

Book Review

Robert Magliola: Deconstructing Life-Worlds

Frank Stevenson

Hai!—Swoosh!

STROKE

of the two-edged (GK *distomos*, ‘two-mouthed’)
sword (Rev. 1:16)¹

Thus opens Magliola’s first “Curriculum Vitae: Psycho-biographemes in Saltire”: the cross-hatching sword of poetic writing performs the SLASH, enacts the identity-and-difference of Japanese Buddhism/Christianity before we’ve had time to reflect upon it within a more “metaphysical” discourse. (My first thought is of Pound in the *Cantos*: poetry as direct juxtaposition, therefore direct “revelation.”) The next line glosses “saltire: . . . an X-shaped cross; esp. St. Andrew’s Cross.” While “in saltire” is a technical term in heraldry, the insignia or design of the bent cross—what then would it mean to offer up your own life (“psycho-biographemes”) as a design, an ornamented text perhaps or illuminated manuscript?—Magliola is presumably playing on “in salt” (as if his life were being served up to the reader as a dish) and perhaps also “in satire.” But I note that “saltire” is from the Latin *saltare*, “to leap, dance” (the bends of the St. Andrew’s Cross are “leaping”) and so, thinking of Nietzsche and David Bowie (“Put on your red shoes and dance the blues/Let’s dance!”), suspect that the author is also, at a still more “secret” level, inviting us to dance.

If Robert Magliola was, like Nietzsche, “born posthumously,” then his most recent book can be a “memoir” only in a very special sense—a memoir which, like *Zarathustra*’s readers, we may not yet

have “ears to understand.”² Indeed the author openly laments (and, like Nietzsche, simultaneously celebrates) the difficulty he has had communicating to/with (*Western*) readers throughout his writing career:

Apropos of Harlequin’s (so-called) *professional life*, his publishing career was doubly-bound: *what* he necessarily chose to set forth in his writing, and *how* he set it forth, necessarily thwarted the likelihood it could be set forth, especially to Western readers (this is still the case). . . . Yet for him *not* to set forth, and not to set forth *as* he did and *how* he did, was an impossible alternative. For he did not write *in order* to publish; rather, he always sought to publish in order to *transmit* the writing. This situation led severally to a Double-Bind. (Magliola 103)

The tone of sincere confession here, lacking the Nietzschean irony, may seem closer to Rousseau or Augustine; but Nietzsche too plays the clown, even “humiliates” himself vis-a-vis the reader, and if we sense in Magliola’s confessional mode a certain defensiveness it may be the defensive posture of the (Zen) swordsman who, having accumulated so much overflowing energy within himself, is ready to attack when we least expect it. The X of the author’s double-bind is simultaneously the mark of the lightning-quick double-stroke of his fiercely transmitted writing.

For Magliola has, as Edith Wyschogrod notes in her excellent Preface,

written a highly unusual book. To identify its genre would already be to misread it. Perhaps the best way to enter it, is to consider it as a meditation upon the mark of crosshatching, i.e., the X. For Magliola this X displays the space of his life. . . the cross-hatching that constitutes the double-binds of his life. . . [and] the vectors of Christianity and Buddhist meditative practice. The work elucidates both the

writer's life and the non-space (as it were) between these religions. . . . The Biographical segments of this memoir are not recollections in the manner of Proust's symbolic madeleine cakes. . . . post hoc creations of presence, but rather bring to the fore transitoriness and becoming in their very passage, the ungroundedness of things. (Magliola ix-xi)

The narrative discourse of the ongoing, fragmented "curricula vitae"—not just the "story" of the author's life but literally (and Magliola is nothing if not "literal") the "running flow" (*curriculum*), perhaps the blood-flow or vital force of it—is, then, though it tends to physically "occupy" mainly the first part of the book, always being intertwined in various ways with the proper "philosophical" (or "professional academic") discourse: the discussion of Buddhism, Christianity and Derridean deconstruction, the metaphysical problematic of the groundedness and "ungroundedness of things" with which the book mainly concludes. If, as Wyschogrod notes, "like Derrida, who invokes and mimes his own terminology, so too Magliola invokes and mimes his own life," this samurai disguised as Harlequin also cuts away, with the other stroke of his sword, the pretensions of academic, intellectual, scholarly discourse: pretensions grounded in "professional" concerns but also, after all—for such is their founding "presumption"—in the presupposition of those absolute truths and transcendental signifieds which the (Nietzschean/Derridean) deconstructive sword primarily seeks to undercut, whose false inflatedness or *emptiness* it would lay bare.

