

Feminism and the Deconstruction of God's Death

Victoria Barker

1. Introduction: Feminism and the Death of God

The relationship between feminism and postmodernism is not always an easy one. A range of criticisms has been levelled by feminists against this most slippery of discourses, targeting its apparent tendency to relativism, to apoliticism and, most importantly, its apparently refusal of 'woman' as a well-constituted political identity. These criticisms have, in turn, been ably addressed by feminists identifying themselves with the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and others.¹

There is one criticism, however, which still seems rather telling. It is raised by Rosi Braidotti, among others. In her *Patterns of Dissonance*, Braidotti ponders why it is that the so-called death of the subject should become a philosophical necessity at precisely that point in our history when women should at last be demanding - and to some extent achieving - the status of full subjecthood within our political, economic, philosophical and other theoretical agenda.² As women gain independence, autonomy, and the capacity for self-definition, why are these qualities no longer deemed to support a claim to subjective identity? It is a mundane reality that the status of a community or profession is commonly downgraded as women gain increasing access to it; is the same tawdry operation occurring here at the theoretical level?

Since this issue was first raised, it has often occurred to me that a parallel argument could be made out concerning the death of God. Is it happenstance that the death of God should have occurred at that moment when women are at last demanding - and to some extent achieving - the status of full subjecthood in relation to God? During this century, women have come to assume those qualities that were hitherto accorded to man in his relation to God: freedom, self-knowledge, and ethical and spiritual responsibility. Is the death

¹ For an authoritative collection of papers on the relationship of feminism and postmodernism see Linda J. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*, New York and London, 1990.

² Rosi Braidotti, 1991. *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1991, ch. 1.

Feminism and the Deconstruction of God's Death

of God the upshot of God's failure to vouchsafe such territory for man alone; is it the effect of the loss of exclusive authority from *his* God?

These questions skirt the philosophical and theological issues that motivated the philosophical statement of the death of God by G.W.F. Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche in the last century. Nevertheless, they invite us to focus on its implications for feminism. The notion of the death of God has not to date received much attention within feminist theology, yet it is clearly pivotal to the postmodern agenda. Ought feminism simply affirm God's death? Or are there specifically feminist concerns - such as those raised by Braidotti - which warrant caution? In this paper, I argue that feminism ought to tread carefully in this context since, *pace* the received opinion across feminist thought, the death of God is not clearly conducive to feminist interests. Indeed, insofar as feminist assertions of female identity mark a transcendental moment in their analyses, they cannot rest unequivocally on the premiss of God's death.

2. Two Exemplary Feminist Approaches to the Death of God: Beauvoir and Daly

Let us consider two exemplary feminist approaches to God, to see how the death of God is invoked at the origins of contemporary feminism. The first is that of the acclaimed 'mother' of contemporary feminist philosophy, Simone de Beauvoir; the second, that of Mary Daly, who might well claim the same status as regards contemporary feminist theology.

The atheistic sensibility of Simone de Beauvoir is palpable in Beauvoir's writings, nowhere more so than her 1949 classic, *The Second Sex*. Firmly embedded in its postwar context, Beauvoir proceeds from the need for man to assert his singular transcendence in his own, self-defined terms. For Beauvoir and her existentialist colleagues, man attains freedom only by asserting his own projects, his own criteria of success, independent of external legislature. God is interpreted as an anathema to such an ethic, as is the authority of the Church. While the Church may be able to condition the circumstances of my bodily existence, while it may oppress me physically, institutions such as these are unable to dictate the conditions of my conscious existence, which for existentialism has absolute priority. The radical humanist message of existentialism is that I am ultimately free to interpret the terms of my existence. And only in this, does human authenticity lie.

While admitting that many women have found a refuge in God, Beauvoir understands God in broadly Marxist terms as a means by which man subjugates woman, while claiming divine endorsement for his morality.¹ God provides the illusion of transcendence: 'When a sex or a class is condemned to immanence it is necessary to offer it the mirage of some form of transcendence'.² And he provides sanction for woman's immanence: 'Woman is no longer denied transcendence, since she is to consecrate her immanence to God'.³ True salvation for women lies in finding her own means to transcendence, eschewing those imposed upon her by her cultural inheritance. Without these terms of self-definition, she will remain forever locked in immanence, subject to bodily oppression, to the role for which she appears 'naturally' destined: that of reproducing the species without benefit to herself as an individual. She will remain forever 'other' to the self-defining and self-authenticating male.

