Celebrating Sacred Anarchy: An Encomium to John Caputo's Radical Apophatics

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I have received the honor of an invitation "to honor." That is to say that I have been honored by a request to compose a textual tribute to John D. Caputo, lauding him for five decades of provocative and creative contributions to Phenomenological Hermeneutics, Continental Philosophy of Religion, and Postsecular Radical Theology. The nomenclature of the solicitation overtly tasks me with composing a "*laudatio*" in order to celebrate, glorify, and, in the strictest etymological sense, eulogize Caputo, *ante mortem* of course(!), by writing good (*eu*) words (*logoi*) about his accomplishments. According to the invitation, formulating such a *laudatio* transforms me into a "*laudator*," a word that immediately intrigued me when I read it in the text of the invitation. It intrigued me because my first thought upon reading the invitation concentrated on the ambiguity of my qualifications for accepting such a laudatory opportunity. In other words, I immediately questioned my fitness as a Caputo *laudator*. What precisely entitles me to presume that I deserve such a commission? Who am I to be lauding Caputo? While contemplating the question of my *laudator* fitness, the term actually stimulated my homophonic imagination and promptly reminded me of the word "auditor," the concept of one who hears or listens. I then realized that this phonological affiliation between the two terms does, indeed, identify what may be the one legislating qualification that does authorize me to take on such a role. My competence to serve as a *laudator* of Caputo may well emanate directly from my having been, for over thirty years, an auditor of Caputo, one who has listened to his voice proclaim creative

theories of radical hermeneutics, and has been intellectually and existentially altered by his interpretations.

Indeed, my first literal encounter with Caputo was not visual or textual but aural. I heard his voice before seeing his face or reading his thoughts. In early 1990, I attended a conference on deconstruction and Catholic philosophy, at which he was the first of two keynote speakers. I had previously purchased *Radical Hermeneutics* but had not yet begun to read it. Furthermore, I had also not seen a photo of him—remember, this was the pre-Google era! During the first night's pre-session dinner, I overheard someone at the table behind me proclaiming something of a *laudatio* for Søren Kierkegaard with specific reference to how significant his thought was for postmodern philosophy. I sat and eavesdropped for a few minutes before audaciously inviting myself to take an open seat at that other table so as to audit the conversation more directly. After sitting there listening for about five or six more minutes, a revelation occurred; I realized that the voice that had initially caught my attention was, in truth, the voice of Jack Caputo! It was he who had been proclaiming Kierkegaard's deconstructive virtues.

Eventually, we departed the dining hall for the lecture hall. For the next hour, I continued to listen to the Caputoan voice as it expounded a creative and genuinely life-transforming presentation entitled "Sacred Anarchy: Fragments of a Postmodern Ethics."[1] The use of "life-transforming" here should not be read as a hyperbole or as an early signal of an exaggerated *laudatio*-to-come. Instead, one should take the term literally and seriously because I came to that conference in the context of formulating an outline for my doctoral dissertation, a thesis that intended to examine the influences of deconstruction on radical theology. The first chapter was established, and the last chapter was established; however, I did not know how to connect the two bookends. In other words, I sat and audited Caputo while struggling with the ellipsis that separated the two ends of my proposed dissertation. But a revelation occurred—yet again! In the middle of his lecture, I experienced an event, a coming out or coming in (*invenire*) of something provocative and promissory (to use Caputo's words).[2] In a moment, an *Augenblick*, the dissertation outline formed itself, almost in the middle voice. I knew from listening to Caputo's voice as he read his essay on sacred anarchy that his radical hermeneutics would fill the lacuna of my compositional ellipsis. With that one unintentional act, he did, honestly, transfigure my status as a student and a

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[1] John D. Caputo, "Sacred Anarchy: Fragments of a Postmodern Ethics," in *The Essential Caputo: Selected Writings*, ed. B. Keith Putt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), pp. 287-304.
[2] John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 47-48.

professor. Moreover, he has been doing so for the past three decades, as he has addressed other ellipses and events through other essays, to the point that I now find that my voice always bears something of the timbre and dialect of Caputo's voice. His is one of my plural vernaculars to the point that I can say of him what he says of Derrida and Kierkegaard—he has loosened my tongue and given *me* a voice.[3] Consequently, I now gladly accept the invitation to laud him both personally and professionally because being his *l'auditeur* (if I may play with the French!) does, I think, empower me to be his *laudator*, a task which I shall strive to accomplish in the following humble little *laudatio*.

Of course, in accepting the invitation, another inescapable question instantly arises that haunts me with a profound uncertainty. How am I to compose a proper *laudatio*, within the reasonable length limits of this essay when confronted with such a prolific and substantial Caputoan bibliography? As stated above, Caputo has been bestowing his intellectual gifts on contemporary philosophy and theology for over half a century. How can one adequately praise him for these scholarly gifts in the space of a journal article? Obviously, an initial editing decision must be made regarding what concept(s) could possibly be identified as a narrow synecdoche representing the broader scope of Caputo's deconstructive thought and, thereby, successfully acting as the focus of this doxology to radical hermeneutics. While contemplating this conundrum, I realize that I have already made that identification in my third paragraph above. Again, my first experience as a Caputo auditor included listening to his presentation of "Sacred Anarchy," an essay that charts *in nuce* how Caputo's theories of the 1970s develop throughout the 1980s and telegraphs a systemic idea of his postsecular philosophical theology for the 1990s and beyond, even up to the present. As I have argued in a previous article, I believe the phrase, "sacred anarchy," provides a nonfoundational foundation for summarizing Caputo's protean applications of deconstruction to a vast panoply of topics, including Phenomenology, Heideggerian Philosophy, Hermeneutical and Critical Theory, Ethics, Religion, Biblical Studies, Cosmology, Angelology, Post-Humanism, and Radical Theology.[4] Consequently, the content of that concept appears to me to be a fitting functional theme for concentrating my textual praise of Caputo.

