section 23

As he imagines a new nobility, Nietzsche’s rhetoric struggles and strains under the pressure and tension to write with a burst of force that releases the confining influence of *ressentiment* and the slave morality that constitutes his own identity and his socio-culture identity. How can one so sick project a sense of health without a comparative understanding? Nietzsche also marshals much of the pressure of his challenge on the reader deploying a fractured style that projects so many ideas from so many angles that tactically maximizes different lines of force. Under this pressure, reading him affects disorder and uncertainty. What is to burst forth from this writing?

The release beyond, this discharge that marks some undetermined heading in his writing, the beyond good and evil, the beyond of the slave morality, the beyond of nihilism, the beyond of futurity, this other side is not his attempt to write an alternative narrative for the future. Nietzsche’s project does not offer a choice between different alternatives ready for evaluation. We cannot simply choose a noble generosity as a more excellent moral option to the rancor of *ressentiment*. For Nietzsche, the possibility of unlimited love to others offered by Christianity, in its present formation, only intensifies and transcendentalizes the rage of hatred because this agape submerges what is really decadent and low, “denying all that is not itself” (Nietzsche,
Thus, the problem is always a matter of diagnosing, evaluating, and regulating forces that compose one’s affective and, then, qualitative life forces. In transformation there is no outside of force, and, thus, pressure is the only practice one can use to encounter the forces of ressentiment. As Nietzsche broadly explains “whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed” (Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals 11-12). Nietzsche practices a dangerous means of transformation, one that intensifies the pressure, regulates the dose, and changes the speed with little or no security of precedent or authority. The burst that his writing tries to detonate shares the violent promise of apocalyptic writing, particularly of the Christian legacy, an influential yet conflicted inheritance that Nietzsche suffers. In apocalyptic narratives, signs and symptoms that foretell a violence that will overturn and open an interval that creates a renewal of justice mark catastrophe. In the Revelation to John, the divinely inspired scribe makes conclusive to the reader that the just will emerge as the righteous victor in this battle of spiritual militarism. The catastrophic preoccupies Nietzsche’s writing with promise but without the clear, conclusive certainty found in his influences. Page after page in the Genealogy and elsewhere in his writing, Nietzsche weighs the cruel height of the noble compared with the inverse depth of the man of ressentiment. Such an evaluation is warranted by the possibility of becoming that exceeds the figural limitations of an ethical horizon. These measurements set the context for the burst of new nobility; this ideal that imagines a lighter, freer man who feels responsibility differently and thus practices justice otherwise. But how might that be and why, after all, what is Nietzsche affirming?

17 Small contemporary examples show the importance of denial that drives a kind of Christianity. Consider the conservative Christian who insists that faith in Jesus Christ—not Allah, nor Yahweh, nor Buddha—is the only
In this sustained background, I have tried to detail Nietzsche’s (and his subsequent commentators’, particularly Deleuze’s) understanding of the origin and development of responsibility. The becoming responsible of man is one of pronounced accountability, as humanity identifies itself before others as a contracting agent. Yet, for Nietzsche, the ought of accountability is not an innate imperative that is immediately felt, the urge of responsibility is formed by painful techniques of punishment that forge an obliging sense of liability and debt toward others. Man’s serious psyche has its economic costs. The imperative toward responsibility results by internalizing the fear of equivalent costs—debt, punishment, and shame—that can be exacted by others in reappraisal for violating the community. In a debtor economy, our formative ethical experience teaches us to stand before others respectfully weighing our commercial relationship. What does he owe me? When will she repay my respect? What do I profit in my relationship with them? To risk thinking otherwise is threatening. Ultimately, for Nietzsche, such an ethico-moral orientation of respect is poor, weak, and utilitarian in its standing.

The economy of sovereign self-identity is formed on the commercial basis of just equivalence in which justice is contracted by equal distribution. Justice is essentially utilitarian, warranted by the principle of compensation that promotes individual self-interest and protection, while compelling the weak to oblige the business of community cooperation. The distributive justice that commands an the eye-for-the-eye and the legacy of responsibility based on the distribution of credit and debt signify the business of morality that remains our contemporary legacy. There are considerable parallels between the fairness of the liberal, cooperative justice that John Rawls names *reflective equilibrium* to the commercial-political conception of equity means of salvation.
that Nietzsche believes originates the ground of morality (29). In this economy of distributive justice, the law manages vengeance, balancing the offense by afflicting directly the punishment of retribution on the offender. The economic ground of responsibility, justice, and law is further established when examining the root of the word *mercy—merce*, which is understood as recompense, rewards, wages, fees, a term that contemporary readers would conventionally assume to be rooted in the emotional sense of pity or forgiveness. In turn, the socio-political ground of justice is projected into a sociocultural ideology of accountability. A very complicated sociocultural hierarchy is extended from the morality of commercial relations and legal obligations with the spiritualization of a primary sense of indebtedness based on the propitiation to a hierarchy of creditors, masters, ancestors, and gods. We might think that Nietzsche is satisfied with such a formation of equitable distribution of rights. Much of the *Genealogy* discusses punishment and cruelty, often stupid, harsh punishment and cruelty, supposedly necessary to impress a measure of restraint that constitutes a conscience within humans. And yet, there is no such thing as discipline without a measure of cruelty. Nietzsche cites positively the formation of the law as a means of sustaining protection from those who would threaten the peace and equity of a society with their legion of hostilities and twisted aggression.

The law represents a containment of the reactive feelings, the war conducted against them on the part of the active and aggressive powers that employed some of their strength to impose measure and bounds upon the excesses of the reactive pathos and compel it to come to terms. (*Genealogy of Morals* 75)

Using this evidence of measure to return us to the long past heading of this chapter, we might conclude that Nietzsche’s evaluation of moral development and justice favors a morality based on just equity, and thus, he would favor the justice that supports capital punishment. The above passage argues that the institution of formal law controls the personal urge for revenge making
crime at once an individual and also a general violation of the social contract. With the formation of the law, a norm distances the personal violation and extends the crime beyond the offended to the body of the community and society. Consequently, we can see that the origin of the icon found often in courts represents the fairness of blind justice, an image of true dispassion that veils its eyes from the sight of prejudice and vengeance.

And yet, just as Nietzsche argues that law restrains the threat of vengeance, his argument in the *Genealogy* emphasizes the formation of *ressentiment* and how these forces turn the cruel discipline of responsibility intensifying the economy of revenge. If we compare these differing formations, the responsibility governed by commercial debt seems simply a more clear proportional and mercantile decision than the oblique internalization of cruelty and fearful hostility that results from the depth of *ressentiment*. Is the conclusion of genealogical endeavor to end with an uncovering, a critique that prefers an older more executive formation that excels over a decadent descendant? To reach this conclusion, though, would be irresponsible avoiding the vehemence directed toward any principle of equivalence by Nietzsche. Major portions of the *Genealogy* may suggest a longing for the simple and satisfying enjoyment of the pageantry of punishment that was meted by “counterbalancing” pain with offense (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* 65). Nietzsche counterbalances this seeming longing with acerbic reminders of the “odor of blood and torture” that gives this simple strength so little quality of character (56).

Ultimately, there is no overlooking this conclusion in his thinking: the principle of equivalence is the harbinger of *ressentiment*, which in turn is the precursor of nihilism because difference is utterly devalued and all becomes intrinsically exchangeable.

Returning more to the initial force of this argument, I could continue to advance the argument that capital punishment is unjust compensation socially because it is narrowly focused
on a particular class and race to the near exclusion of others found guilty. The principle of reciprocity and equity that warrants this justice visited on a few is discussed at length elsewhere in writing that is insightful and correct on so many grounds. My effort has been to further open the enclosure that has bound responsibility to a particular sense of justice. My effort to bring Nietzsche to bear on the justice of reciprocity, sacrifice, and forgiveness in *Dead Man Walking* expresses a sense that he imagines a future community that would try to relieve the cruelty of equivalence by discharging the economy of accountability and debt. I believe his argument about justice in the *Genealogy*, particularly as it is contextualized within a tradition of punishment, aggressively disturbs what remains of our satisfying need for retaliation settled within a justice now based on fairness.

His effort to relieve this economy begins with the argument that the principle of equity is an error that results from a mistaken understanding of the differing relations of the force of power. What takes hold of anything is not power as such but the product of differing forces of pressure. In contrast, the principle of equivalence already presupposes a basic measure of uniformity between individuals, made formative and habitual with the maintenance project of repetition and accountability that brings forth humanity. For Nietzsche, the most vital error, the primary “fiction” projecting the sense of individual uniformity is the mistaken ontological and ethical assumption that a *doer* supervises the doing that results in ones “effecting” and “becoming” (*Genealogy of Morals* 45). As a consequence of this ontological premise, a psychological substratum is produced that creates a sense of intentionality and accountability that naturalizes the state of human presence. Nietzsche exemplifies this fiction of presence when he states that “strength” results from a “neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was free to express strength or not to do so” (45). The accepted premise of presence authorizes the notion of
personal equivalence; a presupposition that he argues quite plainly is evidently fallacious. In unusually direct terms, Nietzsche states “[f]or, to me justice speaks thus: Men are not equal” (Thus Spake Zarathustra 101).

Such decisive conclusions seem opposed to our liberal commonplace of equal rights based on the innate equality of human beings. Nietzsche’s dangerous point is that an understanding of responsibility based on equality originates by repressing a fundamental basis of irresponsibility, which returns us to Deleuze’s conflicted remark that Nietzsche wants to affirm a sense of irresponsibility. Summarized simply, equivalence assumes a generality that risks homogeneity and the diminishing difference to a principle of uniformity: sameness. Equivalence as law of generality remains threatened by the exception. By consequence, if all are equal, all risk losing the quality of singularity and becoming immanently substitutable in value. Furthermore, the process of self-identification risks reducing the difference of the other to a principle of self-familiarity. The outcome of such an equalizing process of self-identification limits the conflict and contradiction of agonistic affirmation that causes the distance of transvaluation and transformation so important to the turning that is the primary force of Nietzsche’s work. A certain measure of sameness begins with man’s emergence as the accountable one, a responsibility that turns very hostile with the formation of ressentiment, an aggression that must seek equivalence by an odd inversion. The man of ressentiment depreciates value further, constantly and unsatisfyingly seeking correspondence in a secure conservative image of enclosed similarity that can sustain itself against all opposition. Ultimately, Nietzsche’s diagnosis throughout the Genealogy is an effort to overcome the “nihilistic voracity” of the will to power that authorizes the legacy of the principle of equivalence and mastery of compensation in its many forms. As we will see in what follows, one of his major lines of
offense is directed against the principle of equivalence, as it is perversely transvaluated with the development of Christianity (Babich 71).

If Nietzsche’s genealogy is not a traditional critique that renews the future by recovering the past, what is the affirmation that his writing invites? We can begin to understand the affirmative responsibility that Nietzsche invites by returning to the conclusion of Dead Man Walking, particularly the lingering vehemence and sorrow that remains unabated by the execution of capital punishment. Here we can begin to understand the affirmation of a mercy, and thus, a generosity that in transvaluating may break forth a future undirected by the principled urge to avenge.

Walter Delacroix, the victimized parent of a murdered son, expresses the lingering, tearing hostility of one who has suffered one horrible violation and now remains confused by an event that seems yet another offense. In a film that is often organized by sharp opposition only to have these oppositions broken under the pressure, Delacroix seems haunted by anger much more threatening than satisfying. By contrast to the other family members of victims who look assured in their rage, Delacroix is presented as a figure of uncertainty. Robbins photographs Delacroix in scenes that present him in clear, stark still shots that contrast with other scenes where his face is obscured in shadows. He often seems to enter a scene from the periphery, as if he has been isolated or stands aside the main focus of the film narrative, but, then, is compelled finally to enter the main of the film. His face seems to sink under the pressure of angry doubt of a disturbance from which his eyes seek a way toward relief. These eyes loom over Prejean making her face the limits of her decision of selected care as a spiritual witness; his presence looms over Poncelet’s funeral making clear that some remains cannot rest peacefully; he is a man struggling to relieve the ill affects of malice.
As the film nears conclusion, with the outburst of murderous violence presumably arrested, Delacroix is approached by Prejean as he stands witnessing what he hopes might be the final ruin of this violent tragedy. In mourning, he cannot bury the violence he suffers when he states so unmistakably that he still feels a “lotta hate.” We identify with this feeling of anger and question how anyone might, even after punishment, moves past this imploding rage. *Dead Man Walking* does end with a parting glimpse of the promise conversion and forgiveness with a long shot of Delacroix and Prejean praying together alone in a church. If forgiveness is possible, if there is such gift in a world based on the ethos of the credit system, what would this responsibility be or what would responsibility become? Nietzsche offers us what might seem a familiar conversion, but actually his experiment in generosity has rarely been felt in the economic community of credit.

Midway in his lengthy discussion on the painful discipline necessary to remember the morality of credit, Nietzsche envisions moral conditions of strength that would alter the tortured seriousness of *ressentiment* that has corrupted the governing power of individuals and the body politic. In his imaginings, a healthy community can endure the weak and hostile because the community becomes stronger, and this strength is expressed by moderation that tempers the offense by discharging, or more, forgetting it. Nietzsche’s arguments are often delivered in virile tone, but when he argues below for mercy, we encounter the emergence of a distinct temperament compelled by a different value for strength, forgiveness, and aggression.