And so, at the origin of contemporary feminism, we find the death of God proposed as the precondition for true self-identity, the identity of man and so, *a fortiori*, that of woman. For Beauvoir, writing in 1949, woman had yet to achieve such transcendence in her own right; with few exceptions (such as Beauvoir herself) women have, she argues, chosen to remain mired in immanence. That is, they have chosen to disavow their ethical and political responsibility for self-definition and self-determination. But, this recognised, there is no theoretical reason why women should not be able to share the status of transcendence that is necessary to full subjectivity.⁴

Mary Daly's disenchantment with the orthodox God is expressed rather more stridently than Beauvoir's. In *The Church and the Second Sex*, she nevertheless frames her argument by

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 632 ff.

² *Ibid.*, p. 632.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 633.

⁴ This said, for Beauvoir - at least according to one line of argument of *The Second Sex* - women's bodies do provide a concrete impediment to the attainment of full subjectivity. This peculiarity of Beauvoir's argument does not directly influence her argument concerning God, though it suggests that men are somehow 'closer' to transcendence than women, a contention which will bear on our later discussion. See Margaret Simons (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, University Park, PA., 1995, especially Arp's article, 'Beauvoir's Concept of Bodily Alienation' for an exhaustive treatment of the competing strands of her philosophy.

Feminism and the Deconstruction of God's Death

reference to her predecessor's approach, refining it to a feminist theological intent by focussing upon the possibilities of transcendence created by taking a stand beyond the earthly hierarchies of the Church.¹ In her later 'Afterword' to this text, she refers explicitly to the Nietzschean dictum, demanding the death of a God that transcends us, that stands as an external authority for our political, ethical and philosophical structures. Assuming a rather simplistic semiotics, she maintains a strict correlation between the symbology of a masculine God and the social structures of patriarchy. So, famously, where God is male then the male will be God: 'If God is in 'his' heaven as a father ruling his people, then it is in the 'nature' of things and according to the divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male dominated'.²

For Daly, the death of God the Father is thus, once again, the precondition for the emergence of a specifically female identity, one no longer subservient to man's desires and needs. Like many feminist theologians since, she argues that the received notion of God has served to undermine, rather than underscore, a feminine subjectivity. Indeed, the belief that there lies a straightforward correlation of symbol to reality leads Daly in the opposite direction of Beauvoir: in later writings such as *Gyn/Ecology*, she is inclined thereby to promote alternative images of the divine in powerful, gynomorphic guise.

It is well to note that these two approaches to God arose in a political climate somewhat different from our own. At this early stage of modern feminism, the very notion of a feminine/feminist subjectivity was not yet assured; the conditions of its possibility were still moot. Hence, the need to develop a feminist consciousness of the theological investments of patriarchy was paramount. That said, it must be admitted that each of these approaches faces conceptual difficulties that undermine their coherence - though perhaps not their influence - as feminist strategies. The weight of criticism of Beauvoir has fallen on her tendency arbitrarily to privilege the masculine in her description of transcendence, as illustrated in claims that if women are to achieve this status, they must distance themselves from the grounds of their oppression: their 'vocation as a female' to reproduce. Daly, by contrast, rejoices in the feminine, the earthly, the natural and so on, though in a largely uncritical

¹ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Boston, 1973, Conclusion.

² Mary Daly, 'After the Death of God the Father', in Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds), *Womanspirit Rising*, p. 54.

manner. Thus she reinforces precisely the gender stereotypes that it has been the task of later feminism to overturn.

3. The Implications of God's Death for the Human Subject

For our purposes, the difficulty of these two exemplary approaches is that they fail to respond to the philosophical difficulties raised by the notion of the death of God. Not that they are required to, of course; for neither theorist was this the motivating concern. While Daly uses this motto of the death of God explicitly, it is intended more as a catch-cry than anything else. The difficulties that G.W.F. Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche associated with this notion are not her own. And while certain Hegelian preoccupations are indeed Beauvoir's concern - to wit, the master/slave relation and the role of the other in the construction of subjectivity - her humanism ensures that these issues are resolved for her at a political and ethical level. The Unhappy Consciousness that for Hegel attended the death of God is certainly not a theological issue for Beauvoir; existential angst, such as it is, is countered only by the assumption of full responsibility for one's own personal fate.