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[3] John D. Caputo, *In Search of Radical Theology: Expositions, Explorations, Exhortations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), p. xiv.
[4] B. Keith Putt, "The Repetition of Sacred Anarchy: Risking a Reading of Radical Hermeneutics," in *The Essential Caputo*, pp. 3-17.

To be honest, choosing to praise Caputo for his notion of sacred anarchy may be considered a bit plagiaristic since he has previously used similar language to praise precisely what I am praising him for in this *laudatio*! In 2005, he writes an essay entitled "In Praise of Ambiguity," and that title categorically commends quite accurately what I consider to be the essence of the phrase "sacred anarchy."[5] We should all be grateful to him for constantly reminding us, in something of a Kierkegaardian manner, that we are not God and, therefore, do not possess omniscience in any form nor even have as much knowledge as we might arrogantly arrogate to ourselves. Sacred anarchy, or ambiguity, addresses this notion of epistemological humility, initially through the kerygma of Jesus of Nazareth, whom Caputo calls "Yeshua," as he proclaims the good news of the kingdom of God. Yeshua's approach routinely calls into question the *status quo ante* and assiduously attempts to dethrone the rule of human reason and cultural traditions. Every *arche* becomes vulnerable to Yeshua's reinterpretation of what God considers to be acceptable, both religiously and morally. He critiques every orthodoxy and overturns every idolatrous pretension to commit the naturalistic fallacy of considering every "is" to manifest the divine "ought." Consequently, he is an anarchic figure, but he is so as an overt revelation of God, a functional *Vorstellung* of "God" as interruptive and disruptive of every human declaration of absolute knowledge or totalized comprehension.[6]

The prophetically critical quality of Yeshua's manifesto of the kingdom of God judiciously qualifies his anarchism with the adjective "sacred." To follow Yeshua's teachings, therefore, requires a commitment to a sacred anarchy that leaves open the possibility that one should always be willing to rethink, reevaluate, and reinterpret reality.[7] Such iteration of thought and interpretation, however, demands the power of faith, a faith that maintains the powerlessness inherent in the coefficients of uncertainty[8] and contingency.[9] These coefficients of sacred anarchy find unique and ironic expression in the unfeigned confession of one who implores Yeshua to heal his

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[5] John D. Caputo, "In Praise of Ambiguity," in *Ambiguity in the Western Mind*, eds. Craig J. N. de Paulo, Patrick Messina, and Marc Stier (NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), pp. 15-34.

[6] See John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) and John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 193-248.

[7] Caputo, "Sacred Anarchy," pp, 292-97, 301-304. Cf. also Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, pp. 82-86; John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 44-45.

[8] John D. Caputo, *On Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 20.

[9] Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 253.

child: "I believe, but help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Sacred anarchy, therefore, inevitably leads to the non-knowing (*non savoir*) that qualifies every confession of faith (*foi*), a faith that never escapes fear and trembling but always acknowledges in good Derridean fashion: "*Je ne sais pas, il faut croire*"—"I do not know, I must believe."[10] Jean-Luc Marion might well translate this Derridean affirmation with the phrase "negative certainty." This phrase references the knowledge that one does not know, a knowledge that may ensue because either the object of knowledge cannot be confined within definitions and conceptions or the "finite conditions" of the knower preempt any exhaustive knowledge of the object. Either way, however, Marion insists that this "knowledge of unknowability" still qualifies as knowledge and, therefore, knowing that one cannot know establishes the negative certainty that empowers continuous questioning.[11] Personally, I am fondest of what may be considered T.S. Eliot's poetic pronouncement of this inescapable negative certainty: "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility."[12]

Undoubtedly, one cannot superficially correlate Caputo's sacred anarchy with negative certainty or mere epistemological humility since he intends an ambiguity far more complex and more cryptic. If we celebrate sacred anarchy, we must do so with discernment and authenticity, both of which demand that we concede the oscillating nature of our nonknowing. In other words, whereas Marion follows a binary structure of what he terms a "saturated phenomenon" and the systemic limitations of human cognition as explicative of negative certainty,[13] Caputo wants to add a third factor—the potentiality that, at times, what we wish to know is impossible to know because there is no "there" there. The "there is" of our desired rational object is merely the anonymity of Levinas' *il y a*, a contentless cipher lacking any substance to be identified.[14] Sacred anarchy may well operate within a context of the weakness of thought or the transcendence of the object; however, it likewise may, perhaps, ensue from the nothingness of the sought-for object. In other words, Caputo admits that

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[10] Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 129.

[11] Jean-Luc Marion *Negative Certainties*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 5-6.

[12] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1991), p. 185.

[13] Jean-Luc Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," trans. Thomas A. Carlson, in *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn': The French Debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 188.

[14] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 190-91; John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 225, 237-38.

ambiguity may be the product of *plerosis*, the fullness of an experience, or it may be the product of *kenosis*, the emptiness of an experience. Here he shuttles between Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida, trying to negotiate the tension between the two.[15] Ricoeur contends that our *docta ignorantia* emanates from the extravagance of meaning, the unavoidable polysemy of semiotics with its wealth of potential intentionalities and its cornucopia of interpretations. The wisdom of humility eventuates from a surfeit of significations that disallows us from ever concluding the asymptotic process of hermeneutics.[16] Derrida, on the other hand, counters with a theory of dissemination that symbolizes the emptiness and poverty of potential meaning. For him, one must consistently battle against *khora* and the nihilistic aspects of textuality.[17] Consequently, sacred anarchy, or ambiguity, can evolve out of the effulgence of the meaning of an object of thought, out of the restrictions of an enervated rationality, or out of the emptiness of absent content. Caputo insists that all of this implicates ambiguity as bipolar, both the source of anxiety and skepticism as well as the salvific foundation for all that is worthy and profound.