The “creditor” always becomes more humane to the extent that he has grown richer; finally, how much injury he can endure without suffering from it becomes the actual measure of his wealth. It is not unthinkable that a society might attain such a consciousness of power that it could allow itself the noblest of luxury possible to it—letting those who go harm unpunished. “What are my parasites to me?” it may say. “May they live and prosper. I am strong enough for that!”
The justice which began with, everything is dischargeable, everything must be discharged,” ends by winking and letting those incapable of discharging their debt go free: it ends, as does everything on this earth, by overcoming itself. This self-overcoming of justice: one knows the beautiful names it has given itself—mercy; it goes without saying that mercy remains the privilege of the most powerful man, or better, his beyond the law. (Genealogy of Morals 73)

We should pause here and carefully consider the innovation, or perhaps more appropriately, the threat of Nietzsche’s proposition that gives priority to the relief of mercy over the credit of justice. Critics might argue that the above passage evidences more clearly the intensity of virile strength that drives his thinking. From their perspective, Nietzsche’s generous reevaluation of mercy merely redirects return of ressentiment, embodied in heightened nobility that really is just narcissistic strength seeking some increased self-value by expending this strength on those appointed weak. Thus, Nietzsche’s transvaluation is really just another kind of decadent valor that reinvests the economy of ressentiment further occupying Nietzsche’s thinking in the very decadence that his writing struggles to transform. From a more prosaic perspective, others might conclude that Nietzschean mercy is an overwrought effort that concludes with nothing more than the ordinary practicality of modeling and assimilation. Commonplace experience tells us simply that transformation occurs by the powerful example of those who influence others producing a conversion of the individual as well as the community and society.

Nietzsche’s writing, particularly in Zarathustra, suggests rhetorically the transformative promise in following the pathway of the exceptional individual that he names the overman. Although, the critical reader might argue that the expropriative strength of mercy that Nietzsche promises in this overman is truly the difficult work of release that is a primary force of Christian forgiveness. In which case, we would be mistaken to interpret the conclusion to the film as anything more than the ongoing plea to realize the forgiveness offered by Christianity. As Sister
Prejean explains to Poncelet as well as Delacroix, to genuinely forgive demands “work,” and such labor means that to forgive one must endure a sense of forbearance that is not simply relieved by the utterance, “I’m sorry” or, “you are forgiven.” The film concludes with a tracking shot that enters the window of a church to focus on Prejean and Delacroix kneeling together in prayer. Here, bent over together in this deferential position, they seem to be working to accept the gift of grace to forgive the offenses that remain so present. The camera then pulls back out of the window to focus on the weathered exterior of the church and further to a long shot that pans the countryside. The broad panning shot suggests that we, the viewers, must struggle for the gift to suffer forgiveness. No doubt, we must struggle to suffer forgiveness. We must suffer forgiveness from Nietzsche’s perspective because our seeming best sensibilities are enervated by a reactive, pathetic sense of pity, a decadence that includes even Christian mercy. The ideal of responsibility undergoes a profound transvaluation with the origination of Christian love. As Derrida argues in the context of his reading of Jan Patocka’s *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, “it seems necessary to reinforce the coherence of a way of thinking that takes into account the event of Christian mystery as an absolute singularity, a religion par excellence and an irreducible condition for a joint history of the subject, responsibility, and Europe” (*Gift of Death* 2). Nietzsche’s writing about Christianity surely confirms Derrida’s evaluation. Yet, for Nietzsche, the *excellence* of Christianity diminishes considerably in the way that these seeming radical values of love and forgiveness remain refined forms of decadence.

Nietzsche is a particularly insightful critic of Christian love because he carefully appreciates the depreciation of life governed by this will. Simply, he believes the promise of Christianity denies life—its most negative affirmation. In denying life, Christianity affirms the deepening of moral debt, motivated by mercy, which suppresses cruelty and revenge. A sense of
revulsion overflows Nietzsche’s writing as he remembers the origin of our “moral prejudice” that remains purposely forgotten (Genealogy of Morals 15). This necessary “absentmindedness” is symptomatic of a morality rooted in suffering that fearfully denies the “terror and horror of existence” (Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy 42). The promise of Christian virtue and spirituality finds order and direction from a the will of the priest, a will that relieves a world of meaningless suffering by constituting a transcendental ideal and a resulting morality that supersedes life’s essential characteristics of appearance, change, becoming, and death (Scott 37). Thus, Nietzsche believes Christianity is essentially the symptom of an unnatural creation—a disease characterized by a willful weariness that desires a queer kind of nonexistence in life that prepares for the promise of another transcendental, eternal world that will finally overcome the troubling meaninglessness of human suffering. In response to the event of Christianity, Nietzsche diagnoses a moral lineage of fearful woe expressed by Silenus, who proclaimed, “that it is better not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is to die soon” (The Birth of Tragedy 42). Silenus’ longing for death over life becomes the primary motivating force of a moral lineage that fears suffering and conspires perversely to surpass the meaninglessness of life’s suffering not by dying but by denying life itself. Silenus’ progeny reaches its maturity during the Christian ethos, which overcomes the void of meaninglessness of life’s suffering by creating an ethico-moral reference, a meaningful horizon of absolute standards of truth governed by the wisdom of God. Christianity is the perverted attempt to invest the world with a referential meaning that overcomes suffering and weakness by inversely making weakness, exhaustion, and fear positive values. Many analysts have detailed Nietzsche’s argument that Christianity intensifies the nihilistic will by depreciating immanent worldly values, reinvesting that value in a transcendental realm. What’s more, Christianity introduces an unprecedented ethic of
responsibility in history, offering compassion to the universal brother that extends beyond family and community. Such responsibility is embodied in God’s sacrifice of Jesus, his son, who actualizes for Christians a personal sense of identity based on indebtedness, and who is only fully actualized when the sacrificial gift of love is extended to others. Yet, in Deleuze’s analysis of Nietzsche, the commemoration of sacrificial love toward the universal brother, either neighbor or enemy, only intensifies the psychology of an inverted image that obliges a deepened sense of debt, an indebtedness that is motivated by a suppressed, hostile self-investment as opposed to affirmative self-expropriation.

Christianity seems to have transformed the concept of responsibility, yet Nietzsche is repulsed by a transformation that remains bound to the psychology of the slave’s identity. The bad conscience of Christianity is extraordinary because it transforms a will that gives power to weakness, inverting the primary threat of opposition into a love that masks and projects a complicated combination of guilt and self-satisfaction. Nietzsche’s extraordinary provocation lies in the recognition of the trace of venomous, aggressive self-investment suppressed within the lineage of Christian agape, for underlying the mythology of the father’s gift of sacrificing his son lies a Christian desire to kill God, a devastating desire driven by vengeful weakness. It is important to look carefully at this passive-aggressive behavior to understand the decadence of Christian love, a love that is pitiful because it is a compassion energized by pity.

Any affirmative act of transvaluation is inimical to Christianity because the creative accomplishment of this will “is not to express power but to acquire power” through its pathological desire for the erasure of its threatening hostile opposite (Babich 73). Thus, the virtuous, unconditional maxim to “love your neighbor as you would love yourself” discloses a perversity rife within the Christian ethos, since the force of this desire is most affirmative in its
negation. To love in appreciation is to assimilate the force of the other by pity, a form of responsibility that discloses the desire to “deny all that is not itself” (Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals 36). Nietzsche carefully analyzes the complex psychological drives and affections that are ordered by the passion we call pity, maintaining that pity is not driven simply by the loving empathy for another’s well being or the compassion for another’s sinfulness (Cartwright 95). The pity that motivates Christian love in compassion is the suppressed urge to dominate because the loved one is under the ultimate domination of the love of a wholly other. The desire to dominate is another turn that begins with the weakness of an inverted image: I will be generous to you who are so weak because I, too, feel so weak. In other words, the threat of difference is internalized and made more agreeable by suppression. The desire to dominate everything, make everything identical—or nothing—to finally relieve suffering culminates in the bearable goals of asceticism that preserve “sickness as sickness,” transvaluing all virtues that emit from this poisoned constitution into outwardly positive values (Babich 73). Thus, the noble’s healthy, forgetful discharge of transformative power is converted into a negative quality, as strength becomes inversely associated with a dominating kind of meekness, piety, and pity.

When we see someone suffer, we like to exploit this opportunity to take possession of him; those who become his benefactors and pity him, for example, do this and call the lust for a new possession “love.” (Nietzsche, Gay Science Section 14)

And yet we might argue that Nietzsche’s perspective seems so narrow and spiteful. Nietzsche’s charge that Christian love conceals an exploitive pity seems particularly misconstrued and accusatory when his charge is confronted by the example of Sister Prejean’s work as spiritual witness, a charity that seems so unmotivated by any underlying desire to acquire power for self-seeking interests. Even so, I believe that Nietzsche’s argument points us to forces of reactivity that economize the seeming limitless love of Christian agape. For,
Christian love emerges within an economy dominated by the gift of release from a constitutive debt, a debt that obligates all Christians to remember the forgiveness granted by a source of generosity that dominates all. The offering of God’s son, Jesus, as *ransom* for the sins of many produces an image of love motivated by the obligation to commemorate the gift of sacrifice by impressing others of their need to accept such relief. Christian love hopes to return God’s blessing of Jesus: the image of Jesus’ selflessness provokes the bestowal of a love, where the bestower earns the respect of the bestowed. In the Gospel of Matthew, we can read how the earliest ideas of the now more formal Lord’s Prayer establish this economy of ethico-moral responsibility based on the image of compensation.

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done
   On earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors; (Matthew: 9-12)

Thus, Nietzsche’s thinking exposes a suppressed economy of spiritualized and moralized credit, a utilitarian strand that remains within the lineage of Christian agape. Jesus’ death may intensify an economy of sacrificial generosity “to its excess . . . in the love of the debtor,” but such generosity is motivated by negation, a self-seeking desire that masks a need to assimilate and thus dominate—“to love others as god loves you”—a love which may come to an end in the annihilation of oneself and the other (Derrida, *Gift of Death* 114). Perhaps, then, Nietzsche’s genealogy critiques the utilitarian bent of Christianity exemplified in the repressed self-investment that motivates the pitiful sense of Christian love to actualize a truly radical ideal of agape that is not subsumed by the force of *ressentiment*. If so, what is this
responsibility that Nietzsche summons that seems so familiar to Christianity, but in the
summoning calls it beyond itself? What does Nietzsche believe about the future of mercy
and forgiveness, this gift that must be seen with new eyes?

Returning to the problem of forgiveness illustrated in the film, Delacroix seems crossed
by the problem that headed this chapter: “We have to think differently—in order at last, perhaps
very late on, to attain even more: to feel differently.” Nietzsche’s heading presumes that a
rational assent leads to a consequent affective transformation; therefore, Delacroix’s suffering
requires some decision to distance the hateful attitude that threatens to sweep over him. Yet his
conflict is less a problem of conscious decision-making and more an affective turning that opens
him to a way of being forgetful. To affirm such a becoming, I think that Nietzsche’s writing
elsewhere would agree with my minor reversal: To relieve the hate, Delacroix must learn to feel
differently—in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: to think differently.

In seeking a sense of relief, some forgiveness, Delacroix senses that the conventional
justice of retributive compensation—asking for a life in repayment for a murdered life—is
reactive because it repeats the inevitable suffering of loss with the reinvestment of more pain.
His vital longing may find expression in the words of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra who longs “that
man be delivered from revenge.” The adverse feeling of vengeful hatred is a torturously
entangled anger full of threat and reproach. For Delacroix, the damage paid in punishment by
his son’s murderer seems to intensify rather than relieve a sense of loss because the desire to
punish is a voracious desire. The yearning for capital punishment never quite stops hurting
because it is predicated on a promise of reparation that only returns to nourish a developed, ugly
taste for cruelty based on self-hatred.

Recently, a radio program interviewed a man who lost two family members during the
September 11 terrorist attacks on Flight 93 and who complained disappointedly that Zacarias Moussauoui would be spared the death penalty. Before the terrorist attack, the man was opposed to the death penalty, but the random cruelty of the attack changed his mind. Understandably angry, he wanted Moussauoui to show some remorse for his conduct; but more violently, he wanted Moussauoui to face more punishment than mere lifelong incarceration. He wished him the torturous deadly pain that his family faced and that he has felt since their death. Of course, he is not alone in his feeling; there are so many victimized who feel the same. It is among the law’s responsibilities to represent victims and victimized, those who have no voice or have unjustly lost their voice. But I wonder if those who demand such justice for voiceless others or other others are not really appropriating the other’s suffering to intensify opposition and pain for their own trauma? The desire to revisit pain with commensurate pain is a visitation that will indeed remain to be seen and felt again and again.