Nevertheless, there are substantive issues that these analyses must address, if they are to be persuasive on the topic of God's death. In particular, they must convince us that the God in question - the one they are criticising - is in fact the one who has passed away, or at least deserves to have. What is their concept of God? Is such a God a worthy opponent? Stated succinctly, the God which these writers decry is God the patriarch. This is a God whose primary feature is transcendence, this understood as denoting existential priority. This is God as God-king, who exists in a hierarchy over and above his creation, and governs man with absolute power and strength. It is this inequality of power more than any other feature that for Daly indicates God's masculinity. It is this that leads to the mentality of conquest and domination recognisable in our history.

And, in truth, this concept of God is not far removed from that which prompted the death of God theme in Hegel and Nietzsche. It arose in the writings of Hegel, anticipated by a sermon of Martin Luther, as a result of the perceived alienation of man from God. This alienation is the direct result of the theology of God's radical transcendence.¹ Where God is conceived as a master to the religious servile, the result can only be opposition and estrangement, with all

¹ See G. W. F. Hegel, 'Revealed Religion', *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford, 1977.

Feminism and the Deconstruction of God's Death

the misery and meaninglessness that attends it. Where man can no longer perceive himself in the image of God, his isolation will lead to a fragmentation and disunity in culture as a whole. The only possibility of overcoming the Unhappy Consciousness to which this conception of God has given rise lies in the mutual self-recognition of God and man, each in other. In Hegel's account of history, the opposition between them will ultimately be resolved in a higher unity, a community governed by love. It is, however, not at all clear that women have an individual role to play in this community.¹

Developing this theme of man's servility to the Christian God at length in his later writings, Nietzsche assumes a God in the Platonic mould. This is a God who, first and foremost, upholds the independence of his own realm from that of humans. The hierarchy between these realms is maintained so as to assure the perfection of all that is divine against the imperfection of creation. Nietzsche's attack on such a God is virulent: it is the fabrication of a world-weary populace no longer capable of recognising the value of the world in which they live. Such a 'herd' are so sick of life and sick of themselves that they downgrade all that is good and natural in this life by inventing an opposition between it and a higher sphere, a supernatural. Man, he maintains, 'has belittled himself - he has separated two sides of himself, one very paltry and weak, one very strong and astonishing, into two spheres, and called the former "man" and the latter "God"'.² To the supernatural is attributed the qualities of the absolute - goodness, truth, perfection, and so on. The natural, then, is saddled with the qualities of the conditional - evil, falsity and imperfection.

The reverberations of this critique are clearly apparent in the existentialism of Beauvoir's collaborator, Jean-Paul Sartre. And from there, the influence passes, via Beauvoir and Daly, to contemporary feminist theology. But there are aspects of Hegel and Nietzsche's analysis which are missing from Sartre's, and which are pivotal to understanding the depth of the crisis which the death of God forebodes. The issue here is that the death of God affects not merely God's identity, his role and status, but our own as well. This drama is not confined to the divine realm alone; with the death of God, the natural realm is similarly thrown into disarray. For without a God to affirm his authenticity, the modern subject is no

¹ On women's role in Hegel's absolute community, see Patricia Jagentowicz Mills (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of G. W. F. Hegel*, University Park, PA, 1996, especially O'Brien, 'Man, Physiology and Fate'.

² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York, 1967, Section 136.

longer able to affirm himself, to assure himself of an identity, of a role and status for himself on this grey earth.

This implication of God's death is missing in Beauvoir and Daly. They identify the symbology by which man is affirmed in God's image, with its implication that the affirmation of woman is less sure where God's image is conceived as masculine. They correctly recognise that this God is to be understood as God the Father. But perhaps because of that very metaphor, they assume that in the process of dying God bequeaths to man his property. He bequeaths to man his dominion, this earth, and the capacity for rule over it. That is to say, he bequeaths to man his transcendence. Such theory, we might note, carries over into modern atheism the idea that man is made in the image of God.