But long before Hegel, Nietzsche and Derrida there was negative theology, which would "say" God by *not*-saying (or negating or undercutting) Him. On the one hand Magliola is responding (as in his earlier *Derrida on the Mend*) to the problematic of a "comparative" (Christian-SLASH-Buddhist) negative theology and (as in *Mend*) intimating the (different) ways in which Christianity can be just as "negative," just as "differential" as (Madhyamika, Chan) Buddhism; on (or in) the other hand he is responding (as he could not have in

Mend) to Derrida's recent confession of his own proximity to/difference from apophatic or negative theology in "*Denegations*."³ Of course, all of these oppositions—deconstruction/religion, saying/not-saying, East/West—are being broken down by Magliola. Wyschogrod speaks of his

consternation at those misreadings of Madhyamika Buddhism which give to the notion of emptiness a Yogacara or idealist reading, thus undermining Madhyamika's deconstructive power. This is not an issue of Buddhist scholasticism but one that relates to the crosshatched practices of meditation (described in various contexts by Magliola) as well as to Derrida's notion of *denegation*, a negation that endlessly undoes itself. Thus Magliola writes: "Derridean trace, mark, etc., is perhaps the closest a Western reader has yet come to the Buddhist notion of *tattva*—thisness, thatness—the intersection of spontaneity (i.e., pure impermanence) and Buddhist relationality (i.e., pure dependence)." (Magliola x)

The biographical-philosophical cross-hatching of the "book" can then also embody—since the curricular flow of the author's *life* has included (embodied) much meditation *practice*—the contemplation/praxis identity-in-difference. The practice of mind-emptying, of deconstructing oneself (one's own life-world), may be after all a way (the only way?) to arrive at what can only be marked within language, within the discourse of apophatic metaphysics and onto-theology, as the unknown/ unsayable X (or only within language can be "crossed out" as X). Derrida speaks of the unspeakable in "*Denegations*":

This, which is called X (for example, text, writing, the trace, difference, the hymen, the supplement, the pharmakon, the parergon, etc.) "is" neither this nor that. . . neither a concept nor even a name; it does lend itself to a series of names, but calls for another syntax, and exceeds

even the order and the structure of predicative discourse. It “is” not and does not say what “is.” It is written completely otherwise. (Coward and Foshay 74)

But Derrida, for whom we never really can get *outside* of (rational) discourse though we can remain at its limit, may be ironically miming here, with his call for “another syntax,” for “exceeding the order of predicative discourse,” the discourse of negative theology. That is, in “Denegations” he once again assumes this limit-position; here he sees an “undecidable oscillation . . . between the narratorial “I” and its “unconscious,” and thus is led to his “negation that . . . denegates itself”:

“. . . denegation is an un-negation that affirms rather than negates negation.” And so denegation, as the inversion of the relation of the subject in and to language, is the subversion, too, of the dialectical negation of negation by which it might render sublime its self-relation and so come into undifferentiated possession of the revelation, of a necessarily (because to-be-revealed) “secret” knowledge.⁴ (Coward and Foshay 7)

For Derrida it is just this (possibility) of the “secret” (or “secret knowledge”) that “already institutes a negativity; it is a negation that denies itself. . . de-negates itself;” this is discussed by Magliola near the end of his book in terms of “originary *differance*.” But in “*Desistance*” Derrida still seems to fluctuate, to offer the possibility of a way out, as when he comes back to Heidegger’s “unthought”:

And what about “denegation?” . . . a matter . . . of a vast movement by Heidegger. . . in a thought concerned with thinking, over and above an onto-theology without which the very concept of denegation could not have been formed, the *unthought* itself. Concerned with thinking not just this or that unthought, but the structure, the possibility, and the

necessity of the unthought in general, its quasi-negativity (the *un*-thought is an *un-thought*, he reminds us). (Derrida 11)

But this *un-thought* takes us back again to the living sword-thrust of praxis, the *active force* of thought-language. Although Derrida takes as initial *topos* in “*Denegations*” his ironic (self-negating) textual “situation”—just as negative theology confronts the paradox of naming/saying what cannot be named/said (God), Derrida says he confronts the paradox of saying something about “negative theology”—a *topos* suggesting the writer’s own entrapment within (an indefinitely extending, perhaps infinitely regressive) discursive language, the *topos* or “text” of his *Post-Scriptum to Derrida and Negative Theology* is something much more “concrete,” the highly *poetic* language of Angelus Silesius:

Ein Abgrund rufft dem andern.
Der Abgrund meines Geists rufft immer mit Geschrey
Den Abgrund GÖttes an: Sag welcher tieffer sey?