Delacroix is struggling with his own loss while also trying to remain responsible to his son’s death as another’s loss without any return to himself. In his suffering, a suffering that he bears nobly, wandering gravely toward a sense of mercy that would finally forgive, he must try to affirm a sense of loss that suffers generously without any sense of personal profit or return. And yet to think of offering such a gift seems unbearable, unknown, and so distant within the economy of thought that Nietzsche reminds us is so human because it is precisely so economical. Derrida draws us closer to the threatening imperative of such a generous forgiveness: “Pure and unconditional forgiveness, in order to have its own ‘meaning,’ must have no meaning, no finality, even no intelligibility. It is a madness of the impossible” (On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness 45). Christianity turns toward a sense of mercy that would approach such forgiveness, but it economizes the cost of suffering through a process of negation. Delacroix
may find relief and nobility from his struggles in the promise of Christianity, but to work toward such a release requires opposing oneself by internalizing a sense of weakness, an inability to fully forgive, a failing that is finally overcome by acknowledging the debt of God’s gift of grace. For Nietzsche, this means of self-overcoming is fundamentally reactive embodying the conflicted promise of deliverance in the salvation offered by the ascetic ideal.

The ascetic priest provides the miracle of reversing life-denial and profound depression into life affirmation and the will to live. This kind of resurrection has moved Western metaphysics as few other powers have. Nietzsche’s claim is that this figure constitutes the pattern by which contemplative power has polluted itself in both its fear of itself and its fear of survival. The unconscious tactic becomes part of an unconscious identity, but one that is fissured with contradictions that issue in continuous recoil and self-overcoming. Ascetic self-overcoming is self-destructively obsessive because it regularly loses itself by repeating its own pattern: it repeats itself in a future of repetitions that reinstitutes the absent transcendence that both cuts it and delimits it. It is an obsession with and, in the unaccepted, unacceptable absence of its ideal. (Scott 43)

How does Nietzsche envision a turning that overcomes the reactive seriousness culminated in the ascetic ideal? If our eyes are informed by revenge and self-destructiveness, what would unsettle this viewpoint to see and feel generously so that we are turned by “pathos of distance”?

3.

And should your friend do you wrong, then say: I forgive what you did to me; but that you did it yourself—how could I forgive that. Thus speaks all great love: it overcomes even forgiveness and pity.

—Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra

Reading Plato’s Republic, or Aristotle’s Rhetoric or Nicomachean Ethics, and much of the philosophical tradition that follows, we get a very definite idea that there is ultimately a rational basis for the idea of goodness and justice arising from the nature of human life, or the needs of a society to organize itself in an accountable and unified way. In our rational collective endeavors, we find, in principle, nothing alien or foreign to our understanding. Yet Nietzsche suggests that such reasoned, consensual self-assurance is the mask of a fundamental deception. The ethical
horizon is so nearsighted because the weak must always try to see themselves. If I understand Nietzsche when he argues that man is the *serious* one, he is broadly arguing that human subjectivity has become settled by enclosing and internalizing itself into oneself. The ethico-morality of compensation both projects and protects this investment against the costs of living. By contrast, Nietzsche envisions the possibility of an ethico-morality in which gains are not self-investments but disclosures that expose one to the unsettling affirmation of chance and becoming.

Nietzsche writes of the *light wink* of affirmation by the strong, a gesture that sends a message of lightness that is enacted by closing one’s eyes and opening them again, as the blink signifies a new viewpoint. The revision enacted by the blink opens a *new eye* to the disclosure of affirmation, an opening that would be responsive to the turning of forces that enliven other senses in the body, and thus, enliven different images of identification between self and other. In other words, we must “feel differently—in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: to think differently.” Nietzsche’s argument that a change in sense activates an alteration of interpretation and value presupposes that “thought, then, is about the projection of bodily experience into the future” (Diprose 22). Affirmation, in the most primary sense, names the active, opening force of release that we find so concentrated in Nietzsche’s declaration: “everything is dischargeable, everything must be dischargeable” (*Genealogy of Morals* 73). As we discussed previously, Nietzsche’s primary argument is that the body is essentially unified and ordered by reactive force that is materialized in a network of social concepts (Diprose 21). The turning open of active force in antagonism with other, external forces is a different form of aggression that creates rather than forecloses new feelings, new images of thought, and new social values. Nietzsche’s combative language, such as *antagonism, aggression*, and the like,
actively struggles with an etymological tradition ordered by a sense of defensive hostility. For example, the Latin root of aggression, *agressus*, is defined by an approach, but that approach implies a movement toward hostility and eventual attack. And certainly his genealogy does indeed attack the will to power that upholds the hostility of *ressentiment*, but the attack is not one to aggrieve the *seriousness* of internalization already weary with weight and depth. In opposition to the weight of this hostile seriousness, he affirms that new nobility may emerge with a *discharge* of active force that would set forth a personal lightness actualized by a sense of forgetfulness. Lingis explains this Nietzschean sensibility concisely:

> The noble life has the power to make the present its own law; that is the source of its distinction, of the difference that marks each thought, each glance, each gesture, each feeling of that life. The source of the great power of the noble life, its welcoming openness to what comes, to what presents itself, lies in that it has the power to forget, to forget the past, to forget what is irrevocable, to let what dies die. (53)

The wink of the *powerful man*, perhaps this gesture of forgiveness that Delacroix seeks, is activated by the graceful strength of lightness that interrupts the internalized *feeling* for justice by forgetting it. I am emphasizing the multivalence of the Nietzschean term *lightness*, which conveys slight weight as well as reflective power. These definitions focus us on Nietzsche’s primary challenge: how might the lightness of forgetting open to nobility that forges greater units of strength?

The wink of the powerful man signals an interruption of feeling that initiates a different conceptual formation of justice. The wink may seem to affirm, “the oldest and naivest moral canon of justice . . . the good will of approximately equal parties to come to terms with one another” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* 70-71). The gesture, however, opens a justice to emerge, not as principle of commensurate good will, but as an aggressive force of becoming (Ansell-Pearson 277). Therefore, the nobility of the wink signifies a break with the psychology
of ethico-moral law that demands credit, failing to answer the debt with the hostility and reappraisal that taints the sovereignty within the cultural conditions upheld by ressentiment. The failure to respond creates a pathos of distance from the regulative norm that confines the body’s need to react by reinvesting itself with the justice directed by a passion for debt (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 173). Consequently, the pathos of distance that results from discharging the debtor forces an opening to actualize active force, intensity that activates new images of justice that overcome the need for revenge registered by the mnemotechnics of the law’s painful discipline. We hold to punishment because we feel the need to make our oppressors suffer like us. Indeed, blithe acquittal of responsibility is not a verdict that Nietzsche would accept; however, he would counter that the less acknowledged crime is the indignity a criminal has done to him or herself. This is not to suggest that Nietzsche respects the penal system’s efforts at rehabilitation. Rehabilitation mediated solely by time and confinement and aimed at awakening guilt is a symptom of the *bad conscience* that tends to “harden” men, sharpen[ing] their alienation” and building within them a sense of circumvented rage that pretends to be sober justice (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* 81). David Cartwright extends my point,

Nietzsche’s claim that mercy is a practice of the most powerful community may strike one as totally unrealistic and naïve. That is one may think that what Nietzsche has in mind is some *Übergemeinschaft*—a community which is immune to the harm of wrongdoers. However, this interpretation of a merciful community is like viewing Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* as some character in blue tights and a cape. Within the context of a society exempt from harm, mercy cannot be a practice, since the mercy presupposes some forgiven harm. But it may be argued that if this is true, Nietzsche is extremely naïve. For if a community can be harmed and fails to do something to deter criminals, i.e. punish them, they will continue to engage in this behavior and even encourage others to do so, thereby threatening the very existence of society itself. Again this complaint fails to appreciate an important distinction between punishment as a way to regulate behavior and methods which accomplish the same result and avoid the particular undesirable dimensions Nietzsche attributes to punishment. That is, Nietzsche argues that a
significantly preferable way of handling criminals is to treat them as if they were sick and as if their behavior were a symptom of this sickness. One then works to help them overcome their disease. So in place of a hangmen or judges, Nietzsche calls for physicians of practical morality or promoters of health. (25)

Waiving the law of retribution is a creative experiment in which Nietzsche’s genealogy uncovers the potential force of virtues of mercy, respect, and love outside the enervating reactive context of revenge and pity. The transvaluation of the law means giving “irresponsibility a positive sense,” overturning the latent hostility that has corrupted the mediation of justice, introducing an image of virtue that loves one’s enemies from the disposition of mastery over the reactive forces. Such mastery turns and strengthens the body by trying to relieve its weakness, interrupting the impotence and inferiority that taint humanity with the resentment that is the primary symptom of its way-of-being-ill (Swanton 29). In turning the eye away from retaliation, it relinquishes the identity of the inverted image and focuses it on oneself. Such a noble turn of the eye on oneself creates an image of sovereignty captivated by the prodigious power of the “actor [acting] its own ideal” (Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil 77).

Nietzsche’s radicalism lies in the possibility that mastery may indeed create one’s worst enemies; yet it is the extraordinary exuberant strength of one’s enemies that Nietzsche appreciates as brilliant. This appreciation is in the gift of absolution from debt that offers the indebted the opportunity of recognizing egoism, the strength of character developed through mastery that gives without a need of gratitude in return. Nietzsche refers to the generous mercy of gift-giving, not as a form of pitying altruism, but as an opportunity for the powerful to express a condition of superfluous energy that is exemplary. The discharging of indebtedness creates the conditions of an interruptive force that enables the debtor to imagine the conditions of mastery through the merciful allowance of power. At last, the debtor-criminal has an image of strength
apart from self-hatred, of the sort intensified in the actualities and symbolism of the execution of capital punishment.

I have argued that the generous mercy afforded the powerful overcomes and enlarges a sense of self and other. The generous affirmative strength initiated by the nobility of the powerful leads to a renewed sense of sovereignty. The new eyes of enlarged responsibility might provide a wink of relief that seems a gift that increases the stature of the strong, drawing the weak along in the force of their aftermath. Nietzsche seems to suggest that the power of affirmation returns in self-increase when he notes that the pathos of distance, the elevation and differing of oneself from other produces an “ever increasing widening of distance within the soul itself” (Beyond Good and Evil 173). The ever-widening distance of the soul suggests that the strong continually deepen and enlarge their power like a great athlete or a super hero in action comics. But we are mistaken when we conclude that will and generosity of the strong only suffer the responsibility of massive self-infatuation. A patient reading of Nietzsche may reveal that nobility requires endurance more than the abundance. He shows in many different ways that what makes a life is not the expansion of some inner principal because lives are lived in the tension of a field of differing forces, opened again and again to the sensitivity of unsettling exposure. The mercy of forgiveness that Nietzsche imagines is not a gift that can be economized; to forgive as he imagines utterly explodes the motivational ethical horizon of responsibility under the credit regime.

Michael Hardt sums the power of Nietzsche’s provocation: “The total critique is always insurrectional; it is unrestrained attack on established values and the ruling powers they support” (116).
We might begin to understand the affirmative aggression of this unrestrained attack with an example that shows a mercy that would give us a sense of the irresponsibility to feel differently. Alphoso Lingis’ writes of the inhuman, unaccountable courage to give forgetfully. This is the courage that Delacroix seeks and a courage that Nietzsche affirms with every ounce of will.

Of the Sandinista guerrillas who made a blood pact to fight for liberation of Nicaragua in 1959, only one, Tomas Borge, was not gunned down in the jungle, and he was captured and held in Somoza’s prisons for years. After the Sandinista victory in 1979, Tomas Borge was selected by his comrades to be Minister of Justice. A few months later, his subordinates informed him that among the captured agents of Somoza Gardia Nacional were identified the three men who had tortured him during the decades of his incarceration. He went at once to the prison where they held them and ordered them to be brought before him. He looked intently at them and verified that they were indeed his torturers. Then he ordered them to be liberated. No reasoning, reckoning, calculation of how most to profitably manage one’s life in human society has ever provided the motivation for the thirst for justice to which sacrifices his life—so often in vain!—and even less for the justice that liberates its enemies. (Lingis, “Bestiality” 70)

At last, about this impossible mercy, I believe that Nietzsche indeed has faith in the promise of ‘irresponsibility’.
Chapter 3:

The Force of Appalling Conclusions: Rx Silence

At the present time writing appears to me as an absolute necessity, and at the same time I have a feeling that my talent is lost and I can accomplish nothing, a feeling like the body’s knowledge of disease which the mind tries to evade and deny. (Early Routines 30)

Why Write?

William S. Burroughs’ oeuvre, which he claims consists of one extensive book, is organized in its utter hostility toward the forces of control, his concentrated name for energy that has forced human and planetary life toward a deathly, futureless blind alley. As in the last chapter, we engage another physician-writer registering the symptoms of the enervating disease of internalization. Within pages of nearly all of Burroughs’ books, short essays, and interviews, the reader is confronted by a pervasive sense of control’s dull, repetitive, deathly force that encloses our conceptual understanding and the possibilities of the body, language, time, and space. For Burroughs, all of these primary concepts limit the possibility of the human organism to the proper name of man, a skinjob addicted to an all-inclusive urge to consume. As a result, man, the addicted, “ugly animal” becomes the most critical figure that Burroughs’ writing struggles to encounter and disintegrate (Burroughs, Ghost of Chance 48). Language that ignites a force of disintegration is not surprising for a writer that relies on so many explosive metaphors and images to blow apart the structure of consciousness and corporeality enclosed by a network of dominating forces that concentrate in what he names as the reality studio. In Burroughs’ idiom, writing names the complicated means of counter-agency that infiltrates and attacks the
symbolic order produced by the reality studio by decoding the word, the force of control that inhabits the psyche and the body. His textual explosives signify a mission in the most etymological usage: not only a detonation that breaks the limits of enclosure, but a “letting go” of the pressures of containment. Burroughs’ explosive charge is not an utter blast of chaos for the sake of hopeless destruction; rather, his writing is charged with the mission of risk that chances a future to come forth uncontrolled by terminal limitations. What would that future be? “I don’t know? Let’s see.” (50).