The classic example of this thinking is offered by Sartre's description of God in the final sections of his *Being and Nothingness*, a text that predates *The Second Sex*, but which nevertheless owes much to his collaboration with Beauvoir.¹ For Sartre, man is that being that strives to be God; the image of God is created precisely so that man may mirror himself in it: 'Whatever may be the myths and rites of the religions considered, God is first "sensible to the heart" of man as the one who identifies and defines him in his ultimate project'. God is 'the value and supreme end of transcendence'; he 'represents the permanent limit in terms of which man makes known to himself what he is'. Thus 'to be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God'.²

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the death of God should occur, as I mentioned earlier, at that point in history when women are first claiming their own capacity for transcendence. In this context, the death of God might be understood as a rearguard action on the part of man to claim for himself the dominion formerly ruled by God. Thus for Sartre - and, ironically, for Beauvoir also - man is naturally more equipped for transcendence than is woman. Men are less 'mired in immanence', less preoccupied with the mundane - the earthly, the bodily - and so

¹ See Simons, 'Beauvoir and Sartre: the Philosophical Relationship' and Kruks, 'Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre about Freedom' in Simons, *op. cit.*, for Beauvoir's influence on Sartre's philosophy.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, London, 1958, p. 566.

Feminism and the Deconstruction of God's Death

more capable of rising above it.¹ For all that, equality feminism such as Beauvoir and Daly defend might be said to aid and abet this death of God the Father, even if only after the fact. This is because such feminism demands for woman some part of that divine inheritance to which man has laid claim.

The Nietzschean analysis clarifies the difficulties with this understanding of God's death. It shows that, upon his death, the dominion of God cannot pass to man, nor less to woman. In the absence of God, all concept of earthly dominion passes away with him, and so too, the notion of a sovereign subject who stands at the centre of his earthly realm. For the God who has died is not merely God the patriarch, but the God of ontotheology. This is a God who stands as the exemplary metaphor for ontological plenitude; this is God the absolute, the ideal, the ultimate and the infinite. Nietzsche's fundamental point is that, with the death of this God, all notions of ontological fullness are eclipsed: not merely the notion of man himself, but also the attendant notions of the soul, ego, the true self, authentic subjectivity and so on.² This is why we live in 'the twilight of the idols'.

For this reason, the death of God cannot provide the means to affirm a full-blooded sovereign subject, whatever its identity. In particular, it cannot serve as the precondition for the advent of a specifically feminist or feminine identity, as Beauvoir and Daly suggest. It cannot provide the preconditions for a theory of woman, as a fully self-identified and self-constituted philosophical or theological subject. For the very notion of the identity of the subject is thrown into question by the death of God: what is to found such an identity? Where is the guarantee of its authenticity? Hitherto, it was God who affirmed such an identity, who provided its source, the ground of its being. In the absence of God, however, such a being is unfounded, unsupported - or to use a Nietzschean metaphor, adrift on the sea of becoming.

One may like to respond that feminism is just the kind of theory which attempts to answer the problem posed by the death of God: the problem regarding the grounds for legitimation of one's self-identity. Starting with Beauvoir, feminism has prioritised the notion of the collective experience of women, claiming it as the ultimate

¹ For example: 'it is quite true that woman - like man - is a being rooted in nature; she is more enslaved to the species than is the male, her animality is more manifest ...', *The Second Sex*, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

² Mark C. Taylor gives a useful account of the mutual implications between the death of God and the death of the Subject in chapter 1 of his *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology*, Chicago and London, 1987.

criteria for judgements of value. But such a response assumes precisely what is in question, to wit, our ability to identify what is to serve as woman, and as woman's experience, for the purposes of our analysis. The question raised by the death of God is that of our ability to identify ourselves with the determinacy required to found our discourses and practices. It is difficulties such as these which are at present motivating the feminist preoccupation with the sex/gender classification. The questions raised by Judith Butler and others concern our ability to define 'woman' by reference to any determinate qualities whatsoever; recent gender theory undermines the inclusive and exclusive boundaries that have been taken to define 'woman' as such.¹ It shows that the notion of sex itself - and not merely that of gender - to be ultimately culturally variable.

Ironically, it was Nietzsche who first noted the difficulties that his line of reasoning poses for feminism - ironic, in that his intent was hardly to inform its progress.² But perhaps feminism is, as he says, a self-defeating enterprise - at least insofar as it must assume a notion of feminine identity which will then be undermined in the course of its analysis. Perhaps it must assume the coherence of woman's experience to show why the death of God the Father is necessitated. But that very theory itself implies, in turn, that the notion of woman is no longer tenable, as a stable foundation for its theory. We seem to be caught in a vicious circle. And this is why feminist philosophers have noted that pursuing such a postmodern approach involves having the ground pulled away from under our feet. It seems that not only are we left without God, but we are left without a concept of a feminine/feminist identity. And if so, then we are without the means to affirm a feminist theory of God or of a relationship to God that is specific to women as subjects in their own right.