Celebrating Caputo for his commitment to a sacred anarchy obliges us to familiarize ourselves, at least semantically, with the glossary of terms that he uses to investigate and communicate his appreciation of negative certainty. "Sacred anarchy" and "ambiguity" are not the only signifiers in Caputo's diverse and fertile vocabulary of *non savoir* and *foi* but are supplemented by a profusion of substitutable signs gleaned from extensive research across an assortment of apostles, theologians, and philosophers. Not surprisingly, he extracts from scripture other paraphrases for sacred anarchy, even from Greek translations of Yeshua's kingdom proclamations. One such synonym is *metanoetics*, a legislating term in some of Caputo's early work post-"Sacred Anarchy."[18] The word translates the Aramaic for "repentance," and it appears throughout the Gospels. Etymologically, it translates into "to change one's mind" or "to change one's heart," at least according to Caputo's reading, which articulates the transformative intent inherent regionally in repentance and universally in the broader implications of Yeshua's preaching. If one truly repents metanoetically, then one leaves

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[15] John D. Caputo, *Specters of God: An Anatomy of the Apophatic Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), p. 266.

[16] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 123.

[17] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 86-87.

[18] For two extended treatments of the concept, see Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, pp. 127-54 and John D. Caputo, "Metanoetics: Elements of a Postmodern Christian Philosophy," *Christian Philosophy Today* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), 189-223.

one's mind open to rethink and reevaluate sedimented theories and traditionally-prescribed plausibility structures. It is a term, therefore, that conveys the necessity to open one's mind to alternative interpretations and to critical reevaluations, to what Robert Scharlemann calls "after-thinking."[19] Caputo then enhances that notion of *metanoetics* with the oft-used Pauline concept of the "glass darkly" in I Corinthians 13.[20] The original phrase is *di' esoptrou en ainigmati*, which may be translated as "through a glass in obscurity." *Ainigmati* lies at the root of the English word "enigmatic," leaving us with ideas of mystery, riddles, and occultic meanings. One could say, therefore, that sacred anarchy constantly reminds us that we never escape the concealed or esoteric in any attempt to comprehend or to explain.

The list continues. For example, Caputo depends upon Derrida's deconstructive philosophy as a major source of sacred anarchy paraphrases. Throughout his work, he has returned incessantly to terms such as "the Secret," "*différance*," and "undecidability" as glosses on the skepticism inherent in sacred anarchy. Derrida's Secret—that there is no Secret—acts as a quasi-transcendental for all of Caputo's radical hermeneutics—with "radical hermeneutics" also being another annotation to sacred anarchy! The Secret may well be enigmatic and potentially revealable; however, the ultimate Secret may be that there is absolutely no Secret whatsoever, a reality that preempts any possible future disclosure. That would be a Secret that one cannot keep since one has never been given any content or *Sache* to shelter. Likewise, *différance*, as the context within which all semiotics functions, disallows any totalized meaning to be discovered or disclosed, interdicting any attempt at a grand narrative or a "transcendental signified" promising to tie up all the loose ends of every textual weaving.[21] That neologism denotes that absolute meaning must be deferred, postponed messianically until tomorrow, until some absolute future arrives that puts a period to all interpretations, a future, of course, that will never arrive, thereby leaving sacred anarchy always in play.[22] *Différance* also connects Caputo's thought via Derrida to the various traditions of negative theology, traditions that have

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[19] Robert Scharlemann, *Inscriptions & Reflections: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp. 3-4.

[20] John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 281-82; Caputo, *Specters of God*, p. 5.

[21] See John D. Caputo, "In Search of a Sacred Anarchy: An Experiment in Danish Deconstruction," in *Calvin O. Schrag and the Task of Philosophy after Postmodernity*, eds. Martin Beck Matuštík and William L. McBride (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), pp. 226-50 for an extended discussion of *différance* and the kingdom of God.

[22] Caputo, *On Religion*, pp 14-17; John D. Caputo, "Bodies Still Unrisen, Events Still Unsaid," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 12 (April 2002), pp. 84-85.

long struggled with the ellipses encountered in any attempt to understand and articulate information about God or the transcendent. While this connection has been conspicuous throughout the development of his thought, it has taken on a new substantial role in Caputo's most recent work. We will, therefore, return below to this conjunction between negative theology and radical hermeneutics.

Along with *différance*, Derridean undecidability has been an essential postulate of Caputo's critique of reason's tendency toward closure and certainty. An often-misinterpreted concept, undecidability in many ways, summarizes the basic fragility inherent in every attempt to consummate the rational process and determine, without a remainder of doubt, proper courses of action. Playing off of Derrida's reference to Kierkegaard, who insists that every decision requires a moment of madness, and remaining faithful to Derrida's avoidance of any ersatz programmable future in which a dogmatic certitude impels a clear and distinct decision,[23] Caputo's sacred anarchy repeatedly argues for the fundamental nonknowing that characterizes every genuine decision. He frequently critiques the primary misunderstanding of undecidability as synonymous with indecision and goes to great lengths to ensure a clear comprehension of the proper interpretation, an interpretation recognizing every true decision as a "leap of faith" and never as the result of a totalized coding of some decisional algorithm. Again, one could reference Mark 9 for a proper paraphrase of undecidability and prescribe every significant choice as an example of "I make a decision, but help my decisive cognitive dissonance!"

One may trace the itinerary of Caputo's sacred anarchy from his use of "flux" in *Radical Hermeneutics* to his insistence on a theology of "perhaps" in *The Insistence of God*, from his reliance on Derrida's *s'il y en a* in countless texts to his spooky adherence to hauntology in others, and, most recently, from his creative correlation between Schelling's unprethinkable and Luther's *Deus absconditus* in *Specters of God*, a text to which we now turn, as indicated above, to examine a contemporary hybridization of *différance* and negative theology. Any one of these occurrences would qualify Caputo as worthy of our accolades and our deep appreciation for his creativity and consistency in teasing out the diverse implications of sacred anarchy; however, taking them together, we cannot but marvel at his almost encyclopedic examination of this concept and acclaim him for creating such a body of work. That encyclopedic approach to the issue comes into plain view in *Specters of God,* where Caputo moves broadly through Hegel and Schelling, Tillich and Luther, Eckhart and Aquinas, and angels and demons.

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[23] See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans, Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 31.

