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The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion (review)

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with his angel locutors about the whereabouts of Paradise, saying it must be outside 45 degrees latitude north and south, since otherwise explorers would have found it. In return, the angels told Dee some strange and not altogether elevated things—that he might share his wife with other men, for example—and they debated prophecies about the deaths of contemporary rulers. Nor were Dee’s angels always good instructors—they began teaching him the characters, words, and names of God’s own language in March 1582 (sometimes at seven hours at a stretch), only for it to emerge that His language conformed to no known rules of grammar, syntax, or pronunciation, and that Dee would not actually be able to utter it until the final days.

For all these claims and experiences, Harkness insists, there can be no single descriptive category, and certainly not “magic”—a testimony to the extraordinary confusion and eclecticism that marked late-sixteenth-century knowledge. Nor can there be any alternative to the wide variations in Dee’s reputation, given the relativity of judgments this same confusion produced. But the question of unreason, by sixteenth- or twenty-first-century standards, remains. How to speak an unutterable language—“to talk,” as one angel put it to Dee, “in mortal sounds with such as are immortal”? How, indeed, to know an ineffable God?

—*Stuart Clark*

John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 368 pp.

Caputo here offers a Derridean-like meditation on Derrida on Derrida. He takes up what is both a constant invitation and also deflection of religious language in Derrida’s work. In its claim and recognition of Derridean writing as “a movement of transcendence,” Caputo’s argument underscores a fundamental element and context for Derrida. Yet, skirting, as it perhaps must, analogical and other alignments of the Derridean with and within Western theological discourses, this book—for all its strenuous good faith—cannot help risking *différance* without difference by verging into a universalism that Derrida works to rupture and breach. Still, Caputo brings Derrida toward a religious encounter without which, to quote Caputo quoting Derrida, his work can only be “understood less and less.”

—*Shira Wolosky*