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# The Call to Radical Theology

## Thomas J. J. Altizer

*Edited and with an introduction by Lissa McCullough*

*Foreword by David E. Klemm*



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Douglas L. Donkel, editor

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**SUNY**  
PRESS

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We philosophers and “free spirits” feel, when we hear the news that “the old god is dead,” as if a new dawn shone on us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation. At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an “open sea.”

—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §343



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## CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by David E. Klemm</i>	ix
<i>Editor's Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction by Lissa McCullough</i>	xv
1 Doing Radical Theology	1
2 Ancient and Modern Apocalypticism	17
3 Renewing the Kingdom of God	31
4 Hegel: The <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> as Ground of a Uniquely Modern Theology	41
5 Nietzsche: Nihilism and the Illusion of Ethics	51
6 Heidegger: <i>Ereignis</i> and the Nothing	67
7 Marion: Dionysian Theology as a Catholic Nihilism	79
8 Contemporary French Thinking and the Primordial	87
9 Modernity and the Origin of <i>Angst</i>	95
10 Postmodernity and Guilt	107



11 The Epic Voyage into Apocalypse 121

12 Adieu: The Call to Radical Theology 133

*Appendixes*

A. The Gospel of Christian Atheism *Reexamined* 145

B. *Altizer on Altizer: A Self-Critique* 151

*Works Cited* 163

*Index* 169

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## FOREWORD

DAVID E. KLEMM

Thomas J. J. Altizer is nothing if he is not a theologian. Indeed, he is the purest theologian of our time in his unrelenting concern with the name and being of God, and his theological thinking is among the most significant, original, and creative work of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first. In my view, Altizer is the successor to the great theologians of the Protestant biblical tradition represented by Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, among others. In his own words, “the primary calling of the theologian is to name God, and to name that God who can actually be named by us” (*Living the Death of God*, 177). Such naming of God, for Altizer, requires unflinching honesty and courage, for the God who can actually be named by us in our time of advancing nihilism is only nameable as unnameable—a God who is absent, or nameable only as a negative presence, a presence so negative that we can speak of the “apocalypse of God” as the advent of absolute nothingness and darkness.

Who can deny that the great figures of modern literature, art, film, and other modes of expression confront and articulate the reality of spiritual desolation, of absolute nothingness interiorized in anxiety, despair, and visions of the abyss? From Kafka’s *The Trial* and *The Castle* to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* or the trilogy of *Malloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, to Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* or Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, to the paintings of Mark Rothko

or Anselm Kiefer, to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* or *No Country for Old Men*, we see theological visions of the plight, pain, and violence of contemporary despair and meaninglessness.

Of course, many take refuge in simplistic ideas of God—say, the idea of God as a transcendent loving Father who looks after us if we pray and go to church. Fundamentalisms abound as well. Others take refuge in silence—having nothing to say about God. These ways of proclaiming or keeping silent about God, with all due respect to those who choose them, have nothing to do with the God who can actually be named and thought in our time. They constitute modes of withdrawal from the harsh truth, confronted, for example, by Elie Wiesel when he wrote in *Night* about watching the SS hang a boy he called the “sad-eyed angel” in the Buna concentration camp: “‘Where is God?’ someone behind me asked. . . . I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is—he is hanging here on this gallows...’” (76).

Altizer's task as a radical theologian is to comprehend the death of God as the actualization of the apocalyptic self-realization of Godhead itself. It should be clear to anyone who reads Altizer that he is heir to Hegel in trying to think the nihilism of the modern age theologically through the death of God as a colossal event in the life of God. But by no means can Altizer simply be called a Hegelian, as he transcends his great philosophical and theological mentor in crucial ways; for one, he appropriates the full power and ecstasy of Nietzsche's radicalized prophetic visions of nihilism in the late nineteenth century and beyond. While Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic* fall short of disclosing the interior experience of the death of God in a world of advancing nihilism, Nietzsche does so not only in his proclamation of the death of God through the voice of the madman in *The Gay Science* (§125), but in thinking the death of God apocalyptically as, in Altizer's words, an absolute No-saying of God, an absolute judgment of God, as well as the transvaluation of all values under conditions of nihilism in the late modern world.