I analyze Burroughs’ writing influenced by Gilles Deleuze’s symptomatological understanding of literature. Literature has been commonly understood as aesthetically valuable because it formalizes a representation of life that is insightful for the reading audience. As well, the reflective literary text has presented normative narratives that provide ethical and moral examples that equip the reader in the dramatic necessities of living. To a limited extent, Deleuze’s perspective on literature broadly seems to share these aesthetic and practical commonplaces. Yet when he states that literature reveals a “tenor of life,” we would be mistaken to assume that literature’s purpose is to return the reader to the priority, propriety, and dominance of established orders of living. In other words, “to write is not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience” (“Life as Literature” 1). In actuality, the life that appears so synonymous with Deleuze’s most significant critical term becoming is a vitalism that differs considerably from the principles that maintain a sense of subjectivity or personalism presupposed in most traditional literary criticism. Regarding this distinction, Deleuze strikingly maintains, “literature begins only when a third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say “I.” (3). From the traditional narrative realism of his early writing to the more experimental
form of the trilogies, Burroughs’ writing has been one long examination of the crisis that results from the desire to direct life explicitly or implicitly by continually uttering ‘I.’

Influenced by Nietzsche, Deleuze’s symptomatological perspective is intrinsically an ethical analysis that diagnoses the health of the life form actualized in the literary event. As indicated, the life that he finds compelling in literature is not an idealized transcendental concept or a unitary self that undergoes a transformation that continually returns to reinvest an I that designates one self. The clinical perception taken in the ‘symptomatological’ analysis makes ethical evaluations based on the complex adaptive power of life to become, to enter into multiplicities that have the potential to extend beyond the territories that organize individuals, families, cultures, societies and nations. Consequently, all becoming is becoming-other, an entering into a network of forces where the constituted I is dispersed from the territorial identifications noted previously. Such a becoming-other projects an unaccountable, apocalyptic future, where this I departs from its seemingly given constitution toward something that it cannot imitate or actually know in advance.

I diagnose Burroughs’ writing, particularly his early work in Junky and Queer, as literature of consumption. The introductory emphasis of this chapter identifies Burroughs’ motivation to write as a violent struggle to attack the forces of appalling conclusions assembled in language. Further, the chapter details Burroughs’ attack on the possessive force of language that leads to a horrible sickness of regressive, consuming life-movement drawn inexorably inward, as language addicts the user to the enclosed identity of an I. At last, I will turn to analyze Burroughs’ later writing that tries to overcome the deadly impasses of the consumptive becoming junk and queer. In Burroughs’ Naked Lunch the conflict turns away from the self-enclosed, still world of junk toward an indeterminate, apocalyptic future opened to a silence, a
stillness that is outside of language. As many critics have suggested, Burroughs’ writing has
great spiritual ambition; I will examine Burroughs endeavor to quiet the ugly spirit in his writing
toward the space of silence.

What Are You Rewriting?

Burroughs’ counterintuitive remark, “While it was I who wrote Junky, I feel that I was
being written in Queer” exemplifies writing within a zone of indetermination that encounters the
outside (Queer xiv). No doubt, “being written” is a paradoxical remark, and moreover, certainly
an odd experience, which leaves us to question carefully the effects of this “I” of the author that
writes as well as this “I” inscribed in writing. After all, Burroughs has limited his authority,
noting that he works not as a “producer” that creates or a “politician” with an agenda, but merely
as an “instrument.” To approach this conflict of authorial control—a symptom of a much more
pervasive form of domination—we might ask, who ultimately writes Burroughs’ novels?

Burroughs’ earliest works such as Junky and Queer render a context of horror that
becomes visceral in Naked Lunch as it feels more like a means of flight. A sense of doom
pervades his work and the many “dead ends” motivate a desperate need to escape. These
conflicting figures of termination and breakthrough emerge from a personal moment of
overwhelming exposure that concentrates Burroughs’ need to write as a means of escaping
possession. But what is it that possesses him? In the introduction to Queer, Burroughs offers a
rare insight into his writerly intentions when he identifies the event that intensified his sense of
possession. In a sensibility that is once confessional and apocalyptic, he notes that he began the
occupation of writing as a reaction to the death of his wife Joan Vollmer.
I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never become a writer but for Joan’s death, and to the realization of the extent to which this event motivated and formulated my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have no choice but to write my way out. (xxii)

Of course, the author’s remark is the most frequently quoted remark identifying his need to write. Moreover, the citation’s continued reference occurs mainly because these frank remarks provide not only a personal but also a familiar critical framework that obscures other difficult matters raised here. My point is that Burroughs’ personal remarks could be used to establish a sphere of meaning around his writing, a tidy hermeneutic methodology that links the author’s motivations and intentions to a primary source that is extended thematically throughout his work. Furthermore, these remarks could provide a sense of personality by familiarizing and humanizing a writer that often repels sentiment. Within this framework, a critic might conclude that the trauma of an accidental death, one that occurred by Burroughs’ hands, reveals the “appalling conclusions” of his own corrupt life, which Burroughs himself likens to a “poisonous river.” Thus, the confrontation with death would be a catastrophic moment of authenticity that makes the writer aware of an inconceivable act of irresponsibility, turning him to writing as an ongoing apology for this act. Burroughs’ writing, then, would actualize a mournful rhetoric, one extended text that continually reinvests an unforgettable failure.

While this perspective has insight, I question the tidiness and uniformity of it. In fact, I use this common critical framework that supports a conventional notion of authorship and subjectivity as a contrast: Burroughs does not become a writer with the understanding that this occupation will best represent and overcome the disappointments of his life. The choice is not quite so moral, self-serving, or determined. He becomes a writer out of horror. The force of appalling conclusion is a matter of reacting to the power of consumption. As such, I understand
Burroughs’ overview exactly as he states it: Writing is not a choice; it is an absolute necessity. The force of appalling conclusions produces a terminal condition that leaves him little or no option but to write against, to breakthrough, this possessive power.

Burroughs’ routines, his name for the episodes that he authors, seem as conflicted as his writerly objectives. In the early novels, particularly Junky and Queer, writing that is more suggestive of instructional memoirs than actual novels, the author's biographical experiences are personified by a third person or omniscient narrator that reports on a character named Lee. Naturally, literary personas and pseudonyms are commonplace literary strategies that allow an author distance and objectivity. However, assuming that Lee is merely a persona might simplify the effect of Burroughs’ engagement with this disposition. More than simply a persona maintained for legal purposes, Burroughs’ Lee is less a traditional literary persona and more the embodiment of symptoms under diagnosis by an author. The clinical significance of the distinction that I am making is well summarized by Gilles Deleuze when he argues that the writing is not to represent but to actualize health ("Literature as Life” 3). From his perspective, “the writer as such is not a patient but rather a physician, the physician of himself and the world” (3). Writing understood as a diagnosis is primary theme throughout Burroughs’ work, and this is made clear from the outset of Naked Lunch, which begins with the forensic overtones of a deposition reporting on the “sickness” of addiction (xxxvii). The objectivity of his written diagnoses, however, often complicate the authority of his analysis. While Naked Lunch testifies to the care and detail given to recording the “sickness and delirium of addiction,” this careful responsibility is undermined by his disclaimer that “I have no precise memory of writing the notes which have now been published under the title Naked Lunch” (xxxvii). Perhaps it was all a blur, as the saying goes. Perhaps his awakening with a blurred sense of memory may be more
indicative of disorientation, the kind of confusion one experiences after a nap when time and place are dislocated; and in that strange moment life has no context or familiarity. One may stand and look at oneself in the mirror with a strange sense of unknowing and fear, as if an under an intruder’s stare. In that moment when all habits and recollection of self are forgotten, one disintegrates and is threatened by indetermination. Perhaps it is within this indeterminate condition that Burroughs’ writing gathers authority?

We need look no further than the epigraph to identify a small but telling example of the kind of conflict that engenders Burroughs’ writing. When he notes that writing is necessary but unfulfilling, I sense his frustration is more than the usual anxiety that all writers feel. The frustration here likened as interference between the “body’s knowledge of a disease that the mind tries to evade” may not merely be a passing simile, but rather an important indication of a major conflict found throughout his writing: the uniform, programmatic effect of language. The locus of this tension rests in writing, or more specifically the word/image structure of language, a medium that is deeply embodied within the problem under attack. And the word attack is language none too strong because he believes that his criticism is actually combat, a warfare against the viral capacity of words. In short, language, upheld by the entire philosophical-conceptual basis of western thinking, is a virus that penetrates and controls the human organism. In Burroughs’ terms the virus monopolizes the field of known possibility. Such an epistemological monopoly establishes a worldview that forms a sense of integrity best expressed by the definitive syntax “to be the.” Burroughs is critical of the pervasive logic that presumes some kind of determination and normativity when one poses phrases such as “the human,” “the universe” or more broadly the primacy of unity in opposition to multiplicity. This logic
classifies through hierarchy and opposition, designating the proper over improper, demarcating inside from out, and more directly, distinguishing the mind over the body.

Burroughs’ overwhelming perspective of viral enclosure might seem less extreme if he merely argued that language theory is influenced by an Aristotelian tradition. However, his continued insistence that viruses are not merely metaphors but actualities emphasizes his radical understanding of occupation by control at the biological level. Returning to the epigraph, Burroughs’ frustration with writing may not just be the inability to form the proper words; rather the anxiety may result from the need to “create his own language” (Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature 5). From this Deleuzian perspective, the creation of a minor language is a literary invention that “attacks” the evasions of language at the cellular level to break through the symptoms that beset the body. While writing may be an absolute necessity for the addicted author, that urge is deeply conflicted when the aim is also to “wipe out the word.” Burroughs’ paradox leads us to an important question: Can he really write using a minor language within and against the inhabitations of the word? At last, what kind of minor language would this writing entail?

Burroughs has stated matter-of-factly that he writes to “create conflict.” There is nothing—not one word or phrase—of his writing that can or could be understood as conciliatory. His writing style forces the reader to encounter a strange textual space, one that is formally alienating and will aggravate a reader that expects traditional literary conventions, particularly developed characters, plot development, and consistent ideas (Hume 111). The alienating strangeness of his writing naturally makes for difficult reading, but difficulty gives way to a sense of exposure for engaged readers, who feel the pressure of emergency provoked from his writing that wrenches them otherwise. Very simply, readers no longer feel under Burroughs’
influence. His writing creates *agon*, a conflict where the reader no longer feels assured of those qualities defined so self-assuredly as human. The effect forces the reader outward, often toward revulsion and often toward chance, but always outward toward the exterior, which is a movement into space. Since this space of radical exteriority is unknown, the reader seeking certainties will struggle with the conflict. In fact, a reader could easily undervalue the flight toward space as some kind of science fiction fantasy guided by a dreamy combination of Gnostic, pastoral and utopian influences. Yet, the extraordinary step toward the exteriority of space is an absolute necessity, a natural law of evolutionary movement for the human organism summarized by Burroughs’ axiom: “We are all here to go!” With this exhortation, we should certainly ask why, or where, or how we might enter this unknown region. Burroughs often challenges the reader with staggering, one-in-a-million odds regarding the possible step into the ungrounded exterior of space. How does his writing prepare the reader to imagine the possible move toward a singular place, a space that traverses the division between “words into silence” and “time into space” (Burroughs, *Western Lands* 115)? His writing is an acerbic attack on the manifold forces that direct the planet’s drift toward termination, a culmination that can be escaped only through the explosiveness of a miracle or a disaster, assuming these two eruptions are distinctions within his apocalyptic work. Throughout this extensive book of picaresque adventures, the author presumes that only an apocalypse of the most extraordinary conflict can activate the most extraordinary possibility.