4. The Turn to Immanence

How are we to respond to this apparent crisis? Are we to accept the death of God? How then to avoid its apparent implications? One

¹ See esp. ch. 1 of Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London, 1990.

² His disdain for feminism is doubly ironic in that his work has provided such a profound and beneficial influence on contemporary feminism. On this see the collections of Paul Patton (ed.), *Nietzsche, Feminism and Political Theory*, London and New York, 1993; and Peter J. Burgard (ed.), *Nietzsche and the Feminine*, Charlottesville and London, 1994.

Feminism and the Deconstruction of God's Death

response, which the tenor of Daly's writing certainly suggests, is that we need not preoccupy ourselves with such problems. They are, after all, the preoccupation of a bunch of 'dead white male' philosophers, and have little to do with the real world in which women - and men - strive to deal with political inequity. This response is not merely theoretically unsatisfying but also politically shortsighted. The questions over how one defines identity may be Platonic; they may have been thrown open by Hegel and Nietzsche, but for all that they have ongoing, concrete, material implications, to which I will shortly turn.

More charitably, however, we might take Daly to ascribe to the response which Nietzsche is commonly taken to advise. It is to refuse that notion of transcendence hitherto manifest in the realm of God and to turn, by contrast, to the notion of immanence manifest in the natural realm, the realm of concrete human relations. If, as Nietzsche maintains, the natural and the human have been devalued for the sake of the divine, then the appropriate response must involve their revaluation. One must affirm that this, the Platonic realm of appearances, is the highest and that whatever divinity there is must exist here before all.

A survey of recent feminist theology will establish that this is the favoured response. Introducing the topic of 'Transcendence' in the recently published *The A-Z of Feminist Theology*, for example, Lisa Isherwood summarises prevailing opinion with a rather sweeping generalisation: 'Feminist theology rejects the Greek dualism of spirit and matter and so finds problematic the notion of a transcendent God. Patriarchal religion has been to preserve the transcendence of God as a central component in creating a religious hierarchy on earth'.¹ Feminist theology is at one with the general trend of twentieth century thought in its appeal to immanence; the greatest minds of the last two centuries have embraced this 'heretical' philosophy, as Yirmiyahu Yovel describes it.² Feminism's complicity here is hardly surprising: the philosophy of immanence might after all be said to have given rise to feminism. For it is only as our attention turns to concrete social realities that

¹ Lisa Isherwood, 'Transcendence', in Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (eds), *The A-Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield, 1996, p. 226.

² Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence*, Princeton, 1989, p. xi. Yovel includes Goethe, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Einstein among these minds. In his epilogue to this text, Yovel provides an interesting account of the predominant features of this 'philosophy of immanence'.

the feminine may be recognised for its role in maintaining social, political, religious and other structures.

Feminism has in turn contributed to a philosophy of immanence, offering a sustained analysis of how the most abstract of concepts - such as transcendence and immanence - have a habit of instantiating themselves in the most material of ways. For our tradition does not merely prescribe how these terms are to be understood, but also how they are to be achieved in this world. And so, for example, across our philosophical and theological traditions, the notion of transcendence is metaphorically associated with masculinity: the capacity for transcendence is conceived a prerogative of man; woman is, by contrast, 'at home' on the immanent plane. And, as a result, the duties before God of the two sexes are singularly demarcated.

Feminism has shown just how fully immanent - that is, immanent to purely mundane political considerations - a notion of transcendence truly is. A particularly clear example of this is presented by Sartre. For Sartre, transcendence is only possible where one leaves behind the immanent realm, a realm depicted most strikingly by Sartre by the 'obscenity' of the female sex.¹ His philosophy allows for no recognition whatsoever of the role that this female sex had in creating the circumstances under which transcendence is made possible - not least, in giving birth to that male subject for whom transcendence is ordained. Nor does it attribute to such forms of creation a potentiality for transcendence.