Nietzsche alone in the nineteenth century could think this absolute No-saying of God as at the same time wholly a Yes-saying, a Yes-saying to the absolute negation that Zarathustra proclaims. For Altizer, the *coincidentia oppositorum* between such an absolute Yes and absolute No, between the sacred and the profane, between ultimate light and

ultimate darkness, is the central idea and image in his radical dialectical theology. Finally, such absolute Yes-saying to the absolute No of God's death in our time is, in Altizer's thinking, the actualization of resurrection beyond the death of God.



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## EDITOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While a few of the essays published here were occasioned by a specific conference or project, most were spontaneously generated by the author independently of each other and with no particular publishing venue in mind. Nearly all were composed since 2001. In editing this book, my aim was to arrange them in an order that draws out their natural thematic coherence. The choice of book title is mine, approved by the author.

The essays are all previously unpublished, with two partial exceptions. Chapter 8 was published in French translation by Mireille Hébert under the title “Crucifixion et apocalypse” in the volume *Penser le Dieu vivant: Mélanges offerts à André Gounelle*, edited by Marc Boss and Raphaël Picon (Paris: Van Dieren, 2003), 9–17; the English version appears here for the first time, considerably revised, by kind permission of Van Dieren Éditeur. An earlier and shorter version of appendix B, “Altizer on Altizer,” appeared in *Literature and Theology* 15, no. 2 (June 2001): 187–94; this segment of the essay is reprinted by kind permission of Oxford University Press. The present version has been updated by the author to address his publications since 2001.

I am grateful to several colleagues for their astute critical feedback and support of this project: these include Andrew Cutrofello, Alina N. Feld, Theodore W. Jennings, Robert S. Oventile, Daniel M. Price, and Carl A. Raschke.

—LISSA McCULLOUGH



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## INTRODUCTION

LISSA MCCULLOUGH

This, too, is a unique calling of theology, a calling to voyage into our most absolutely negative depths, a voyage apart from which theology could only be truly vacuous. The theologian is a voyager . . . into the deepest darkness, a voyage apart from which every voyage into light is now wholly empty and unreal.

—Altizer, “Doing Radical Theology” (5)

A living God inspires vigorous life and direction. A dead God bequeaths weight, disorientation, and appalling slowness—as when, enduring a nightmare, one feels unable to move. Already more than a century removed from Nietzsche’s annunciation of the death of God as a remote event, a deed “still more distant than the most distant stars” (*The Gay Science* §125), we are understandably impatient. We “post-moderns”—surely a wishful self-naming—want to be finished with all this slowness and dead weight, as even a formerly liberating “modernity” has become a weight we pine to throw off. We long to advance! But we are stuck entertaining the very serious and respectable thesis that no forward movement to a truly new way of thinking and doing is possible unless we patiently, ever so patiently, revisit, reabsorb, reenvision, and slowly exorcize through a profound transformation the old—the centuries old, the millennia old—God. Any less patient approach to liberation from our past, generating and sustaining a new era, will be too superficial to succeed, no matter how intensely we hope and aspire



to move on; too superficial, that is, to take hold and become effective, to give new direction that is not motivated by the old means and ends and styles of logic. This means contending with the gravitas of the past with a deep voyager's patience. According to this thought, we must abide with the slow decomposition and recomposition process until this abiding—a new thinking-believing-perceiving—gradually delivers us out of the valley of the shadow of death. It is not possible to force this deliverance through passion or brilliance alone. It will develop according to its own measures. We must be prepared to abide with what Thomas J. J. Altizer calls the “dead body of God” if we would be truly released from its infinite reach and power. The absolute cannot be overcome by being bypassed, evaded, or inconsequentially superseded, but only by being thought through and transformed.