Burroughs declares in *Naked Lunch* “the way out is the way in.” This kind of therapeutic technique suggests a spiritual proverb recycled by *Billy Jack* or a maxim found in a fortune cookie. Is Burroughs really endorsing some variant on the age-old insight of “know thyself?” In knowing oneself, is there really an internal self, some essential seed of memory that longs for the
distant ideal of true inner self. Long after the Platonic ideal of self-knowing, we live with the continued search for an interior place of presence. The western tradition is founded on a metaphorical network of essences. Naturally, the notion of a true self remains significant because we have inherited a “tree” of transcendental ideals that ground and extend a correspondence between the essence of truth and the presence of subjectivity (Deleuze and Guatarri, *A Thousand Plateaus* 5). Regarding Burroughs’ directive to turn inward toward an essence, I know of few thinkers more dismissive of the traditional structure of subjectivity, a conceptual design that maintains the internal presence and integrity of consciousness. For him the integrity of essential self is a container that maintains a dormant life form. His writing warns about the need to satisfy and control a dominating sense of interiority, when he notes, “Hustlers of the world, there is one mark you cannot beat: The Mark Inside” (*The Ticket That Exploded* 55). Rather than liberating some fabulous, true self, his writing seems a variant on George Clinton’s advice “free your mind, and your ass will follow.” The goal for Burroughs, though, is not “one nation under a groove”; he would invert Clinton’s program suggesting, “free your ass, and your mind will follow.” For Burroughs, one’s ass as opposed to one’s mouth communicates the real materiality of interiority, an organ that mediates a movement bound to discharge over and over again. That is why trying to understand your inner self is so full of shit. Unlike the sphincter, the mouth mediates the subject, those verbal outbursts of ego always formed in a

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18 Burroughs discusses this issue assuming a rather conventional understanding of transformation in an interview with Jennie Skerl. He states: A man has to get beyond his conditioning, or his future is going to be a repetition, word-for-word repetition. I would say for a great percentage of people, all they do is repeat their past. They really don't have a future at all. And it's only by a sort of break with the past that anything new and different will emerge—which is very rare—a very rare occurrence (*Conversations with William S. Burroughs* 117).

19 Steven Shaviro draws a correspondence between Burroughs’ seemingly disgusting obsession with the anality and interiority, when he claims that from a Burroughsian sense “My shit is my inner essence,” a material essence that I “find myself always compelled to give away” (*Doom Patrols* 4).
personal declarative such as: “I believe that . . . My needs require . . . My human rights are.” The ego is not merely the psychological formation of the self for Burroughs, ego formation is an illness resulting in symptoms of swelling and discharge made apparent in speech that leads to literal self-control—a self utterly possessed. He specifies this intensified form of selfishness, when he notes, “Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk. That organism is the word” (The Ticket That Exploded 49-50). In the course of this chapter, I will try determine the forces of silence enclosed.

Naturally, shit is the outcome of an extensive digestive process that begins outside the body. Given that, the point of this excursus is to finally underline this conclusion: the “way in,” an examination of interiority begins with forces that activate from the outside. In short, a subject referred to as “I” is always otherwise, constituted by outside forces that traverse the self. Therefore the “way in” for Burroughs is a digestive, neural, and cellular examination of conditioning that corresponds with Deleuzes’ theoretical endeavor to diagnose the forces, sensations, and intensities that form a body’s orders.

To return to the introduction’s question: What is Burroughs rewriting? If this massive question can be summarized, his writing is a means of inoculation for the addiction of being man. The initial recognition that motivated his early writing turns on itself and gives way to another form of recognition: the identity that Burroughs gains from writing also identifies the absolute necessity for writing. Deleuze provides theoretical insight on this unusual effect of writing when he claims “writing has nothing to do with signifying”; rather, it measures and maps (A Thousand Plateaus 5). Writing is a measurement for Burroughs in the sense that it is another kind of fix, an inoculating one that tries to balance the amount of toxin introduced in order to
control an infection named human nature, a way-of-being addicted to a static image that guides life into “extreme untenable positions” (Nova Express 7). I interpret Junky and Queer not just as literary biographies that merely render the experience of addiction, rather these pathologies establish a context for the more visceral scream of absolute exposure and consumption expressed in Naked Lunch. In the end, Burroughs’ project is not merely a method to overcome a personal sense of “alienated bitterness,” but more a transformation of horrible conditions. (Hume 132).

Writing Ensures Further Writing

How does Burroughs “get his shit together” through writing? To rephrase, how does his writing move inward to turn outward? To understand such torsion requires an analysis of Burroughs’ radically therapeutic practice of writing.

In the introduction to Queer, just preceding the climactic accident cited earlier, Burroughs makes a cryptic remark regarding Lee’s investment in writing. In his symptomatic analysis of the persona, Burroughs presumes that Lee was taking the necessary steps to become “committed to writing” (xvi). On the surface, this presumption is a queer as the heading that entitles the book, primarily because the plot has nothing to do with writing in any conventional sense. Rather than writing, Lee seems quite at odds with himself and in a state of personal disintegration. This oddity leads us to ask this: How does Burroughs link the disintegration of withdrawal with an immersion into writing?

If Lee has any desire it is expressed in a very needy form of consumption displayed in a binges of unfulfilled sex and drink. In very direct terms, Lee appears out of control and in acute need of recognition as he suffers through the withdrawal and recovery from heroin addiction.
From Burroughs’ perspective, the need for recognition results in an agitation between disorientation and orientation as the invisible junky becomes quite visible when withdrawn from junk. As he so concisely summarizes the agitation of withdrawal, “the junk spills out.” Junk narrows the focus of a junky similar to an athlete. The junky is, in fact, the consummate athlete, utterly disciplined and self-absorbed within the functioning habits of the most extreme project. Take it to the limit! Just do it! Well, not quite. Junk is consuming—there are no timeouts or station breaks from its enclosure. The life of a junky is not a game, not a hobby, nor a lifestyle that ends after some reasonable time. As Burroughs states so unquestionably, junk is not a job; “it is a way of life.” Withdrawal, the end of junk time, is a renewed period of visibility that results in painful conversions. Within this awakening, Lee’s condition as “recovering addict” is highly suggestive because when “the junk spills out” he seems to be actually re-covering himself in a different form of consumption. Queer personifies the disorientation and vulnerability of a subject withdrawn from the forces of a controlling and consuming habit. Lee staggers about like an adolescent hungry for contact, ejaculating wildly in a desperate attempt to integrate an exposed and dispersed personality withdrawn from the cool enclosure of junk.

All of this obsessive need for contact is eventually directed toward a languid sort named Eugene Allerton. As the focus of Lee’s agitated outpouring, Allerton’s indifference seems to mirror Lee’s own insatiable demand for identification. However indifferent, Allerton’s presence provides a connection of self-recognition that staves off the threat of disintegration for Lee. In other words, his presence satisfies a renewed sexual urge that is overflowing; but more important, Allerton provides a reserved audience, in actuality a dim face turned toward Lee’s wild attempts for contact and recognition as it is projected in his outrageous routines. At the formal level, Queer is primarily comprised of a narrative point of view full of clinical
observations of disintegration interspersed with Lee’s performances, the kind of routines reminiscent of old bar stories that begin with the old tried-and-true ethnic opener: “There was a Jew, an Irishman, and a priest in a rowboat. In contrast, Lee’s routines are weirdly self-absorbed, at once seemingly earnest, and yet completely ironic; these shticks mock sentimentality and romantic comedy with a sense of repulsion. For example, when Lee openly discusses his homosexuality, the actual shock of being compared with a foolish group of “simpering female impersonators” is converted into a routine that ridiculously enacts the fear of identification into a joke on earnestness and valor. The performance has the hilarious smarminess of Hollywood’s traditional obsession with the sentimental tragedy, where those too dull to recognize inner character waste goodness needlessly. In the routine, Lee’s fears are projected and, then, actually gutted by a brutal wit throughout the tender tale of Bobo, the noble Queen who taught him to live honorably with the horror of homosexuality.

Nobler I thought, to die a man than live on, a sex monster. It was the wise old queen—Bobo, we called her—who taught me that I had a duty to live and to bear my burden proudly for all to see, to conquer prejudice and ignorance and hate with knowledge and sincerity and love. Whenever you are threatened by a hostile presence, you emit a thick cloud of love like an octopus squirts out ink . . .

Poor Bobo came to a sticky end. He was riding in the Duc de Ventre’s Hispano-Suiza when his falling piles blew out the car and wrapped around the rear wheel. He was completely gutted, leaving an empty shell sitting on the giraffe skin upholstery. Even the eyes and brains went, with a horrible shlapping sound. The Duc says he will carry that ghastly shlep to the mausoleum . . .

Then I knew the meaning of loneliness. But Bobo’s words came back to me from the tomb, the sibilants cracking gently. No one is alone. You are part of everything alive. (Queer 40)

Bobo was clearly too beautiful for this world; at least too beautiful, until he became a slab of ground beef.
From a literary perspective, these routines are more than just outlandish satire using shock to gather attention. For one, a literary critic might simply add that obviously these routines suggest more than just outlandish performances; they introduce the beginnings of routines developed further in *Naked Lunch* and the subsequent trilogy. And while such an interpretation is correct, this reading alone may simplify and diminish Burroughs’ compulsion to write.

These routines discharge a complicated emotional situation. The performances feign sensitivity to evade the awkwardness of intimacy, and in doing so redirect the anxiety and fear of exposure into an outrageous story that covers the tension. Naturally, the attraction that Lee has for Allerton is sexual, but more pressing is Lee’s need for a kind of contact that reassures some sense of self-awareness. In more symptomatic terms, the crisis of withdrawal results in a metabolic overturning that returns Lee to a state of visibility, an exposure in the sense that a new affective selfhood emerges “queer.” This very queer subject is insecure, vulnerable, and foremost his sexuality appears at odds with the normative form of homosexuality during this period. If Lee becomes “committed to writing” as Burroughs claims, the context for this initial writing might be understood as a form of obsessive role-playing by an actor in need of audience (*Queer* xvi). Rhetorically, routines such as the outrageous tale of Bobo are strange and unnerving, notably because Lee acts like a dummy freed from a ventriloquist. The freed dummy must talk incessantly, wildly, and directly to the ventriloquist to assure itself of independence; so too Lee’s “cover stories” seem motivated by the anxiety of dispersal, or more threatening—by silence. The presence of an audience assuages these fears reassuring the speaker of some authority and contact. Thus, when “the junk spills out” the reflexive object is Allerton, who acts as an immediate audience offering Lee a face (often an unsatisfying one) of recognition that
identifies and orients Lee’s own dispersed personality, one that is queer in all the many valences of the term. All said, the commitment to writing that Burroughs foresees remains distant; Lee’s response to withdrawal seems similar to a very odd kind of conventional therapy that rehabilitates through the productivity of fiction rather than the typical conventions of writing. This form of rehabilitation redirects a possessive need for contact into obsessive urge for audience.

If there is any tentative indication that might foreground this problem, it is Burroughs’ awareness that Lee’s effort to make an “impression” expresses his eventual occupation as a writer. Throughout this section, I will concentrate widely on this sense of impression as an initial mark that Lee tries to make on an audience, but moreover, on Burroughs’ sense of language itself, which prescribes an impression that inscribes. The word/image encodes the soft machine that prescribes the fleshy mechanism that is his name for the body. About this program, he says: “These colorless sheets are what flesh is made from—Becomes flesh when it has coloring and writing—That is Word and Image write the message that is you on colorless sheets determine all flesh” (Nova Express 36). By concentrating on language as impression as opposed to expression, I will try to recognize an authorship that tries to communicate the affective sense of contact with a possessive force, of writing that “ensures further writing” against a viral disease of replication and consumption (Queer xiv). To flesh-out this contagion, I must turn to his understanding of language, particularly the word/image structure, to establish this clinical diagnosis that responds to the primary conflict of possession and disease that Burroughs tries to arrest through writing.

Burroughs’ means of attack on language is summarized by the now familiar demand to “rub out the word.” Within this context of ongoing battle the mobster lingo of a “rub-out” aimed at competing forces is obviously slang, yet the street-talk stresses that language regulates through
organized pressure quite similar to a mob. The swarming pressure of the mob named language is intensified by the more predominant metaphor of breakthrough, when he writes: “William Seward will unlock his word horde,” and open the syndicate that language forms (Naked Lunch 232). Any opening demands a major “hit” because language is an effect of a larger structure of control that produces the Aristotelian understanding of conceptual difference ordered by dichotomies. However, beneath this installation lies an anterior monopoly, a unified control system that provides a basis for the conceptual division authorized by Aristotle. Thus, within this war of competing forms of possession, to unlock the word horde requires a pressure forceful enough to eliminate a predominating organization of control.

Burroughs’ choice of the phrase word horde is forceful because it gathers the multivalent sense of multitude and pressure; hordes are not just gatherings, tribes, crowds, packs, legions that are drawn together, but the action of this aggregate force stirs tension. In simple terms, crowds crowd. For Burroughs, the horde of words indicates enclosure, a legion that swarms and possesses identity and consciousness. The word/image horde is a structure of control that establishes and monopolizes the whole pre-programmed “reality film” that produces and frames the constructs of time, causality, and death. From this perspective, words may seem to have an ideological effect since they interpellate images and perceptions that influence both individuals and groups to adopt a manufactured view of reality and truth. Undoubtedly, Burroughs would agree that reality is manufactured, but he would not accept the implied assumption that ideology critique uncovers a form of authenticity within. If there is any authentic reality that Burroughs would authorize, it is the disclosure that there is no authentic truth. Reality is a scanned effect; a cutup that incorporates word and image clusters into a made-for-living film that expresses a
sense of permanence and finality for its leading man who is the epitome of the evolutionary drama.