There is, however, a danger for feminism in assuming that its philosophy or theology can simply remove itself to the other pole of the transcendence/immanence split, and so create an immanentism, uncontaminated by concepts of transcendence. Just as transcendence can be shown to rely on its opposite, so also, the inverse relation is demonstrable. And so, commonly, feminism will allow itself to rest on an unanalysed notion of woman's experience, treating it as given, as an absolute against which theory is to be assessed. Isherwood states: 'Feminist theology considers personal experience to be the starting point for theology and this has implications for our view of transcendence. We experience in and through our bodies, and so experience the immanence of the divine; to suggest that God is ultimately transcendent is perhaps the greatest illusion of all'.² The point is not merely that this appeal to immanence has *implications* for our view of transcendence, but that it *is* a view of transcendence. It is a view of how we are to transcend

¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, *op. cit.*, p. 613.

² Isherwood, 'Transcendence', *op cit*, p. 227.

Feminism and the Deconstruction of God's Death

the merely mundane and earthly, the finite and the conditional. Where woman's personal experience is understood as fundamental, where it serves as a wellspring, a ground or foundation for our theology, where it provides ultimate criteria against which notions of God are assessed, then it is treated as sacrosanct. It is what is commonly called 'a transcendent ground of appeal' - an idol of God, Nietzsche would retort. The notion of immanence that is being developed here is not a pure one. A concept of ultimacy, which allows us to transcend the purely finite and conditional, is reintroduced by stealth.

The issue here is not merely one of how the relationship between these two terms, transcendence and immanence, is to be understood; there is a further issue of how the terms themselves are understood. Martin Heidegger has argued that Nietzsche is guilty of inverting this hierarchy but leaving the terms of the opposition unchallenged, thus leaving the philosophy that underlies it intact.¹ Thus Sartre and others are able to appropriate the notion of transcendence, taking it as an paradigm of humanity, while leaving it opposed to immanence and all that it connotes - including the feminine. But by the same logic, feminist theologians are able to appropriate the notion of immanence, taking this as an paradigm of divinity, while leaving it opposed to transcendence and all that it connotes - including the masculine. Heidegger's point, which deconstructive theory has pursued, is that it is insufficient merely to invert the hierarchy of transcendent and immanent; one must also reinterpret and reinvest its terms. The point is important to feminist theology in that it suggests that the death of God will remain merely nominal while abstract notions of transcendence and immanence remain as given, and associated with the division of masculine and feminine. And this is so whether transcendence is framed by reference to notions of God, man or woman.

Feminist theologies, such as Isherwood introduces, have commonly resisted the notion of transcendence because transcendence has been understood on a model of hierarchy and domination. Thus the transcendence of the other - whether the other be God, man or woman - rules out *ex hypothesi* the possibility

¹ Martin Heidegger, 'The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead' in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, New York, 1977 pp. 53-112, p. 61 ff. My comments in the next section regarding Nietzsche's notion of the self-overcoming of God lead me to think that Nietzsche was aware of the need to re-evaluate the notion of transcendence. I interpret him as at least acknowledging, though not fully theorising, the interdependence of these two concepts, immanence and transcendence.

of reciprocity and communion between them. Interestingly, it is precisely this concern - to theorise the possibility of reciprocity and communion - that leads recent 'philosophies of alterity' to argue for a transcendence conceived even more radically. Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray are representatives of such a position. While there are differences among them, differences commonly made out in terms of the strength of their commitment to otherness, they nevertheless share this fundamental premiss: that without a sense of radical otherness, we will be without a means to theorise an excess, a beyond of the given symbolic structures of Western thought. For each, an image of divinity is considered a means to represent and acknowledge this otherness, and for Levinas and Irigaray in particular, this image has distinctly feminine connotations, insofar as its otherness is typified by the otherness of the feminine to the masculine symbolics that have underscored the development of Western thought.¹

For Irigaray, a 'sensible transcendent' is framed in the feminine, by reference to terms traditionally connoting feminine immanence; she speaks of it as 'an immanent efflorescence of the divine of and in the flesh'.² Nevertheless, this transcendent is conceived as purely excessive to the framework of the same/other and transcendent/immanent dichotomies, as conceived within our philosophical, theological and other traditions. Her concern here is that there should always remain a place, an interval, for the feminine, beyond the assimilating logic of these traditions. And so, contrary to Beauvoir, it is only when a radical otherness of the feminine is acknowledged that there will be the possibility of reciprocity between man and woman. And, contrary to the consensus of feminist theology, it is only when a radical transcendence of the other is acknowledged that it will be possible to conceive divinity in communion with us. For only by reconceiving transcendence in the mode of the feminine other is it