This has been Altizer's consistent conviction through his fifty-year career as a death of God theologian. Hence he finds it exceedingly regrettable that theology has all but disappeared in our time except in forms that are predominantly conservative or reactionary—denying the death of God altogether—or focused on ethical rather than properly theological concerns, plying references to God and theology in ways that are vaguely assumed in support of an ethics rather than critically examined. “For the first time,” Altizer observes, “we are bereft of fully systematic theologies that are critical theologies, and this is above all true of our fundamental thinking of God, which is now our most silent or most forbidden theological topic” (2).<sup>\*</sup> As if echoing the ironic pathos of Slavoj Žižek's recent title, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Altizer's cherished lost cause over the last half-century has been the reinvigoration of a genuinely radical theological thinking as against the overwhelming array of conservative options.<sup>1</sup>

If the question is, *why* retrieve theology as a mode of inquiry in the wake of the death of God? Altizer's answer is embodied in this book, in many passages explicitly and everywhere implicitly. The question of God is for Altizer the overwhelming question: the question that questions *us* absolutely. We need this question because it challenges us to activate our fullest critical and imaginative powers, conscious and unconscious. Apropos of this he acknowledges: “Yes, our most agonizing questions are what most impel a genuine theological language, and not only questions that are seemingly impossible, questions that truly assault their hearers with the most ultimate challenge, and if all such questions are dissolved in our common theology, is that not a

dissolution of a real or actual humanity?" (139). For Altizer, it is in attempting to name a God who has become void and anonymous, in questing to create a theological language perhaps bereft of the name of God, in formulating such thinking freely as we venture forward instead of finding it preformulated, fossilized, and critically unexamined in our past, that we voyage toward an ultimate encounter and a truly new domain that dissolves the dichotomy between secular and religious, transcendence and immanence. He makes clear that a fully theological language pursued in this vein may be free to dispense with the name of God, and even with the word "theology" (135); it is the ultimacy of the call and the openness of the quest that is indispensable.

Altizer characterizes the present context of postmodernity as "a metamorphosis of the most purely negative forces in late modernity" (111). Mindful of postmodernity's critical contradictions and intricacies, he would concur with one commentator's insistence that theology must become "authentically modern" before it tries to be postmodern, otherwise postmodernity will be seized upon by "those who are reluctant to face the theological challenges of being modern" in order to evade the task.<sup>2</sup> Theo Hobson makes this culminating remark in his critique of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, but well before Radical Orthodoxy emerged in the mid-1990s, Altizer had articulated the same concern: "Conservative theologians can now laud the advent of a 'post-modernity' which is seemingly a dissolution of the modern world. But the simple truth is that a fully modern theology has not yet been written or conceived, so that there cannot yet be a postmodern theology, but only a renewed medieval, or patristic, or pagan theology."<sup>3</sup>

The writings of Altizer gathered here form a strikingly cohesive manifesto, one that poses a theological dare. The intent of this dare is to catalyze theology to reinvent itself as a mode of fully modern—and eventually postmodern—thinking; to radicalize it as a postontological, hermeneutical, imaginative discourse that is current and unrestrained, a creative thinking emboldened to rethink received traditions of the sacred, the profane, historical meaning, the human condition, the existential orientation of life vis-à-vis death, investigating how these actualities reveal an otherwise unhearable Yes and Amen: "Can such a Yes be pronounced today, and be pronounced so as to be heard? Is this not the mission of theology today, even if it can be realized only in the most radical theology?" (10). A radical theology is committed to think God, or rather the "God after God" of absolute transformation; not a

primordial God of stasis and immutability, not a God of “Spirit” apart from incarnation, but a God who embodies the apocalyptic revolutions and evolutions of existence in time, who embodies actual history, suffering, change, death—ultimately Death—and therefore Life. In Altizer’s terminology this God is named dialectically as at once Satan and Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Altizer makes the case that radical theology’s keenest moment of historical opportunity is now. In the midst of this unprecedented epoch of apocalyptic transformation, it is possible for theology to stand *with* rather than against the forces of transformation—and even to lead them through visionary power. He offers a working definition of radical theology as a fundamental thinking that always entails the negative moment of unthinking on the way to rethinking:

A genuinely radical theology is a theological thinking that truly rethinks the deepest ground of theology, a rethinking that is initially an unthinking of every established theological ground; only through such an unthinking can a clearing be established for theological thinking, and that is the very clearing that is the first goal of radical theology. Nor can this be accomplished by a simple dissolution of our given theological grounds, for those are the very grounds that must here be ultimately challenged, and challenged in terms of their most intrinsic claims. (1)

Altizer intends to demonstrate how the most exemplary models and resources for doing radical theology of this kind have been provided by continental philosophers—above all by Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger—and by prophetic writers—above all by Blake and Joyce—rather than by modern theologians of whatever theological orientation, denomination, or school. Indeed, he argues, the most powerful philosophers and writers of modernity have been reinventing what theology is and can be in the modern world while theologians have tended to remain conservative and averse to contending with the full consequences of the death of God. In a post-Nietzschean world, those prominent theologians who have been regarded as most radical, such as the early Karl Barth and the early Paul Tillich, retained conservative positions in their maturity vis-à-vis the identity of God.<sup>5</sup> The modern philosophers and writers explored here, meanwhile, embarked on more radical and

transformative modes of theological thinking, a quest of thinking not only after the death of God but precisely *through* the death of God (chaps. 1 and 9). For each of these major figures, the death of God is itself the core productive event of their epoch (see especially chaps. 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11). This cannot be said quite so fully of Barth or Tillich or any prominent theologians since, apart from Altizer and certain of his contemporaries influenced by similar cultural-historical forces.<sup>6</sup> In recent years the continental philosophers Gianni Vattimo and Slavoj Žižek have generated theological positions—still in rather fragmentary form—remarkably similar to the one Altizer has been elaborating systematically since the mid-1960s. Signs of their mutual influence and exchange are only beginning to emerge.<sup>7</sup>

So then, this call to radical theology concentrates on those primal figures of modernity who have already voyaged in theologically radical directions—if only theologians would take up the challenge of their example. The philosophers who figure most prominently in this volume—Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger—are those who, in Altizer's sight, can best teach contemporary theologians how to theologize in a radical vein. But also treated here secondarily—as counterexamples to Altizer's own kenotic thinking of God—are recent French philosophers whose "turn to religion," in his view, has been directed in a theologically conservative direction. These include Lacan, Levinas, Derrida, and Marion, whose thinking evokes "that absolutely primordial which is absolute ground and source" (88). Altizer considers Lacan's Phallus, Levinas's Infinite, and Marion's God-without-Being to be evocations "wholly opposed to any possible self-negation or self-emptying" of the sort that Simone Weil, by stark contrast, envisions in her neo-Jansenist religious thinking (chaps. 7 and 8).

In the course of this manifesto Altizer puts forward several positions that may be judged unpalatable from a mainstream point of view: to wit, the notion that Hegel is not *really* an absolute idealist, that Nietzsche *really* is a theologian, that the genuine theologian "speaks for others" and "speaks for all," and does so in the context of a "universal horizon" (though this stance may appear more appreciable in light of Alain Badiou's book on the universalism of Paul).<sup>8</sup> Such counter-mainstream claims deserve to be examined with fresh consideration. But the most potentially off-putting stance of Altizer is his enthusiastic embrace of *apocalypse*, understood as bearing a positive valance. Given the dark brew of associations that the word "apocalypse" stirs in popular

imagination, ranging from visions of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, to film clips of 9/11, to the hyperbolic passions of Christian millennialists, why would a critical theologian seize so insistently on this unsympathetic term?

Altizer employs “apocalypse” to name the historically unprecedented and cataclysmic transformations that have constituted modernity, engulfing us exteriorly while opening up an abyss of unknowing within. He maintains that we late moderns have achieved little understanding of apocalypticism’s power and meaning, despite the fact that so many of the primal modern thinkers, including Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, have been manifestly apocalyptic thinkers.