Language as a word horde communicates by force that invades and infects as opposed to language communicating by carrying personal expression. If language has any expressive capacity, what it imparts is limited to Burroughs’ well-known claim that the word is a virus, a claim that suggests that language is neither referential nor even figural, but rather the word/image structure continually reproduces and permeates a “communicative sickness” that expresses by infection as opposed to intention (Harris 247). I use the word express in the sense of delivery since words do not signify in the conventional sense, rather they communicate a prescribed code, a program of replication that infects and inhabits the body. Steven Shaviro defines the forceful program executed by the word virus, when he explains that,

[Viruses] aren’t self sufficient, or even fully alive; they always need to commandeer the cells of an already existing host in order to reproduce. A virus is nothing but DNA or RNA encased in a protective sheath; that is to say, it is a message—encoded in nucleic acid—whose only content is to repeat itself. When a living cell is invaded by a virus, it is compelled to obey this order. Here the medium is really the message: for the virus doesn’t enunciate any command, so much as the virus is itself the command. It is a machine for reproduction, but without any external or referential content to be reproduced. A virus is a simulacrum: a copy for which it has no original, emptily duplicating itself into infinity. It doesn’t represent anything, and it doesn’t have to refer back to any standard measure or first instance, because it already contains all the information--and only the information--needed for its further replication. (1)

Based on Shaviro’s explanation, we might assume that language issues from a source, something like a copying machine without any original signifier. Yet this analogy seems silly because the whole mechanism of duplication results from the introduction of an original that can be reproduced and multiplied. This problem notwithstanding, Shaviro’s analogy may obliquely clarify Burroughs’ understanding of language’s state of parasitic control.
The technology of reproduction emerges within an epistemological worldview that upholds and warrants the priority, purity, and authority of an originary structure. Undoubtedly, simulation has diminished the authority of origin; nevertheless, theological values maintain the hierarchy of an original’s superiority to counterfeit. The structure of origin in its many variations is an effect of an economy of authenticity, mastery, and unity that is metaphorically referred to by Burroughs as a “monopoly.” For Burroughs, monopolies obstruct the horizon of possibility, a barricaded enclosure exemplified in the most fundamental sense by the word/image structure of language. For example, western grammar actuates a linguistic conceptual system ordered by fixity and integrity. These principles are exemplified for Burroughs by the law of propriety indicated in proper names, which seems to exhort a presence that must stay present.

**The is of Identity.** You are an animal. You are a body. Now whatever you may be you are not an “animal,” you are not a “body,” because these are verbal labels. The is of identity alway[s] carries the implication of that and nothing else, and it always carries the assignment of permanent condition. To stay that way. All name calling presupposes the Is of identity . . .The definite article THE. THE contains the implication of one and only: The God, The universe, The way, The right, The wrong. If there is another, then that universe, That way is no longer the universe, the way . . .The whole concept of either/or. Right or wrong, physical or mental, true or false, the whole concept of or will be deleted from language and replaced by juxtaposition, by **and.** *(The Electronic Revolution 57-58)*

Burroughs’ warnings about language echo Kenneth Burke, both thinkers recognize that words are not just names that correspond to an object, rather words are abstract designations that draw their force from symbolic orientations that define very complex patterns of being. From Burroughs’ perspective, the semantic force inscribed by words such as the *human* determine identity by demarcation, which classifies but also limits the extent of the term by implying an essential quality that warrants exclusivity. The static quality inherent in conceptuality sustains the differential system of either or logic. His criticism of the “permanent condition” of identities is only partially understood if we conclude that the fixity of our language continually reinforces
exclusivity. The more important point implied in his attack on the syntax of absolutes assumes that language enforces the realization of an inherent actuality: a phrase such as the way is directed by a telos that seeks an entelechy of a concept’s actuality. Within this economy of thinking the potential of an actuality is established in advance: becoming supervenes over being. For Burroughs, the traditional question, “what is a human” always implies the definition of genuine characteristics passing over the open, transitive question of human becoming. Therefore, the static recourse of an actuality directed toward the quality of a perfected end controls possibility by limiting the betweeness of juxtaposition that would proliferate the connections of mobile quantities without restrictions.

Culmination is inscribed within this program of control, Burroughs encapsulates this trajectory when he states “It’s all a film run backward . . . the Atom Bomb through the Manhattan Project to the formula . . . e=Mc2.” His writing is full of sweeping rants about life force directed by a formulaic design drawn toward the actualization of an end. The atomic weaponry that incinerated Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not unforeseen but an anticipated event that disclosed the initial signs of an eschatological program in which energy itself is formed and accelerated toward the actualization of worldwide completion. The terminal quality of language is the outcome of forces seeking a final actualization. In the Nova Express, he writes, “Listen to my last words anywhere. Listen to my last words any world”(3). His words are words that register emergency amidst words that impress closure.

Burroughs’ proposition that juxtaposition should “replace” the terminal effects of language may not overcome the laws that govern the conceptual enclosure represented by the either/or dichotomy. Juxtaposition would introduce multiplicity within a tradition based on unity, but the laws of this tradition may envelop the many folds of difference offered by
juxtaposition. In a desperate attempt to breakthrough a programmed universe Burroughs wildly claims that words have arrived as foreign agents from some outer space.


However, the infiltration of language may not be so alien. I believe his conclusion that the *wordvirus* is a foreign invasion is really an issue much closer to home. The binary logic exemplified by the either/or distinction is not extraterrestrial but a fundamental conceptual distinction endemic to what Jacques Derrida refers to as the “ancient fund of western metaphysics” *(Margins of Philosophy* 140). Metaphysics is a fund that guarantees a return on its investment, which means that the simultaneity and multiplicity that Burroughs anticipates in juxtaposition, may offer nothing more than a detour that renews the enclosed holdings of metaphysics. In short, the “prisoner” that Burroughs calls forth from imposed fear may not overcome its confined enclosure. Can Burroughs’ words—like some double agent—infiltrate the lines of this conceptual enclosure?

Outwardly, any comparison between Derrida and Burroughs’ work seems distant. Derrida analyzes the forces upholding structures and laws, while Burroughs diagnoses the penetration of habit and infection. Yet both thinkers converge in their efforts either to breakthrough or delimit the various enclosures that effect control. Derrida’s references to metaphysics comprise more than the traditional study of ontology or first principles. At the least, deconstruction accounts for the inauguration of metaphysics, an originary fund that endows and distributes the entire economy of conceptuality exemplified by either/or logic. The metaphysical fund of reference is the performative turned constative, the master monopoly of control that exclusively distributes conceptual hierarchies that prescribe one reality, a design that leads
Burroughs to conclude that the entire universe is “preprogrammed.” When Burroughs faults the restrictive controls of an either/or distribution, his thinking corresponds with Derrida who recognizes that metaphysics is a violent regime programmed by theological principles of origin, unity, and truth that erases the traces of its emergence.

The problem is not just the definite article that implies THE one and only as opposed to an other; the propriety of such a distinction is warranted by a fundamentalism that Derrida refers to as the philosophy of presence. Fundamentalism is the conventional understanding of an absolute perspective established by fidelity to the immutable words of God commemorated in Holy Scripture. But moreover, an unerring faith in God as an ultimate principle shares in an overarching tradition of truth that has guided the destiny of western and eastern thought toward the totality of a transcendental ideal, a goal either reached by retroactively returning to an authentic origin or by advancing toward the culmination of a transcendental ideal. A mere glance at current news events focused on the presence of evil emphasize how pervasive the fundamental sense of truth, either guided by the tradition of sacred scripture or the secular faith in the nation, is the ultimate principle warranting the political undertakings in the East and the West. For instance, the rhetoric resulting from the September 11th assault often suggests an apocalyptic battle between messianic cultures convinced of the truthfulness of the way. Whether it is the sweeping “one nation under God” or faithful trust in Allah’s words, political activity draws on the indivisibility of truth and its revelation through the “pneumatalogical” relationship with a principle of truth (Of Grammatology).

The fundamentalism that Derrida refers to as metaphysics inscribes a hierarchy that establishes an immutable theological term, a firstness of a presence that reigns over a secondary representative. This primary quality of presence provides an authority and propriety for phrases
such as *the way* that suggest, to extend Burroughs’ critique, the actualization of restricted telos. Derrida has argued that a fundamentalism that secures a restricted determination for phrases such as “the way” results from the primary hierarchies that order western thought. From Derrida’s perspective, the presence of a truth principle upholds an economy of unity and thus completion that Burroughs would generally refer to as the monopoly of the “one god theory. “ Not just monotheistic perspective, monotheism, for Burroughs, results from a word/image film scripted by a nucleus of perfection that regulates by extending a static image in which a transcendental producer controls the possibility of action of all secondary, ephemeral terms, as I blend his thinking with Derrida’s. These hierarchies begin with the truth of being, the producer of origin that acts the demarcation of *physis/nomos*, a division that emanates a series of related links extending onward from the social division of nature/culture to veracity of language upheld by the sign/signifier union. Within this ontotheological economy turned toward being, *the way* implies, as Burroughs has suggested, one way, an exclusive return to the director’s studio that has previewed the future.

In addition, a theological sense of language is a deeply habituated belief; the presence of truth extends an enclosure of meaning over discourse and communication. We believe that the meaning can be grasped in its entirety by language users, that the meanings of words are present to us in our mind when we speak or write them, such that they can be passed on to others in a fairly pure form as long as we can communicate those meanings to others in a relatively unproblematic fashion. It is difficult to break through this enclosure because any project to counter the fund of metaphysics resists credibility, as Derrida warns,

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already
slipped into the form, the logic, the implicit postulates of precisely what it seeks to contest. (*Writing and Difference* 280)

Recalling the earlier metaphor of a copying machine, the reproduction fundamental to metaphysics does not exactly duplicate an original term. The more precise analogy is that it acts less like copier that reproduces and more like a “tympan,” mechanism that enframes and distributes impressions (*Margins of Philosophy* xxvi). Derrida’s analogous use of the tympan approximates the pressure and force that constitutes a field of inscription. The tympan within a printing press is a support and distribution mechanism that provides a tablet to stabilizes the force of impression as well as a framework that distributes the textual space of letters, words, and margin on a printed page. His contention that we have “no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history” outside of this ordered impression is a reminder that merely dismantling the organizing template, what Burroughs would refer to as “seizing the reality studio,” requires using conceptual tools that are invested in the program’s framework.

The attack on the binary opposition is Burroughs’ attempt to introduce qualitative difference and proliferation within an exclusive program. However, breaking through the logical framework of opposition with multiple interactive frames of juxtaposition may not overturn the exclusive order of unity fundamental to metaphysics. The problem is that nexus of juxtaposition could easily slip into the programmed framework of unity, which is the most metaphysical pattern, and precisely what Burroughs seeks to contest, when he attacks systems of duality governed by a principled term. Either/or suggests a paired opposition that forms a disjunctive correlative that accounts for the exclusivity of *the way* but also accommodates differences. Opposition is naturally a problem for a program based on integrity and exclusivity, and metaphysics unceasingly arrests opposition by synthesizing the differend under the authority of
the dialectical movement. Derrida succinctly summarizes this synthetic movement when he states that metaphysics manages to “interiorize every limit within its propriety” (*Margins of Philosophy* xxiv). Likewise, the dialectic’s logic of unifying violence is compressed by Burroughs into a biting monologue that derides the pseudo-elevation of opposition, a synthesis that pretends uplifting when actually it enforces for him nothing other than conflict, combat, and consummation. The war of dialectical opposition recognizes the other as an object that must be truly encountered, but moreover, consumed and exceeded resulting in his hostile understanding of intersubjective communication exemplified below.

Am I right? you are wrong.
Are you wrong? Right I am.
Right I am. Wrong you are.
Right? Wrong? I am? Are you?
Right or wrong: I am you.
Wrong are you right? I am
I am you right or wrong . . . (*The Burroughs File* 103)

To parody the unity achieved by the dialectic is forceful but is it powerful enough to upset the enclosure of this fundamental principle? One may deride metaphysical oppositions that discriminate and dialectical logic that assimilates without diminishing its encompassing power. For someone who was obsessed by the completion marked by last words, it seems that Derrida has the last word for Burroughs and all those who hope to shake free of metaphysical commitments. After all, it seems that any means of breaching or interrupting the enclosed framework of metaphysics leads seemingly to an impasse. Challenged by this deadlock, the cliché that nothing remains “outside the text” of metaphysical hierarchies and divisions actually has valence. However, to accept this impasse so readily diminishes the inventive breakthroughs that occur within the course of both Derrida’s and Burroughs’ writing. My point is that Burroughs’ breakthrough implodes metaphysical categories of unity and exclusivity by
repeatedly illustrating the inevitability for stasis within this economy of control. The breakthrough into space that he projects through *Operation Rewrite* is not necessarily extraterrestrial but rather an invention projected within the conceptual framework that he finds so terminal. Therefore, the breakthrough into space that Burroughs provokes is not some ineffable departure: emergences occur through repetitions, juxtapositions, and reinscriptions of the trace remnants within the sphere of commonplace conceptuality. Consequently, I believe that Burroughs’ diagnosis that the word/image structure perpetuates a viral infection embodies and extends Derrida’s summary evaluation of metaphysics as a violent, consuming program.