In doing so, he reprises a theme that has long been a *sine qua non* for all aspects of his radical hermeneutics, specifically the idea of mysticism and the apophatic.[24] He testifies at the very beginning of the book that he has always felt a call, some solicitation, from a mystical source, an unconditional summons from something that remains concealed and orphic.[25] This "mystical element" has always haunted him, serving as a specter that cannot be exorcised from his philosophy or theology. Not surprisingly, therefore, he responds yet again to that vocation.

As Caputo strives to wield the "sword of nonknowing," he does so immersed in the negativity of the apophatic—which he amplifies into "the apophatic element, the apophatic imperative, [and] the apophatic imagination."[26] Although the sword of nonknowing appears to deny any sense of peace and inhibits him from offering any therapeutic comfort from the concept of anxiety, he, nevertheless, admits that he cannot escape a certain "edifying apophatics," noting the inevitable conflict between an edifying apophatics and a radical apophatics.[27] He admits an "apophatic core" to his philosophy that keeps it grounded in facticity, a core that manifests itself as a "quiescent apophaticism" (edifying), while simultaneously reminding him of the mystery of an "inquiescent apophaticism, which is uneasy, perplexed, restless, and perfectly achieved in life" (radical).[28] He refers to this *pas de deux* between an "edifying apophatics" and the parasitical "anxious apophatics" inhabiting it as another instance of undecidability or another function of *différance*, which ironically bestows upon us the nihilism of grace in that it signals something akin to Albert Camus' "absurdity" of thinking, an absurdity that affirms the lack of a saving voice. The absurd as the voiceless or deaf "nothingness" of our relationship to the universe (*ab*-from and *surdus*, that which has no voice or cannot be heard) actually proclaims in silence a saving word of hope and faith.[29] Caputo concedes to the good news, the *evangel*, that one can encounter a "saving apophatics, a certain salutary purgation of the positivity of belief, which reminds us all that we do not know what is coming, what is *tout autre*."[30] That

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[24] References to Caputo's focus on the mystical and the apophatic are "legion." For one such reference, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 1-68.

[25] Caputo, *Specters of God*, p. ix

[26] Caputo, *Specters of God*, p. x.

[27] Caputo, *Specters of God*, p. xi, 5-6.

[28] Caputo, *Specters of God*, pp. 41-42.

[29] Caputo, *Specters of God*, p. 240.

[30] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, pp. 150-51.

gospel continues to empower the "salutary minimalism"[31] of his radical messianic thought inspired by a spectral spirit always reflected in the "glass darkly," never transparently but always in various intensities of translucence, and never univocally in one clear voice but in the heterogeneity of plurivocal dialects in an endless substitution of signifiers. Caputo would call such a haunting by that spirit a "metanoetic event,"[32] an event that endures as "intrinsically apophatic," perpetually lending the event its redemptive competency. Consequently, I must honor Caputo as a prophet, as a disseminator of glad tidings, something of an evangelist proclaiming an apophatic allegiance to mystery, a hauntological hope in the messianic to-come, and an anarchic *agape* that loves without why.[33] In other words, I must extol him for faithfully serving as a true disciple, *mutatis mutandis*, of Yeshua's sacred anarchy.

Yet, in contemplating the broader implications of this *laudatio*, I find myself returning frequently to a reflection on the multi-genre character of Caputo's bibliography. As noted above, he writes as a philosopher but also as a theologian, as a phenomenologist but also as a hermeneuticist, as a cosmologist but also as a biblical scholar, as a mystic but also as a deconstructionist. The diversity of his literary output is truly quite remarkable—which is precisely one of the reasons that I "mark" it as his *laudator*! Consequently, I wish now to extol his momentous contributions by suggesting another perspective that one can take on Caputo as an author, a perspective that intersects conspicuously with his commitment to sacred anarchy. What type of writer are you reading when you read Caputo's radical apophatics? Is there among the diversity of literary styles that he adopts a primary genre of literature that epitomizes his approach? Is there a consistent rhetorical idiom that he uses as the basis for his discourse? Or, to use a good hermeneutical word, I now inquire, "When he writes, what exactly does he write *as*?

I want to argue in the remainder of this *laudatio* that Caputo actually writes as an essayist; that is to say, I believe that throughout his literary corpus and across all of the legislating issues that guide his philosophical and theological meditations, especially his scrutiny of negative certainty, Caputo predominantly produces texts that may be characterized essentially as "essays" in two senses of that concept. Unquestionably, Caputo's bibliography includes literally hundreds of essays in the colloquial sense of short compositions on singular topics designed to be read in a relatively brief period

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[31] Caputo, *On Religion*, p. 21.

[32] Caputo, "Bodies Still Unrisen, Events Still Unsaid," p. 74.

[33] Cf. Caputo, *Against Ethics*, p. 137; Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 224; Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, p. 180; Caputo, *Specters of God*, pp. 262, 332.

of time. These compositions include both journal articles and chapters contributed to various anthologies. Were I to reduce the claim that Caputo is an essayist to this rather pedestrian clarification of the term, then clearly my claim about an applicable Caputoan genre would be frivolous. I hope, however, to rise above that mundane frivolity and assign a more consequential meaning to the idea of "essayist," one that derives directly from the etymology of the word. The English word "essay" emerges from the French "*essayer*," which means "to try," "to experiment," or "to give something a whirl." Wolfgang Holdheim contends that "*essayer*" references a state of mind in which an author experiments with ideas in something of a dilettantish fashion, with "dilettante" itself understood in *its* etymological sense of "delight" or "pleasure." In reflecting on the master of the essay form, Michel de Montaigne, Holdheim claims that Montaigne wrote as one who wished to avoid the pedantic and simply to revel in the pleasure of endeavoring to think through various topics in a non-dogmatic approach that left open any final determination of a singular interpretation.[34] Lawrence Kritzman further supplements Holdheim's "definition" of the essay genre by also referencing Montaigne and claiming that the essayist quests after a knowledge that "resists totalization."[35] In other words, essaying "is opposed to essentialism and absolute singularity of the instant" and, therefore, "produces fragments" that result in an enduring appreciation of indeterminacy and ambiguity.[36]