Indeed, the very advent of modernity can be understood to be an apocalyptic event, an advent ushering in a wholly new world as the consequence of the ending of an old world. Nowhere was such a new world more fully present than in thinking itself, a truly new thinking not only embodied in a new science and a new philosophy, but in a new reflexivity or introspection in the interiority of self-consciousness. . . . Cartesian philosophy could establish itself only by ending scholastic philosophy, and with that ending a new philosophy was truly born, and one implicitly if not explicitly claiming for itself a radically new world. That world can be understood as a new apocalyptic world, one which becomes manifestly apocalyptic in the French Revolution and German Idealism, and then one realizing truly universal expressions in Marxism and in that uniquely modern or postmodern nihilism which was so decisively inaugurated by Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God.<sup>9</sup>

Violent and disruptive transformations, increasingly global in their reach, have constituted our actual history; as such they have fissured and transformed not only our common history but ourselves, our core identities, and not only our core identities but that which we (formerly immanent in our identities) knew and identified as God. Increasingly less able to trace our identities through patterns discernable in the past-unto-the-present, we are flung away from that past, divorced from it, unanchored. Now comprehensive reality as we encounter it is absolute transformation, dislodged from all stabilizing orders and identities. For

Nietzsche, as for Heidegger in his wake, the death of God brings forth an abyss of nihilism, a collapse of European values and a “monstrous logic of terror,” but this is intimately connected with a radical, epochal openness—truly a millennial openness.<sup>10</sup>

Nietzsche and Heidegger alike saw their epoch as ending the Christian era and opening an era as yet molten and unnamed. So Altizer likewise emphasizes that apocalypse not only puts an end to the old, it catalyzes the utterly new, creating an opportunity (*portus* = access, port) for transfiguration, for all things breaking away from the known, the given, and becoming transformed: a newness of the world that signals as well the newness of an unnamed anonymous God and the newness of ourselves. Thus Altizer understands the world-transfiguration of our time as the apocalypse of world, humanity, and God in one overwhelming coup of absolute transformation. God is no longer in “heaven” or anywhere transcendent or apart but is—if anywhere—*here*, caught up in this transfigured “chaosmos” of a neither-immanent-nor-transcendent reality. He insists that it is “no longer possible to speak of God in a classical theological language, or any form thereof, and this means that God can no longer be conceived as transcendent or immanent, either as ‘above’ or ‘below,’ in the ‘heights’ or in the ‘depths.’”<sup>11</sup> When transcendence is emptied, immanence loses its dichotomous other, hence its otherness, and the demand for a categorically new thinking is upon us (see top of 142).<sup>12</sup>

Confronted with such apocalyptic disruption, conservative Christians continue to assert that God abides in transcendence to the world. While fundamentalists insist that Jesus, the Son of God, was crucified, rose from death in resurrection, and literally ascended in the flesh to the right hand of the Father in heaven, considerable numbers of more sophisticated conservative Christians, including members of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, also continue to maintain the transcendence of God, renewing traditional arguments in a new context. At the opposite extreme, meanwhile, secularists and atheists, including the “new atheists” (Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and others), eagerly embrace Nietzsche’s core message of the death of God and assume that the demise of God renders crucifixion moot, a fossil symbol emptied of all religious power and meaning.

Altizer, in contrast to both positions, forges the death of God into a radical theology offensive to both camps: a post-theistic theology too ontologically transformative of God (unto Death) for the religious

conservative, on the one hand, and too religious in its portent for the strict secularist or atheist on the other. Altizer advocates the live option of a *Christian atheism* as against the options of a God resolutely without atheism or an atheism resolutely without God. While this approach certainly cannot be said to “mediate” the former positions, it does propose an entirely alternative way that conjoins a genuine atheism with a genuine theism. As the reviewer Robert S. Oventile has put it, even a secularist who is indifferent to religion may consider God’s death apocalyptic, because for millennia the Occident has been pervaded by the belief that a transcendent eternal being anchors existence: “For both the Christian and the non-Christian, when God dies, an actual nothingness remains.”<sup>13</sup>