¹ See Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Dwelling' and 'Phenomenology of Eros' in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, 1969 and Luce Irigaray, 'Divine Woman' in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, New York, 1993. Interestingly, Beauvoir objects to Levinas' description of otherness as feminine, since for Beauvoir, the aim for women is to overcome their status as other. See *The Second Sex, op. cit.*, p. 16, fn. 1. For Irigaray, by contrast, women must affirm a more radical otherness if they are to avoid the ascriptions of a masculine symbolic, to which both same and other are attributed.

² Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Caroline Burke and Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca, NY, 1984, p. 30. See also pp. 32-33.

Feminism and the Deconstruction of God's Death

possible to accord the other the autonomy and respect needed for true reciprocity and communion. For Irigaray, the transcendence of the other is a precondition to woman's becoming, rather than an anathema to it.¹

5. The Feminist Deconstruction of God's Death

The difficulties of immanentism, as outlined above, suggest that feminist theology remains plagued by the difficulties of its tradition, and that it cannot simply divorce itself from this tradition by reverting from transcendence to immanence. Not only is it impossible conclusively to leave behind one's theoretical inheritance in this manner, it is not at all clear that it is desirable. Our theological inheritance is what allowed us to get to where we are now; it is only by recognising this that we will be able to move beyond it. And, pragmatically, our theological tradition has a wealth that we have still to plunder. Most significantly for feminism, there is a rich tradition of theology which itself refuses the characterisation of God that motivates the claims to the death of God.²

Here, I wish to raise a point that Catherine Madsen made several years ago in a review of recent texts in feminist theology in the journal *Signs*.³ She commented that the task of feminist theology (and indeed of any feminism) is not to engage with the poorest that our tradition has to offer, but with the richest. It is relatively easy - and increasingly, relatively uncontroversial - to sound the death-knell for the old patriarchal God, the power-hungry God who stands atop humanity, providing sanction for the worst of patriarchal excesses. Granted the political ramifications of this death are still to be effected in full, but the theory underscoring them is clear and

¹ This said, there remains a question of whether Irigaray fully recognises otherness as a general phenomenon, and not merely one governing woman. Serene Jones, for example, questions the consistency of Irigaray's depiction of God in these terms, charging her with making God a projection of woman's becoming. See Serene Jones, *Divining Women: Irigaray and Feminist Theologies*, Yale French Studies 87, 1995, pp. 42-67, p. 63 ff.

² See Brian Ingraftia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*, Cambridge, 1995, who argues that Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida fail to fully appreciate the difference of Christianity from the Platonic metaphysics that they critique.

³ Catherine Madsen, 'A God of One's Own: Recent Work by and about Women in Religion', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 19 (2), pp. 480-98, 1994, p. 481.

coherent, for all who care to attend to it. Here if anywhere is the place for Mary Daly's cynicism.

What feminist theology is now entitled to address is the best that our theological traditions have to bequeath. And this includes a God whose radical transcendence is traversed - and, paradoxically, underscored - by an equally radical immanence. It is a God who gives no particular counsel to a patriarchal cause, a God that cannot even be imaged exclusively in the masculine without risking the turn to idolatry. If it is this God that we are talking about (and it should be) the questions surrounding her continued livelihood become infinitely more complex - and infinitely more interesting.

Madsen argues for the need to diversify feminist strategies beyond their present consensus in the critique of God the patriarch. To date feminist theology has prioritised the question of how we are to conceive divinity in the wake of the death of God the Father. But the prior question, it seems to me, is one of how this deicide is itself to be conceived. And, pursuing this question, it soon becomes apparent that the very notion of the death of God is plagued by those same difficulties that arose earlier regarding human subjectivity and its authority. Who is it, after all, that authorises the death of God? Who is entitled to issue a warrant for deicide? Does the very notion of God's death not call into question the legality of such a move? For surely the power to legislate on the taking of life is paradigmatically God-given and, in the absence of God-given powers, how is such an edict defensible? Nietzsche himself notes that without 'a religious sanction and guarantee for our senses and rationality', we have no right to trust our judgements.¹

The most compelling response for a Nietzschean may be to argue that deicide is demanded on strictly ethical grounds; the decree is forged in our own best interests, since such a God demeans humanity. But what, precisely, is the ethical basis for murder? It is not at all clear that it is one such as feminism might construct or condone. Even where they have commended other parts of the Nietzschean corpus, feminist ethicists have been notoriously wary of the will to power,² a situation hardly helped by Nietzsche's repeated warnings against the effeminating tendencies and seductiveness of submission to God.³ Is effeminisation really one of the dangers that feminism seeks to avert?