Mirabile dictu (at least in the context of considering Caputo!), Holdheim continues by insisting that Montaigne's essays actually reveal that he is engaged in "an *Abbau* of his tradition (the term has lately been translated as 'deconstruction')." Montaigne attempts to circumvent the "sedimentation" of traditions and to focus on the "uniquely diverse and particular" without playing the sycophant to ersatz universals that pretend to supply closure to knowledge.[37] G. Douglas Atkins extends Holdheim's association of deconstruction and Montaigne to include the "essay" form generally. He insists that the "essay" maintains an "open-endedness, skepticism, and critical spirit"; consequently, it "avoids coming to rest in positive truth or absolute knowledge . . . and not only acknowledges but also embraces and even celebrates the uncertainty and ambiguity that deconstruction tirelessly reveals."[38] One would, therefore, not

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[34] W. Wolfgang Holdheim, *The Hermeneutic Mode: Essays on Time in Literature and Literary Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 10, 28.

[35] Lawrence D. Kritzman, *The Fabulous Imagination: On Montaigne's Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 237.

[36] Kritzman, pp. 240, 242, 249.

[37] Holdheim, p. 21.

[38] G. Douglas Atkins, "The Return of/to the Essay" *ADE Bulletin* 096 (Fall 1990), p. 6.

expect deconstructionists to write massive systematic and kataphatic tomes but more humble apophatic expository reflections on topics that do not lend themselves to final answers. In other words, if we adhere to Atkins' approach, we must consider the deconstructionist—or radical hermeneuticist—to be a discursive experimenter who inevitably writes in the "essay" genre. Holdheim affirms such a consideration, postulating that the deconstructive, essayistic approach "enacts nothing less than the perspectivistic character of knowledge" that avoids deteriorating into the nihilistic threat of relativism.[39] For the essayist, "concepts appear, develop, overlap, go underground, then reemerge, and are progressively sharpened and expanded" until they "gradually assemble into a shifting configuration that still remains open to further displacement and evolution."[40] He considers this process to be an example of repetition more than linearity and to be more of a poetic than a cognitive venture.

Although Holdheim does not make the connection directly himself, his conclusion that the essayist traffics in poetic repetition suggests a Kierkegaardian quality to the form. Kierkegaard's extended investigations into the existential significance of repetition as a repeating forward, whereby continuity and discontinuity propel an interminable expectation for the unique and innovative, offers a fascinating gloss on the fragmentary and messianic nature of the "essay."[41] Along with the obvious connection with deconstruction, this Kierkegaardian motif also offers another justification for considering Caputo an essayist since his work has consistently been influenced by Kierkegaard's argument for objective uncertainty.[42] To be sure, connecting Kierkegaard and the "essay" form is not necessarily an unwarranted move. In his famous essay on "essay," Georg Lukács overtly makes that connection, declaring that since the essay seeks to avoid the "icy, final perfection of philosophy," one may discover examples of such avoidance in Plato, the mystics, Montaigne, and Kierkegaard.[43]

Indeed, as Kierkegaard sits in Frederiksberg Gardens and engages in second-cigar reflections on his predisposition toward indolence, he realizes that his *raison d'être* as an author, his sacred vocation in life, is "to make difficulties everywhere."[44] He

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[39] Holdheim, pp. 29-30.

[40] Holdheim, p. 31.

[41] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 131.

[42] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to* Philosophical Fragments, vol 1. eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 203.

[43] Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Soul and Form*, eds. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis; trans. Anna Bostock (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 16-18.

[44] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to* Philosophical Fragments, pp. 185-87.

testifies to his submission to that vocation in a text that serves as an unscientific postscript to a work entitled *Philosophical Fragments*, a title telegraphing to the reader that one should not anticipate discovering a grandiose system of absolute knowledge in the Kierkegaardian corpus. Indeed, he refers to the postscript as yet another "little fragment" owned by the author.[45] He does, in truth, continually traffic in fragments, in bits and pieces of ideas that never quite coalesce into a completed system of logical consistency or completion. Faith, not reason, is his Gödel's Theorem, always reminding those with the humility to acknowledge the fear and trembling of objective uncertainty that something gets omitted from every simulated world-historical system. Kierkegaard lets Hegel compose encyclopedias and dialectical systems; it is he who is "the philosopher" who can ascend to the heights of the Idea. Kierkegaard chooses to resign himself modestly to the more mediocre and mundane. He, or at least Johannes de Silentio, confesses that he is no philosopher, has no "prodigious head" for the system, and can only be considered an *ekstraskriver*, "a supplementary clerk who neither writes the system nor gives *promises* of the system."[46]

So, then, what does Kierkegaard write if he does not write the system? What precisely is the literary product of an *ekstraskriver*? He claims that in his indolent desire to complicate matters he writes mere "pamphlets," at least that is how he, or Johannes Climacus, characterizes *Philosophical Fragments*. Although he intends to give his opinions concerning certain significant topics, he contends that people have little interest in those opinions. By giving them, therefore, he intends nothing more than "to dance lightly in the service of thought."[47] Such choreography avoids the grand movements of systematic thinking and settles, instead, for the more subtle and intimate movements of personal reflection. One could, therefore, consider Kierkegaard's "pamphlet" as a synonym for "essay" and conclude that he writes literary fragments that experiment with what cannot be totalized, with the relative instead of the absolute, and with the difficulty inherent in pluralism and in doubt. Consequently, "*ekstraskriver*" would, in turn, function as a Kierkegaardian synonym for "essayist." To be an *ekstraskriver* and compose pamphlets investigating objective uncertainties that never rise to the conceptual heights of a *weltgeschichtliche* metanarrative is to be an author of "essays," of

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[45] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to* Philosophical Fragments, p. 8.

[46] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, p. 7.