Although no philosopher, Burroughs’ constantly intensifies in form and content (if this separation can be upheld in his work) the violence resulting from the order of thinking warranted by binary opposition and dialectical synthesis. Through a heightened form of imitation and satire of these orders, he displays the double movement of opposition and synthesis as assimilation, but more important, the violence wrought by this opposition as a parasitic union that results in worldwide form of control and addiction. Returning to the mockery of dialectical recognition quoted above, we can see that assimilation is not only evident in the distinction between the subject “I” and the object “you” that is eventually overwhelmed by a hierarchy of certainty, but the style of assimilation is shown by ignoring any capitalization of the pronoun “you,” even when it is the subject of the sentence. In Burroughs’ world unity is a parasitic life form that lives off of another, as distinct from juxtaposition that proliferates a multiplicity of serial connections. If the viral effect of words infuses a parasitic state of *communicative sickness*, we must confront the consequences of Burroughs’ symptomatology: the metaphysical structure of western thought is a viral program drawn toward ongoing reproduction and eventual completion. Based on this conclusion, we must diagnose Burroughs’ writing, a textual
inoculation that combats a viral contagion of conflict, division, and consumption, the main symptoms of this communicative sickness.

The metaphysical order is an invented tradition that sustains its authority through the novel repetitions of its basic, self-enclosed narratives. As I noted earlier, metaphysics’ primary narrative is an extensive form of fundamentalism, a principle that Derrida refers to as ontotheology, an exclusive fund established by an original principle that enforces a return through a fulfillment on its investment. The Derridean insight that western thought extends a broad form of fundamentalism is repeatedly “mocked” in Burroughs’ writing (Nelson 123). For Derrida, the history of metaphysics is a history dominated by a fund bound within a book that encloses the primary force of the word and the proliferation of writing. Rather than the figural book, the word has divine status for Burroughs; it is not only the principle force of history, but furthermore, it guides the project of the planet’s future (Nova Express). Regarding this terminal pre-programming, he writes: “What we call history is the history of the word. In the beginning of that history was the word” (Ticket that Exploded 50). The word constitutes an originary-terminal telos that actualizes what I have repeatedly referred to as the programmatic way. A teleological way that establishes the primary hierarchical distinction between an ideal and its representative and a subsequent chain of differential oppositions in which either/or logic is just an effect. More important, the design of the way must reach a conclusion by actualizing a fulfillment. Burroughs’ mocking attack on the ‘way’ of the ‘word’ concentrates the biblical fundamentalism as evident in The Gospel According to John, which is an exemplary repetition of omnipotent force of the divine word. In words that express the force of the Word, John writes,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The
light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (The Gospel According to John 1:1)

Rather than an expression of faith in the revelation of an all-powerful source of life, Burroughs would interpret John’s mediation as a symptom of an addictive need for an overpowering source of control. The Gospel of John performs in near syllogistic form what Burroughs' refers to as the “One God Universe,” a theological enclosure that monopolizes possibility within the unified static image of the creative source. Ultimately, all must represent and all is consumed within the reflection of the original source. 20

The OGU is a pre-recorded universe of which He is the recorder. It's a flat, thermodynamic universe, since it has no friction by definition. So he invents friction and conflict, pain, fear, sickness, famine, war, old age and Death. (The Western Lands 113)

When all is god and god is all, the future of chance is designed by a sovereign source that produces a “pre-recorded universe,” a film track named Time that moves retrogressively toward a standstill. If the beginning was the word, that introduction of words by the master Word

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20 Compare Burroughs' biting parody of god-like origin in the routine Ancient Face Gone Out to the introduction of John's Gospel. I quote this at length to emphasize his argument that the word-image structure effects division and eventual stasis.

Now a few basic principles: Any word, any image is defined that is precisely shaped like wax in a mold by what it is not. I am the mould. I am at all times what you are not. So every moment every thought every word or picture must have my shape. You live in a mold and I am that mould. Image is an organism. Now consider the limits of what you call organic life. Narrow limits. Temperature—(Believe me this is the most important. Key image of heat under all my power)—Water. Sustenance. Oxygen. You can of course easily conceive organisms with wider limits, built to endure higher or lower temperatures, breathe, different gases, eat different food, and such organisms exist, millions of them. Once I start the proliferation of image there is only one end to that. Now all organisms are by definition limited and precisely defined by what they are not. And I am what all organisms are not. Mr. Gysin speaks of rubbing out the word and image. Why do I oppose this? The answer comes before the question. I am the opposition. The opposition that defines all organism. And let me take this opportunity of replying to my creeping, sniveling, organismic opponents on this world or any other. I am not a parasite. You do not give me anything I need. I need nothing. I need zero. Parasites are organisms that I use. Such parasite organisms are of course basic to the Nova formulae. Actually the Nova formula is number. Image is time. Time is radioactive. Take your own planet. Now let us say I heat up the mould that surrounds you. I heat up to a point where you cannot exist. I squeeze the mould tighter and tighter. Sput. The mould explodes in a white-hot blast. The mould now contains nothing. I am (The Burroughs File 45).
inaugurates time, a scheme of causation, differentiation projected toward a unifying end-orientation. The way of time determines life by a temporal pattern of sequential causation “made flesh” in a bodily organism drawn toward its consumption in death. A way that Burroughs summarizes in his flippant, hustler lingo as “the whole birth-death con,” the ultimate scam hustled by the so-called god of a static universe. As Burroughs notes about this dead-end scheme,

Man was born in time. He lives and dies in time. Wherever he goes, he takes time with him and imposes time . . . Time is a human affliction; not a human invention but a prison. So what is the meaning of one hundred sixty million years without time. (Ghost of Chance 16-17)

To follow Burroughs' question concerning the possibility of meaning without time, we must ask: Can we conceive of a meaningful space outside the force of the Word and the subsequent realm of time?21 His response might conclude that such a space might open when we overcome our addiction to the “weariest form of thought” (A Thousand Plateaus 5). Regarding this weary, repetitive thinking, my point is that Burroughs' attack on the “word” agrees with what Deleuze refers to as the “law of reflection,” an order fundamental to metaphysics that presupposes an economy of truth based on divinity, division, and eventual unity (5). The law of reflection is the

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21 If Burroughs’ proposal of a life outside of time seems unrealistic, consider the Ibatans the natives of Babuyan Claro, a volcanic atoll north of the Philippines. Twenty-five years ago they lived in near isolation from the so-called civilized world, which is really an anachronistic term that now means the global pervasiveness of the First World. In 1977, Rundell Maree, a missionary representing the Wycliffe Bible Translators, introduced the natives not only to their first Caucasian but to written English exemplified in the Bible, as the introduction of written literacy was assumed to be the best way of preaching the word of God. Yet Christianity almost seems a byproduct of more fundamental principles that result from the onset of literacy. For example, natives refer to the time preceding the issue of literacy as "before time." As a native says about this particular type of progressive temporality, "Written language gave us a way to capture our history and compare ourselves to people everywhere. Now that we have a past, I find that I think only of the future. I always feel like a clock ticking and time rushing by" (Suskind). I cite this not as a narrative of an innocence corrupted, a life eternally in the present condemned by the arrival of a progressive form of temporality and a modern sense of history. Influenced by Burroughs, I make the point that western literacy introduces a sensibility of the future that is anxious about the "clock ticking" away that progresses and continually projects the future toward an end-orientation.
basis of binary logic in which the primary “One becomes two” and three and four . . . (5). A division in which each differend is divided by the force of the primary one, and finally, a division in which all these differends are sublated by the primary force of assimilation within the dialectical movement. The dialectical law continually represents the lasting image reflected by a godly term, which is a unity that disguises possession and utter need, the very essence of control for Burroughs.

Deleuze’s “law of reflection”—the one that begets two—is evident in Burroughs' writing when he defines the dialectical components of the word. In The Nova Express he writes,

Word *is* flesh and word *is* two that *is* the human body is compacted of two organisms and where you have two you have word and word is flesh and when they started tampering with the word that was it and the blockade was broken and the Nova Heat moved in . . . (76)

Although, in Burroughs’ hands, the assimilation that engenders dialectical sublation is truly the labor of the negative as opposition remains in a continual conflict. The theological connotations of the phrase the “word was made flesh” give way to a denotative sense of the expression for him, because the Word actually embodies and absorbs the flesh. Deleuze explains this form of embodiment as *autoscopia*, the formation of the internal, self-contained subject within a figure known as the body. As Deleuze explains the enclosure of subjectivity, an inside that comes out: “The body is felt under the body . . . I feel myself inside a head, I see and I see myself inside a head . . .” (Deleuze, *Francis Bacon and the Logic of Sensation* 45)

The dialectical relationship of word and body formed by division and opposition is detailed carefully by Burroughs in the *Ticket that Exploded*,

The Other Half is the word. The Other Half is an organism. The presence of the “Other Half” a separate organism attached to your nervous system on the air line of words can now be demonstrated experimentally. One of the most common hallucinations of
subjects during sense withdrawal is the feeling of another body sprawled through the subject’s body at an angle . . . (49)

At the sentence level throughout these two passages, we note the hierarchical division of word and flesh brought together through juxtaposition and disjunction. Although more important, the style of Burroughs’ writing presents the assimilation of the organism by the word, an incorporation that is not digestive, symbiotic, but viral in its possessiveness. For Burroughs, the word is the theological term that extends a fundamentalism that begets viral representative images. He uses the term image in a very limited sense because all likeness and similarity mirror the word's presentation. As Shaviro argued earlier, the image is pure code that repeats the word's designation of fundamentalism. If this discussion seems too abstract and theoretical consider this seemingly distant but important example. The current military escalation between India and Pakistan over Kashmir naturally is quite a complex, longstanding political conflict made more difficult by hasty partitioning by the British. But one of the fundamental principles provoking this conflict is the Muslim Jihad waged not only against Jews, the West, but also Hindus, to take a very short course on a difficult historical pathway. Pakistan, the so-called “land of the pure,” was another potential place to realize fanatic ambitions of an authentic and true Muslim state that would combine Afghanistan, Pakistan and ultimately Kashmir. In an ironic twist, September 11 has exploded that possibility for now. More important, my point is the battle to mutate Pakistan to the ultimate is the consumptive goal of a fanatic Muslim world to impose a pure form of Koranic or Shari’a law on the Muslim world. And Pakistan, and perhaps even the disposed Taliban, are the clearest examples of the futility of defining a nation by religion. This excursus returns us to Burroughs’ understanding of the theological word, an ideal that actualizes a
permanent state of consumptive conflict in its apocalyptic ambition to realize the image of purity.

Excursus aside, fundamentalism effects the body-politic. The form-content of word's image activates the body's sensibilities though impression, exciting a sensory image that reflects the principle of the word. A viral code enters the “other half,” what Deleuze would refer to as “the intensive reality of the body” sensitizing a form named the body proper. That is the word's basic con, a hustle that infects an overall sense of propriety and presence. If I understand Burroughs, values like the proper result from a language under the control of the laws of reflection that affects an overall constancy. To understand this, recall the earlier example concerned with the constraints of either/or logic; the principle of the word presupposes a name that implies a fixed principle of integrity, a determination “that carries the assignment of a permanent condition” of totality amidst change—a condition for Burroughs that is concentrated in the phrase “one and only one,” a unity that signifies homogeneity and a fundamentalism that also is the essence of totalitarianism. The repeated internal ultimatum of “You don't belong here! What are you doing here! Who are you?” that intimidates Burroughs’ psyche gives voice to alienation and the threat of his personal difference; but moreover, the threat is perhaps issued to any form of difference that conflicts with a prescribed way—the one and only way—authored by a principle of truth (Naked Lunch 220). Although, to explain this point more carefully, we should reverse Burroughs’ formula because words really institute the word. In other words, the truth of the word as an origin originates itself by a demarcation that excludes any other order. It is words, commanding words that produce the theological word, because the narrative of origin remains true through the regulation, instantiation, and repetition of the logic of causality.
Extending Burroughs’ attack on the word/image by way of Derridean and Deleuzian structural ideas has still perhaps left unclear how the word becomes a viral infection. Specifically, how does the structural law of reflection that upholds the word become toxic? This is an important question that returns us to a main heading of this section, a question that links metaphysics to the contagion of a communicative sickness, an infection that performs and replicates a program of fundamentalism. Once again, Deleuze's thinking, in particular his concept of an assemblage of enunciation, provides recourse to understand this challenging combination of structure and infection, design and embodiment within language.

For Deleuze there is no universal language as such, rather language is an assemblage of statements enacted by a word-order command. The word-order assemblage is not simply an overt demand: do this! Deleuze’s concept is subtler; the word-order is a regime of presuppositions, a background of enunciations that establish the possibility for performative statements. Deleuze likens these assemblages to the murmur that provides a subtext for one’s own personal voice (A Thousand Plateaus 84). For Deleuze, language is not the medium of intersubjective communication; rather, language communicates meanings that assign, name, and habituate. As he argues, “Language is not life; it gives life orders. Life does not speak; it listens and waits” (76). In this sense, the word-order is the circumstantial context, the assemblage allowing the statement to accomplish an act and an act to be accomplished in a statement (79). Most important for our discussion, these performative assemblages are significant for Deleuze because these order-word statements of “non-corporeal attributes” organize and transform not only social bodies but configure the body proper (83). In very simple terms, the word-order assemblage produces conceptualities but the effect of these concepts embodies subjectivity.