¹ See *The Will to Power*, *op. cit.*, Section 436.

² See, for example, Diprose, 'Nietzsche and the Pathos of Difference' in Patton (ed.), *op. cit.*

³ See, for example, *The Will to Power*, *op. cit.*, Section 252. In a somewhat different manner, though one which deserves closer attention than it has yet

Feminism and the Deconstruction of God's Death

There are, however, aspects of Nietzsche's discussion of God's death which remain suggestive, particularly those that introduce a paradoxical note into the analysis. Nietzsche might be considered to have at first skirted the issue of the authority for deicide, in placing the originary pronouncement of the death in the mouth of a madman.¹ But elsewhere we find a novel way around the problem: God's death was something closer to suicide. Two explanations are presented, with characteristic irony, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche suggests, firstly, that the gods laughed themselves to death when one among them claimed to be 'the One God'. And later, this God choked with pity upon seeing what had become of humankind.² Thus no-one legislated for God's death; it is perhaps necessitated by the very notion of a transcendent God. For if God is defined by reference to transcendence then he must, as it were, transcend even himself. And in support of such an interpretation are comments such as this: 'All great things perish by their own agency, by an act of self-cancellation'.³

The paradoxes of God's death are pursued by Jacques Derrida, in a couple of papers on the relation of deconstruction and negative theology, that is, a theology that refuses the adequacy of positive speech of God.⁴ His approach suggests that the deconstruction of the notion of God can only be achieved by way of a deconstruction of the notion of God's death. For example, Derrida notes that the death of God literature calls to mind religious apocalypticism: those who preach the death of God preach the imminence of the end. The promise to reveal the secret of the end is of course a quintessential religious motif; secular discourses usurp this strategy precisely at that point at which the death of God is proposed as a final truth, a revelation or ultimate vision.⁵ The very statement of God's death shares this appeal to the transcendental.

been given, Hegel correlates the realm of religion with the feminine, domestic realm - and indeed with the realm of death.

¹ *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Harmondsworth, 1969, Part II, Section 125.

² See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, 1961, 'On Apostates' and 'Retired', Third and Fourth Parts respectively.

³ *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, 1967, Part III, Section 27.

⁴ See 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy' and 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' both in Harold Coward and Toby Fossey (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, 1992.

⁵ Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy', *op. cit.*, p. 53.

Feminist theology may well benefit from the negative theological tenor of these writings, insofar as this allows it to refuse traditional masculine imaging of God. Such symbolism merely reflects our incapacity to represent the transcendent. Feminism is, after all, thoroughly familiar with the process by which male-defined terms are projected outwards, and has been successful in elaborating the implications of such projections for those who introject them. It is also familiar with the disparity between the symbolic realm so constituted and the truth it purports to capture. Our symbolism of the divine, even while it refers to social realities, as Caroline Walker Bynum notes, never simply transcribes or prescribes them.¹ There remains, therefore, always an alienation between immanent and transcendent realms, between same and other; the transcendent, the other remains always radically other. This alienation is captured in the theme of the death of God.

While it is true that the radical transcendence of the other allows the notion of the death of God, it also allows us to demonstrate that the death of God can never fully capture the truth of our relations to the other. If the other remains always transcendent, then the conditions exist to reconceptualise it in terms that more fully reflect our experience of this transcendence in the immanent realm. Such reconceptualisations are never final; they will never allow us to capture the other in its very otherness. But, as John D. Caputo recently argued of Derrida, what is of primary concern here is that we leave space for another other, an other we may not yet have recognised or acknowledged.² Feminism is, first of all, a discourse of the other; it must be wary of acquiescing to those strategies intended to rule out other such discourses by fiat.

¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (eds), *Gender and Religion: The Complexity of Symbols*, Boston, 1986, p. 2.

² John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1997, p. 41 ff.