[47] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 5-7.

petits récits that modestly experiment with opinions and overviews, which, in good Kierkegaardian fashion, avoid any pretention of constructing a system of existence.[48]

Of course, Kierkegaard warns that writing "essays" (pamphlets) disallows one from designating the resulting texts as examples of a "scientific-scholarly endeavor," thereby disqualifying the author from receiving the legitimating stamp of approval given by the academy.[49] The "essayist" always risks the disapprobation of the "positivist" philosopher and scientist who traffic in universals or in empirical confirmation or in methodological purity. Interestingly enough, one may also find this Kierkegaardian warning of academic alienation in other scholars who take a more sanguine view of the worth of "essays." For example, in his insightful and stimulating essay on "essay," Theodor Adorno acknowledges that in German scholarship, the "essay" is "condemned as a hybrid," having "no compelling tradition." Accordingly, he confesses that "to praise someone as an *écrivain* [essayist] is enough to keep him out of academia."[50] He affirms that the "essay does not play by the rules of organized science and theory" and that it contradicts the "illusion that thought could break out of the sphere of *thesis*, culture, and move into that of *physis*, nature."[51] The "essay" constantly raises doubts about the superiority of any homogenizing "method," opting, on the contrary, for the heterogeneity of the partial and the fragmentary.[52] It refuses to delude itself into thinking that one can genuinely establish Cartesian clear and distinct ideas issuing forth from an analytical mind that abolishes prejudices and that, through "exhaustive enumerations," may achieve the totalized closure of a comprehensive system.[53] The "essay," consequently, seeks no first principles and allows no "treasure-hunting obsession with foundations." Adorno admits, therefore, that "[i]t is not so much that the essay neglects indubitable certainty as that it abrogates it as an ideal."[54]

Ultimately, for Adorno, all of the above means that the "essay" overtly embraces the hermeneutical. It "cunningly anchors itself in texts," thereby functionally grounding itself in something other than first principles or methodological criteria and engages in "over-interpretations" that never pretend to establish the definite article

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[48] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to* Philosophical Fragments, p. 118.

[49] Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 5.

[50] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature Vol. One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 3.

[51] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," pp. 10, 11.

[52] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," p. 9.

[53] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," pp. 14-15.

[54] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," p. 13.

with reference to truth, meaning, or value. In other words, the "essay" remains humble in its claims and leaves open the possibility of alterity and difference, refusing to accept that one may realize "the" truth or "the" meaning, or "the" value.[55] This interpretation of the "essay" as grounded in an interminable hermeneutical process correlates well with its etymology as a "testing." Adorno does, indeed, connect the "provisional character" of the "essay" as "an intention groping its way" to its status as a *Versuch*, a "trial," "endeavor," "venture," or "experiment."[56] If the "essay" is, indeed, a *Gedankenversuch*, a thought-experiment, then it cannot abstain from being a hermeneutical venture. "Experiment" derives from the Indo-European root "*per*," which means "to venture," "to test," or "to take a chance." It is the same root for the word "interpreter," one who stands between or negotiates.[57] As a result, the definition of an "experiment" as a "tentative procedure . . . for the purpose of discovering something unknown or of testing a principle" conforms to that of the "essay." An "essay" functions as an experimental investigation into some chosen topic with the intent to negotiate the various aspects of that topic in order to come to some disclosure as to its meaning, significance, or applicability to existence. It remains, however, a disclosure that does not pretend to discover or elicit any closure. Since it is a negotiation, the "essay" is a process that remains open to alternative explanations or perspectives. As Derrida would phrase it, "essay" as negotiation manifests the "dis-ease" or "un-leisure" of constantly shuttling back and forth among positions in something of a "perpetual suspension."[58] The essayist certifies a certain agnosticism and skepticism—perhaps undecidability—toward any subject, always testing the various opinions that insinuate stable explanations, and always acknowledging the fragmentary dynamic of non-closure regarding the identification of any final, immutable, and absolute interpretation. As Ricoeur claims, one must choose between hermeneutics and absolute knowledge.[59] In her/his reflective negotiations, the essayist always chooses the former.

The fragmentary, skeptical, and experimental nature of the "essay" leads Adorno to conclude that "the essay's innermost formal law is heresy," which, of

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[55] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," pp. 4, 20.

[56] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," p. 16.

[57] Joseph T. Shipley, *The Origins of English Words: A Discursive Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 304.

[58] Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971-2001*, ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 12-13.

[59] Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 153.

course, indicates that the essayist operates in the community as a heretic. The essayist constantly violates "the orthodoxy of thought" by seeking to make visible what orthodoxy aims at concealing or, one might speculate, what orthodoxy may not even acknowledge as "there."[60] Yet, the "essay's" predisposition toward heresy may not merely be the inevitable implication of remaining true to the literary form; on the contrary, that predisposition may well be the original project of the essayist, an intentional desire to serve as a Socratic gadfly perverting the youth and intimating atheism through the dominant direction of upsetting the *status quo ante*. The essayist may be motivated by the redemptive dynamic of dissatisfaction with any extant expression of meaning and truth in order to ensure that the authoritarian powers, who control all straight opinions, are not consciously or unconsciously deceiving the community so as to create or maintain a certain jurisdictional structure that solidifies their own authority to rule. In other words, the essayist considers her/his vocation to be prophetic, to utter critical words that motivate re-evaluations of any expression of power, value, or truth. One might say, therefore, that the essayist seeks to obey a heretical imperative by rejecting the hegemony of universal, eternal principles, and endorsing the need to remain committed to a more humble and less certain hermeneutic of existence.