Regarding the enunciation of a word-order command, Deleuze, influenced by Ducrot, cites the
example of the juridical assemblage that pronounces guilt on an accused suspect and thus transforms the defendant into a convicted felon. Here guilt is more than the statement of the law, the penance of reparation requires the guilty to embody the crime through punishment. Given this explanation, we might simply understand assemblages as constancies, such as a code with ordained directives; however, this conclusion may underestimate the mobile quality of Deleuze's thinking. His concentration extends beyond the lines that order to the lines of alteration, to the potential within order expressed more definitively in Deleuzian terms as the related movement of flight from territorialization toward deterritorialization. Ultimately, he summarizes such a transformation throughout his writing as a becoming minor (Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature 18).

From this Deleuzian perspective of language as an assembled force of commands, we can evaluate Burroughs' word/image structure as a control assemblage within an overall metaphysical regime ordered by a root term that assigns a fundamental origin of constancy and duplication. The word constancy gathers the complexity of Burroughs’ assault on the word by combining both the forces of encounter and movement. A constancy presumes a coming together, in the prefix con, toward a persistent, ongoing stance that repeats its designated movement. As a regime of signs, metaphysics, as it is invested in Burroughsian word, signifies an immutable hierarchy of division that repeats itself by authorizing its terms as the point of origination. It is as if metaphysics is the ultimate tautology creating and recreating itself through the repetition of its own basic terms. Deleuze exemplifies the repetition commanded by the word/image assemblage when he refers to Elias Canetti's reflexive term enantiomorphosis (A Thousand Plateaus 107). Under Canetti's influence, Deleuze's use of the term emphasizes the predominance within this mirror-like order that specifies Burroughs' sense of antagonistic
control. For Deleuze, *enantiomorphosis* is another form of the law of reflection that issues
control much like the fundamental dominance of Burroughs' word, which inaugurates,
a regime that involves a hieratic and immutable Master who at every moment legislates
by constants prohibiting or strictly limiting metamorphoses, giving figures clear and
stable contours, setting forms in opposition two by two and requiring subjects to die in
order to pass from one form to the other. It is always by means of something incorporeal
that a body separates and distinguishes itself from one another. (107)

My point throughout this section has been that that the parasitic word is no foreign invasion;
rather, the force of metaphysical principles exemplified by the law of reflection is actually the
constitutive virus. In the most benign sense, the word is a hierarchy that maintains order through
a master copy that repeats itself, yet when Burroughs’ writing is accompanied by Derrida's
thought the control exerted by the word is more sinister. For Burroughs, the constancy of such
extensive fundamentalism becomes viral through habitual repetition and consummation. The
malignancy of the word, and all its subsequent theological metaphors, designs an order of
mastery, yet it is not only a fundamentalism but rather a terrifying *vampirism*, a parasitic duality
that absolutely needs to consume its other. 22 After this strong statement, I should be very clear
about the implications of my last claim: I am arguing that metaphysics as it is invested in the
dialectical logic of the Burroughsian “word” is a consumptive program drawn toward a unity, an
end that is nothing more than exhaustion. From Burroughs’ perspective the word allows for
nothing other, but when this conclusion is intensified by Derrida's thinking, we can see more
forcefully that the dialectical “word” must not only partake but consume what is other. This

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22 For an example of this broad sense of vampirism, consider this rant:
I theorize that the present God of gods were not the creators. They took over something already created
and are using for their own purposes, which is not at all to our advantage.
To put it country simple: the Christian God exists. He is not the creator. He stole someone else's work
after the manner of his parasitic species. He steals and curses the source. The Christian God, and that goes for
Allah, is a self-seeking asshole planning to cross us all up. Like all colonists he despises those he exploits. To him
conclusion explains why Burroughs understands addiction not just as an individual problem but the basis of a more widespread symptom of a universal magnitude that constitutes the life form named human nature. About this addictive relationship of communal and utter need, he writes:

His immortality depends on the mortality of others—The same is true of all addicts—The life-line of control addicts is the control world—That is these so-called Gods can only live without three-dimensional coordinate points by forcing three-dimensional bodies on others—Their existence is pure vampirism—Either they accept a rewrite job or they are all broken down to lavatory attendants, irrevocably committed to the toilet. (The Nova Express 53)

Metaphysics exemplified in the word surely maintains constants, but from Burroughs' perspective the reiteration of these fundamentals infect a gradual consumption that results in an occupation, a swelling, and an inertia, a communicative sickness that is actually a life form entitled becoming-possessed.

If, as Deleuze has suggested, “Life does not speak; it listens and waits,” a communicative sickness is commanded within this interval. Language supervised by the metaphysical word infects the body producing a flesh script of images that form a cognitive structure. Here I use the term cognitive in a broad sense to include a sensory-motor system that contributes to our abilities to conceptualize and to reason (Nova Express 179). Through repetitive legislative orders the body is subjected to possession comparable to data processing that impresses and inhabits the fixed determinations of metaphysics, a viral mastery that maintains its program through and through. As Burroughs explains the programming of the flesh script: “Transparent sheets with virus perforations like punch cards passed through the host on the soft machine feeling for a point of intersection—The virus is usually directed against affective life” (73).
For Burroughs, possession describes the viral infection of the life form referred to as the human condition. Subjectivity, in his view, is not conditioning in the traditional sense but rather an invasion, because quite actually “an entity jumps in the body” (Naked Lunch 221). He details this possessive invasion more definitively in the introduction to Queer, when he states,

My concept of possession is closer to the medieval model than to modern psychological explanations, with their dogmatic insistence that such manifestations must come from within and never, never, never from without. (As if there were some clear-cut difference between inner and outer.) And indeed the psychological concept might well have been devised by the possessing entities, since nothing is more dangerous to a possessor than being seen as a separate invading creature by the host it has invaded. And for this reason the possessor shows itself only when absolutely necessary. (xix)

Naturally, as Burroughs has suggested, an invasive presence must dwell by erasing the traces of its penetration. Similar to invading, the inhabitation of metaphysics is a force that possesses by investing the subject with a conscious sense of propriety that appears utterly self-evident. An indication of the self-evident is the “I” of individuality that is authenticated in the enclave of the inner mind. The adage, “I exist; therefore, I am” is guaranteed by the privacy of an inner voice that individualizes the solitary mental life. The “way in” that Burroughs’ writing tries to cut-up (incise and open) is the enclosure of an inner essence that preserves an authentic place of self-belonging. Derrida's thinking, again, provides a helpful explanation of how fundamentalism initiates a natural sense of individual presence. His term phonocentrism names an essential relationship where a principle sense of the authority of truth and the truth of authority is signified and projected by an internal voice of self-presence. Derrida explains this formation of an essential interiority of consciousness when he succinctly explains that “the essence of the phone would be immediately proximate to that which within thought as logos relates to ‘meaning,’ produces it, receives it, speaks it, ‘composes’ it” (Of Grammatology 11). What Derrida is suggesting in this compact statement is a natural relationship of communication between mind
and being, an internal place where the imperative of truth is heard and spoken in the voice of conscience and reason and made meaningful through spoken communication to others. In this extrapolation on the Burroughs problematic, the inner voice of consciousness—this proper-sense-of-being-with-myself—is possessed by a sense of authenticity that swells the subject, resulting in an inflammation that affects a natural sense of self-righteousness and self-conservation. Finally, the most “potent tool” for proliferating the ongoing infection of the word is the self—constituted of the inner voice of consciousness so natural to us (Burroughs, The Place of the Dead Roads 97).

The I continually voiced internalizes a sense of self-possession inhabited by a form of fundamentalism that repeats a programmatic code that produces, for Burroughs, a general communicative illness. The illness begins with an I so self-possessed that it lives in opposition to itself and to other lived experience; and the actuality of such oppositional otherness drives this subject to divide, discriminate, or consume other life or life itself. In a characteristically sweeping statement, he expresses the comprehensive outcome of this communicative illness:

Man sold his soul for time, language, tools weapons and dominance. And to make sure he doesn’t get out of line, these invaders keep an occupying garrison in his non-dominant brain hemisphere . . . A rift is built into the human organism, the rift or cleft between the two hemispheres, so any attempt at synthesis must remain unrealizable in human terms. I draw a parallel between this rift separating two sides of the human body and the rift that divided Madagascar from the mainland of Africa. One side of the rift drifted into enchanted timeless innocence. The other moved inexorably toward language, time, tool use, weapon use, war, exploitation, and slavery. (Ghost of Chance 49)

In language, possession takes hold; and in language, we can understand the embodiment of the force of appalling conclusions for Burroughs. At last, we then understand more clearly the relentless rhetoric of consumption and termination expressed throughout his writing.
Writing Approaches Silence

Burroughs has stated that his “writing is directed against those who are wittingly or unwittingly bent on destroying the planet” (Early Routines 1). Considering this remark was made during the Cold War, a historical period producing the first nuclear arms race and the imaginings of global devastation, we could easily understand its political resonance. In this context the statement is rather clear: writing combats the looming danger of destruction from nuclear, biological, or space weaponry. Yet, when we consider the range of conflict detailed in his writing, we see many more fine distinctions. Enclosed within the more apparent threat lie the unwitting desires that contribute to the peril that commands Burroughs’ writing. I believe that detailing the life of the addict introduces a primary sense of control’s affect, which is initiated by the consuming desire to become a junky. “Once a junky always a junky, but you are never off after the first habit (Junky 117). And even if the outlaw world of the addict seems so different from the massive, devastating power mobilized by the “boards, syndicates, and governments of the earth,” I do think that the conflicted horror of addiction does indeed contribute to the more overt concerns for global devastation (Burroughs, Yage Letters 60). From the very beginning in Junky and in Queer, Burroughs depicts the unwitting, complicated urge toward some final fix of consumption and such an urge drives Burroughs’ horror of termination (Junky 152). Trying to dispossess one from its control leads to horrifying lucidity:

I got drunk on fifty pesos. About nine that night, I ran out of money and went back to the apartment. I lay down and tried to sleep. When I closed my eyes I saw an Oriental face, the lips and nose eaten away by disease. The disease spread melting the face into an amoeboid mass in which the eyes floated dull crustacean eyes. Slowly a new face formed around the eyes. A series of faces, hieroglyphs, distorted and leading to the final place where the human road ends, where the human form can no longer contain the crustacean horror that has grown inside it. (133)
Burroughs’ writing is directed against the *force of appalling conclusions*, the unrelenting urge to finalize, which is an addiction common to all *those* driven by the forces of control bent on utter incorporation.

For Burroughs, the way of living consumed by junk is a metonymy for the total possession of control. Junk produces a profound dispossession of the junky: Junk dispossesses but in doing so it intensifies the internalization of the user by producing utter consumptive need. As Burroughs reports, “[b]eyond a certain frequency need knows absolutely no limit or control” (*Naked Lunch* xxxix). One possessed by consumption lives a costly life: consumption requires income, absorption, expenditure and growth. Yet, the need to consume does not merely lead to being expended, wasted, or destroyed. Burroughs shows us that the risk of addiction has the potential of insight and transformation especially when he writes about *kick*, the moments when the junky is removed from addiction: “[k]ick is seeing things from a special angle. Kick is the momentary freedom from the claims of aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh” (*Junky* 152). Kick offers a sense of personal dispossession. Junk, however, produces an entirely different expenditure, and Burroughs distinguishes this difference in consumption: “Junk is not like alcohol or weed. Junk is not a kick. It is a way of life” (xvi). Ultimately, junk, like language deepens the profound sense of internalization that subjects *man* to stasis.

Deleuze believes that becoming “requires entering a zone of indistinction,” yet Burroughs shows us that junk demarcates a near terminal space of utter distinction. Still, even a space of utter distinction, for Deleuze, has difficulty neutralizing all force because “lines of flight” can always intersect that space *territorializing* it beyond itself. In *Naked Lunch* Burroughs introduces *line of flight*, advocating a program of silence before the many forces of control.
Silence is the response that exposes one to the consumption that is at the end of the fork of life. Silence stuns a central nervous system consumed by a dominating drive toward stasis. Silence combats a form of communication that is a means of control and assimilation. Burroughs does indeed ask us to step outside the space of language controlled toward stasis.
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Dissertation

“Apocalyptic Acts: Rhetoric, Ethics, Community and Futurity”

Directed by: Richard M. Doyle (Chair), Jeffrey T. Nealon, Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr., Amy S. Greenberg

This study examines the rhetoric of apocalypse in contemporary politics, theory, and literature. By tradition, apocalyptic discourse has anticipated a catastrophic interruption that would bring forth a culminating event. The catastrophic event detailed in apocalyptic writing typically forecasts a devastating end-time that engenders ethical judgment—a conclusion that opens the possibility for a renewed sense of community and futurity.

The scope of this interdisciplinary study includes a diverse group of thinkers that ranges from Kenneth Burke, Jacques Derrida, Friedrich Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze to the literary works of William S. Burroughs and Maurice Blanchot. Throughout the dissertation, I engage the paradox of catastrophe as it appears in the divergent notions of apocalypse: in political matters (the Star Wars Defense Initiative and the Death Penalty); in contemporary philosophical thinking (Burke, Derrida, and Nietzsche); and contemporary literature (Burroughs and Blanchot).

I believe this study contributes to the ongoing discussion between rhetoric and contemporary philosophy concerning ethics. I also foresee this project opening pedagogical opportunities to examine the challenging, paradoxical, and threatening rhetorics of fundamentalism, extremism, manifestos, and proposals for communities and futurity.