One abyss calls the other.
The abyss of my spirit always invokes with cries
The abyss of God: say which may be deeper? (Coward and Foshay 315)

The “cries” of this doubled “abyss” call us back to the ancient tradition from which Magliola is writing. His *curriculae vitae* are, as Wyschogrod says, “a *cri de coeur*, impassioned and poetic;” his book, in Caputo’s words, is “like every such work from Augustine’s *Confessions* to Derrida’s ‘Circonfession’ . . .”. The force of the poetic here also brings us back to that most immediately pragmatic-concrete side of Magliola’s text, the visual impact of excerpted lines of poetry (Buddhist and Western), the Chinese characters, hexagrams from the *I Ching* and other figures. Like Pound the author intersperses, in the radically “open form” of his book, fragments of poetic texts

from different authors/traditions. Much ties back to the intensely personal. For instance, in one of his *Curriculae Vitae* we see in the left margin the picture of a skull with a crack in it and with a small cross on its top; above, beside and beneath it we get these texts:

“And He went out bearing His cross, to (the) place called Of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha, where they crucified Him. . . .” (John 19: 17,18)

“. . . one can stop at an altar dedicated to Adam [sic] at the bottom of the rock of Calvary. Here can also be seen a crack in the rock.”

“. . . The Cross planted in the skull has long been an emblem for me, the *nous* (mind) drawn and quartered, double-bound. “And through a Riddle at the last/Sagacity, must go—,” says Emily Dickinson. I now read the epigraphs slowly. (126-127)

A fitting epigraph/epitaph here would also be the Chinese *hsin* (☒), “top of the human head, the skull”—perhaps an imaginary or *recreated* ideogram, as I’ve only found it in one dictionary and several Chinese have told me they don’t “know” it—which has the X in a box with a sword-stroke on top, opening (“cracking”) it. (This in contradistinction to the Chinese skull-and-crossbones, the familiar *hsiung* (☒), “evil,” bad luck,” the X in a three-sided square, open cup, cup of poison rather than “in saltire”).

Magliola in his Preface (“CROSSHATCHING THE BUDDHA, a Prolusion”) quotes from Derrida’s early essay *Dissemination* on the openness of the square:

Through the opening of the fourth surface or through the empty box in the center of the four squares, you shall have been swept off, overcast in a still unended, unending labor. The square or, as you wish, the cube, will not close itself

up. (xiv)

And in the last of his final “Curricula Vitarum: Philosophy/Religion in Saltire” he again treats “Dissemination,” with its emphasis on numerology and the “supernumerary” (via Sollers’ *Nombres*), its inclusion of Chinese writing and its image of “opened fourness.” This emblem of the “opened four”—another way of looking at the X—is one way to try to catch what Magliola wants both from Derrida (that “quasi-negativity” of the “unthought in general,” itself placed squarely *in writing*, “in saltire”) and from religion (the “*nous* drawn and quartered, double-bound,” the double sword-stroke of Zen enlightenment). Sollers describes his “novel,” on the book jacket, as a

theater, having neither stage nor house, where words have become the actors and spectators of a new community of play, [which] should also enable us to capture, across its intersecting surfaces, our own “time”: the advent of a dialogue between East and West, the question of the passage from alienated writing to a writing of the trace, through war, sex, and the mute, hidden work of transformation (Johnson xxix-xxx⁵)

and the West/East theme plays a central role in Part 9 of “Dissemination,” “The Crossroads of the ‘*Est*,’” where *est* is both “East” and the copula “to be” in French. This is the section Magliola is most interested in, and he gives his own translation, “for analytic purposes,” of key passages:

“One cannot, then, repose in the copula. Coupling is the mirror. The mirror is traversed *off/with/by itself*, which is to say that it is never traversed. The being-traversed does not come upon the mirror accidentally—in the West—it is inscribed in its structure. . . forever producing itself, it never comes to be. Like the horizon. . . And yet the ‘*est*’ [‘it is,’ the East] which has always meant what is beyond narciss-

sism is caught in the mirror. Read in the fault/gap [*ecart*: . . . ‘quarter’ of a heraldic shield] it never arrives. Insofar as it is turned towards the ‘*est*’ being confines itself henceforth under this erasure [*rature*] like quadrature [*quadrature*: . . . configuring of a square]. It is written only under the grid/grill/grille of the four forks.” (175-177)

In his “celebration. . . of the deconstructive traits of Chinese philosophy (they come from ‘the *other side* of the mirror,’ etc.),” Magliola ties open-fourness to Nagarjuna’s tetralemma and doctrine of the *prajñapti* (“conductal clue,” “double-bind,” self-negating *secret*), and to the whole “scene” of writing/Writing:

“The form of the chiasmus, the X,” interests [Derrida], he says, “not as the symbol of the unknown but because there is here a sort of fork which is moreover unequal, one of its points extending its scope further than the other.” Further than the other so chiasmus can have a tilt to it, a tilt which necessarily engineers mobility. . . which is. . . *neither* random *nor* purposeful. Both writing and Writing are as artificial as they are conventional, as much a question of free-play as of author’s intention, of spatiality as temporality, etc., and such-wise that these moments crisscross and undo each other, but always—please note—*unequally*. Disproportionately. Thus the *overlap*. And always necessarily by pure *is not*. Thus the *negative* overlap. In reprise, we can say that writing is a *prajñapti* for Writing, and Writing in Derrida means the ongoing alterity of happenings. (180-181)

But this “ongoing alterity of *happenings*” suggests again praxis, the curricular flow of life-blood and the inevitable suffering of one’s own emptiness and death, the unbearable carrying of one’s own (most irregular, most bent) cross. Derrida’s opened four also catches the dynamic sense of a finite excess (“supernumerary” as “part of the

numeral”), the “extended column” of controlled (explosive, indefinitely disruptive) passion:

Just as the fourth surface, which is *part* of the square, reflects, distorts, and opens the righted *whole*, exposes to view without being seen. . . so, too, the supernumerary is part of the numeral and belongs to the very milieu it exceeds. It makes the excessive proliferate in its invisible column. The column of words, the column of numbers, is thus supernumerary. . . standing erect, poised, (in) the middle of the sundial. . . extending out of sight. “4.36. (. . . *But that thought is not found: it comes in the mass whose fury is, however, restrained like a torrent changed and formed into a column of words, and it is precisely in the sign that is one too many*—屮—” (dong: *penis*). (Johnson 364-365; Sollers’ own words in italics)

And if Derrida/Sollers concludes his essay/novel with an ideogram of dubious “literacy”—*diao*-penis 屮, a slang term combining the left-hand (“sinister”) radical *shih* 尸—“body, corpse” with the sounding-element *diao* 吊, which the dictionary says is really 弔—“to mourn,” “to pity” but also “to suspend, to hang” (from the radical *tiao* 刁, “perverse, artful,” strangely evocative of *tao* 刀, “a knife, a sword”)—Magliola concludes his book with a *recreated* ideogram, an ornamental emblem, heraldic insignia, 冂 *li*-power within an “open square” (a box open on the “bottom”), the (un)controlled, (dis)seminating, *ying*⁶ 盈 (over)—flowing passion of the

“—CROSS-STROKE—”

of the two-edged sword”

NOTES

¹ See Magliola 3.

² Knowing Robert as I do/did (in Taipei in the mid to late 1980's) I suspect he may be thinking of this book as a kind of final memoir of his life, an ultimate summing-up, though I also think (and hope) it won't be the ultimate one. . . perhaps rather just one more in a never-ending series of "penultimates". . .

³ "*Comment ne pas parler: Denegations*" was originally presented at a conference on negative theology in Jerusalem in 1986, since which time it has sparked considerable controversy; the essay, translated as "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," appears with Derrida's "Of an Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy" and concluding "Post-Scriptum" and the "responses" of several scholars (which include discussions of Hinduism and Buddhism) in *Derrida and Negative Theology*; see Coward and Foshay.

⁴ Toby Foshay in his Introduction to *Negative Theology 7*; he quotes here from Mark Taylor's essay in the same book, "nO nOt nO."

⁵ From Barbara Johnson's "Translators Introduction," *Dissemination*. Derrida begins his *Hors Livre, OUTWORK, Hors D'Oeuvre*—one thinks again of the "opened square" and also Magliola's text served "in saltire"—to/of this "book" with the statement: "This (therefore) will not have been a book."

⁶ Lao-tzu 4: "*Tao chung, yung chih erh pu ying*," "Tao empty (flows), use it but pu ying, (it) never overflows/never fills/(you) never (need to) fill (it)." (Different translations.) Perhaps ying can mean both "filling" and "overflowing," just as chin (盡), "limit" can mean both "emptying/exhausting" and "filling (to the limit)," so that *wu chin* "unlimited" is really a dynamic "inexhaustibility."

WORKS CITED

Magliola, Robert. *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997.

Coward, Harold and Toby Foshay, eds. *Derrida and Negative Theology*. Albany: State U. of New York P, 1992.

Derrida, Jacques. "Desistance." *Introduction to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*. Ed. Christopher Fynsk. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989.

Johnson, Barbara. Trans. "Translators Introduction." *Dissemination*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1981.