The phrase "heretical imperative" actually comes from the work of sociologist Peter Berger, who, in his 1979 book aptly entitled *The Heretical Imperative*, argues that modernity in its pluralism and alterity forces the exigency of multiple interpretations of reality, thereby relativizing the plausibility structures that societies depend upon for continuity and stability.[61] Modernity has transformed belief structures and social *Weltanschauungen* into commodities, forcing individuals into becoming ideological consumers having to choose a favorite brand of interpretation among the vast inventory of hermeneutical perspectives being hawked through the media and on the internet. Berger insists that the relativizing of theories about everything compels human beings to make choices, coerces them into the crisis of decision by requiring them to listen to the cacophony of contradictory voices attempting to explain various truths, and finally impels them to determine which one(s) to heed. Yet, this mercantilism of ideas necessitates uncertainty and instability. The individual must now reflect on the copious amount of conjectures about reality currently available for consumption and, in good Kierkegaardian style, take the leap of faith and decide, in

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[60] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," p. 23.
[61] Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1979), pp. 10, 17.

an instant of foolishness—or, again, as Derrida would say, "madness"—which ones to embrace.[62] As Berger states it rather succinctly, the condemnation to be free ensuing from modernity's pluralism positions individuals in a context in which "certainty is hard to come by," a situation to which Adorno claims the "essay" remains vulnerable.[63] Berger labels modernity's imposition of decision the "heretical imperative," a designation based on the etymological intimations of the word "heresy." He notes that the Greek word *hairesis* originally means the "taking of a choice," which, in turn, signifies the adopting of an opinion.[64] *Hairesis*, therefore, means "to choose," "to decide," or "to determine a perspective." The common connotations of "heresy" as a belief contrary to the established dogmatic tradition and of "heretic" as one who holds such a belief are easily comprehended given this etymology. A heretic offers a different interpretation or theory of an accepted doctrine, established norm, or paradigm of thought, thereby creating within the society the possibility of having to choose. In proposing an alternative opinion that may well be contrary to the straight (*ortho*) opinion (*doxa*) of the established orthodoxy, the heretic condemns the members of a community to a crisis situation, forcing them into that reflective mode that evokes both doubt and decision. Furthermore, in creating a context of choice, the heretic potentially entices the members of a community to reassess traditional norms and entrenched dogmas. Such reassessment might then lead to emending those established interpretations, replacing them with alternative explanations, and, thereby, generating an incredulity toward the ruling faction whose power derives from the conservation of infallible orthodox principles. Self-preservation of accrued domination leads the powers-that-be to silence the heretic through threat of violence, excommunication, or ultimately death.

Berger defends the position that modernity creates a milieu in which the threat of heresy becomes a necessity as a predetermined response to the pluralism and uncertainty that qualify the relativizing processes of post-Enlightenment societies. One must confront the heretical imperative whether one chooses to do so or not, which indicates, ironically, that the demand to choose is not itself open to choice! In this context, I want to suggest, with reference to Adorno's delineation of the "essay" as a form of heresy, that the essayist does not mourn the modern (and one might say

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[62] Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, p. 22; Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 52; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 31; Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 9; Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 255.

[63] Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, p. 19.

[64] Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, p. 27.

"postmodern") reality of pluralism and difference but celebrates it and cheerfully obeys the heretical imperative. To be sure, the essayist writes as an evangelist proclaiming the heretical gospel of epistemological humility and the therapeutic potential of *sans* and *peut-être*, the "without" and the "perhaps." Both of these are tenets in a faith that believes in the redemptive efficacy of the non-dogmatic *without* certainty, *without* closure, and *without* the absolute. The essayist experiments with diverse opinions that may, *perhaps*, offer intriguing insights that do not arbitrarily denounce other interpretations that may, *perhaps*, add valid profiles to any phenomenological investigation. In this way, one might conclude that every "essay" should end in good heretical fashion with a candid or a camouflaged "*perhaps*!"

Oddly—or not so oddly—enough, *"without"* and "perhaps" are two of Caputo's favorite words when expounding on the broader aspects of sacred anarchy. He uses—and not just mentions—them constantly, whether in English, German, or French. From his dependence on Eckhart's *ohne warum*, "without why," concerning the rose's propensity to bloom with no concern for the Principle of Sufficient Reason to his glosses on Derrida's "religion without religion," where he speaks of faith as "*sans vision, sans verité, sans révelation*" or "*sans voir, sans avoir, sans savoir*," Caputo is never without access to the "without."[65] Likewise, he consistently advocates the centrality of the "perhaps," specifically utilizing the Derridean translation of that concept. Derrida does not define *peut-être*, "perhaps," in its literal etymological sense of "may" (*peut*) "be" (*être*) but in the more active sense of "it may happen."[66] This paraphrase directly connects "perhaps" with the idea of the "event," another one of those ideas that Caputo endorses throughout his corpus, especially with reference to sacred anarchy. The event just happens without why and without the compulsion of the preordained. It cannot be programmed or anticipated by the inexorability of logic, the necessity of causality, or the manipulation of individual or social sovereignty. It remains messianic, always "to come" in some absolute future that will have been but never is—one of the only "absolutes" that Caputo allows![67] Consequently, the event subverts every dissimulation of totalized meaning, or hegemonic capital T truth, or reductionistic claim to certainty. It grounds only the ungrounded "perhaps," haunting it as a specter

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65 John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 166; Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 263.

66 Jacques Derrida, "As If It Were Possible, 'Within Such Limits' . . ." in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 344.

67 John D. Caputo, "The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology" *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 11 (Spring 2011), pp. 44-45; Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 156.

of undecidability that demands taking the risk of decision.[68] Caputo argues that this hauntology of the perhaps as "a principle *without* [emphasis added] principle, an anarchic and unmonarchical *archē*" (a sacred anarchy, perhaps) inspires the "ability to sustain uncertainty and to venture into the unknown."[69] It establishes and conserves the constancy of the two coefficients identified above, uncertainty and contingency, with the addition of the "coefficient of undecidability."[70] These hauntological coefficients comprise a "spectral hermeneutics,"[71] which synonymizes with "radical hermeneutics," that seeks to engage the flux of existence with a minimal metaphysics and with a sacred anarchy, which respects the inherent pluralism and difference within reality and rejects the pretense of a Platonic essentialism.[72] It recognizes and exploits the "irreducible depth and uncertainty in things . . . [the] indeterminacy built right into things" and keeps all traditions fluid and corrigible, operating in an "under-determined situation that requires judgment and human determination."[73]