An atheism that is simply dismissive of God has no capacity to contend with the potency of this actual nothingness—the dark night of nihilism that is effecting a de-foundational disorientation of Western and even global culture; meanwhile, a theism that is ultimately dismissive of atheism tends to discount its actuality altogether, declaring the death of God to be a self-refuting surd, since—if there is a God—by definition God cannot die. Complicating this either/or picture, however, secular theorists and historians are increasingly documenting the religious underpinnings and theological presuppositions that “secularity” has retained—to the point that this has become a mainstream view. Among such theorists, Santiago Zabala defines secularization as “the appropriate way of bearing witness to the attachment of modern European civilization to its own religious past, a relationship consisting not of surpassing and emancipation alone, but conservation, too.”<sup>14</sup> He asserts that secularization has become the norm for *all* theological discourse. Another cultural critic, Michael Allen Gillespie, makes patent that even if our age is defined by the death of God, it is still defined by its relationship to God and therefore defined theologically, even if by a negative theology; he argues that secularism itself can be understood as an extreme expression of the concealment of God, the *deus absconditus*, of Protestantism.<sup>15</sup>

But it is not possible to characterize Altizer’s death of God theology as expressing a “concealment” of God; it is far rather a full epiphany of the actual negation of God. The God whom we encounter in modernity, Altizer argues, is never essentially God’s Being but that Being poured out, evacuated, crucified in a movement of self-emptying that constitutes the genesis of our actual world, permeated by an actual

nothingness. This theology centers on kenosis and passion as the essential self-defining acts of Godhead, a kenosis and passion not limited to Jesus but understood to be the passion or kenotic self-negation of Godhead itself, a passion that thus negatively affirms the active Godhead of God, which a flatly irreligious secularist would not accept. This God of universal passion extends life to all the living, a life not rescued from death but grounded in death, for there is no actual life apart from such grounding in death, just as there is no genesis apart from negation. The self-emptying God, who is not the “plenitude of Being” but rather the manifest voiding of that plenitude, is the foundation of existence. Onto-theology is transformed into nihil-theology. Although primordially God is *esse ipsum*, Being itself, existentially God is *becoming Nothing*, the actual perishing of that Being.

Thus we begin to make sense of the crucial contrast Altizer draws here and elsewhere between the “primordial” and the “apocalyptic” Godhead (chaps. 3 and 8). God conceived as pure Being, *ipsum esse subsistens*, is a God untouched by actuality, a God untransformed and untransformable, a perfect quiescence before and apart from creation and incarnation. The apocalyptic God shatters that quiescence, empties Being, crucifying the primordially of God. This means that the “God after God” (the apocalyptic God) is no longer identifiable as a “God beyond God” (the primordial God) except qua crucified; that is, insofar as crucifixion reconciles these opposites in a *coincidentia oppositorum*. God as Omega is identical to God as Alpha crucified, thus manifesting the self-embodying will of Alpha in creation and incarnation. Granted the fact of incarnation, there can be no return to the primordial God, for the birth of actuality, the creation of an actual world, has wrought an irreversible shattering of Alpha by Omega. This “traumatic core of the divine kenosis,” as Žižek characterizes Altizer’s position, “retains a properly apocalyptic shattering power” that goes beyond the mere deconstruction of human ideas of God.<sup>16</sup> It is not an all-too-human construct of God that is shattered—an idolatrous faith or an ontotheology—it is God as Being itself that is shattered, giving rise to a universal actuality that is Perishing itself.

The concept of actuality as a “perishing” that is identical to the self-negation of God only fully entered Altizer’s theological vocabulary mid-career, with *The Self-Embodiment of God* (1977), as the influence of Hegel became increasingly decisive for his thinking. Altizer’s Hegelian understanding of actuality as perishing—which he also names with



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