Conspicuously, at least to my reading of Caputo, his spectral hermeneutics of the hauntological dynamic flourishing in the semantics of the "without" and the "perhaps" appears remarkably similar to all that has been discussed above concerning the fragmentary, open, uncertain, and experimental efficiencies of the "essay." In other words, I insist that radical hermeneutics in all of its expressions adheres to the "essay" genre and that Caputo writes philosophically and theologically as an essayist. For example, I can assuredly adduce as evidence the intimate connection between Kierkegaard and Caputo with reference to their own personal reflections on their individual literary productivity. Caputo explicitly commits to Kierkegaard's chosen vocation—*sans* cigar smoke, of course(!)—and claims that radical hermeneutics aims at making life difficult by facing up "to the difference and difficulty which enter into what we think and do and hope for."[74] Furthermore, his adoption of Derridean deconstruction leads him to identify overtly with Kierkegaard's authorial humility. Not only does Caputo refer to Derrida as a "'supplementary clerk' of singularity, picking

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[68] John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 5; Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 17, 31.

[69] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, pp. 6, 8.

[70] John D. Caputo, "Hauntological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Christian Faith: On Being Dead Equal Before God," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 102.

[71] Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, p. 51.

[72] Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 101; Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*," p. 273; and Caputo, *Against Ethics*," pp. 93, 221.

[73] Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 198-99.

[74] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 7.

up the shards and fragments left behind by philosophy's search for universality,"[75] but he quite frankly announces in an early work on obligation that he, himself, writes as an *ekstraskriver*, as one who composes "occasional pieces" as an "amateur author" merely collecting "bits and fragments," never intending to create a system of knowledge.[76] Even in the original essay, "Sacred Anarchy," in the voice I heard over three decades ago, he confesses that writing a book "exceeds [his] ability." He desires only "to make a little contribution . . . to toss in a few loose unscientific ethical fragments."[77] This language sounds remarkably similar to Kierkegaard's with its self-deprecating modesty, its ambition to remain "unscientific," and its fondness for "fragments."

It follows that if, under influence from Lukács, I am correct that *ekstraskriver* is the Kierkegaardian cypher for "essayist," then one must subsume Caputo under that designation as well. Moreover, on two occasions in *The Insistence of God*, a "book" that runs 307 pages in length(!), Caputo overtly christens his text an "essay," one addressing both the "perhaps" and "radical theology."[78] In addition, as further validation of my desire to extoll Caputo as an essayist, I must note that he also connects deconstruction with all that has been "declared abnormal, unnatural, irrational, *heretical*" [emphasis added].[79] *A fortiori*, one may conclude that Caputo's radical hermeneutics also consorts with heresies and seeks to obey the heretical imperative itself. Accordingly, I offer a Caputo reading that accepts this self-designation but extends it by advancing the theory that the entire Caputo bibliography represents diverse examples of the "essay" form. Given the primary traits of the "essay" as focused on pluralism, difference, uncertainty, agnosticism, fragmentation, and experimentation, I am convinced that no better genre captures the prevailing purpose of Caputo's radical/spectral/devilish/apophatic hermeneutics. Why else would he be so devoted to the interrogative mood? Why else would his decades-long textual investigations appear to orbit elliptically (to use his imagery)[80] around two legislating Augustinian questions: "What do I love when I love my God?"[81] and "What is the answer to the

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[75] John D. Caputo, "Instants, Secrets, and Singularities: Dealing Death in Kierkegaard and Derrida," in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, eds. Martin J. Matuštík (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 217.

[76] Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pp. 20-21.

[77] Caputo, "Sacred Anarchy," p. 292.

[78] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, pp. 18, 110.

[79] John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 99.

[80] See Caputo, *Specters of* God, p. 299.

[81] Caputo, *On Religion*, p. 6.

question of myself?"[82] As a result, reading Caputo may well mean reading an essayist who attempts constantly to engage questions without dissimulating final answers, who revels in experiments with various remnants of ideas, who develops diverse *Gedankenversuche* with *jouissance* and heterophilia, and who remains resolute in his belief in *différance*, undecidability, the anarchic, the mystical, and the apophatic, a belief nourished constantly by a messianic hope for the meaning and the understanding that are always "to come."

Caputo definitely preserves a "cold hermeneutics" when he engages the apophatic character of sacred anarchy by never dissimulating the nihilistic aspects of ambiguity.[83] Nevertheless, he consistently emphasizes the nihilism of grace, which indicates the ambiguity of all we hold dear, such as God, beauty, and love. Consequently, ambiguity, that is, sacred anarchy, is a gift, and Caputo's "essays" on that gift are also gifts of that gift given to us who likewise seek answers to the Augustinian questions.[84] At the risk of arousing his ire over committing an act heretical to the typical orthodoxy of deconstruction, I choose to annul his gifts and voice to him a sincere and hopeful "thank you."[85] This *laudatio* gratefully offers accolades to Caputo for all of his work as a hermeneutical essayist. It seeks to honor and commend him for doing "God's" work when he interrupts sedimented interpretations, when he prophetically proclaims the subversive dynamics inherent in "God's" kingdom, when he restrains the arrogance of our deceptive declarations that we know the Secret or have all the answers, and when he reminds us that every manifestation of sacred anarchy ultimately shelters a reverential commitment to faith, hope, and love. Although I do not always agree with his reading of sacred anarchy, I always listen to his voice, always hear something of "God" in it, and always approve and celebrate his edifying apophatics. As Caputo's privileged *laudator* and committed auditor, I modestly submit this *laudatio* as something of a prayer, an entreaty that expresses my hope that Caputo will continue to give us textual evidence to corroborate our celebrating and venerating his radical and edifying apophatics well into the future.

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[82] John D. Caputo, "Laughing, Praying, Weeping Before God: A Response," in *Styles of Piety: Practicing Philosophy After the Death of God*, eds. S. Clark Buckner and Matthew Statler (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 253.

[83] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 189, 192; Caputo, *Weakness of God*, p. 287.

[84] Caputo, "In Praise of Ambiguity," pp. 15-17.

[85] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 29-30; Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, pp. 142-143.