



Re Manning, R. (2017) 'Life, sex, and ambiguity', in Dumas, M., Richard, J. and Wagoner, B., eds. *Les ambiguïtés de la vie selon Paul Tillich*. Berlin: de Gruyter, pp. 39-50.

Link to official URL: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110486254-004>

## ResearchSPAcE

<http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/>

This published version is made available in accordance with publisher policies.

Please cite using the reference above.

This cover sheet may not be removed from the document.

Please scroll down to view the document.

## Russell Re Manning

# Life, Sex, and Ambiguity

**Abstract:** This essay responds to Donald MacKinnon's influential critique of Tillich in his 1975 essay "Tillich, Frege, Kittel: Some Reflections on a Dark Theme," in which MacKinnon laments Tillich's "failure at the level of faith" on account of his sexual lifestyle. After outlining MacKinnon's argument in detail, I suggest four possible strategies of response available to those who wish to affirm the value of Tillich's theology in light of the biographical considerations of his sexual ethos. I conclude with a suggestion – *contra* MacKinnon – of the centrality of ambiguity to Tillich's life and his theology.

**Résumé:** L'auteur répond à l'influente critique de Donald MacKinnon contre Tillich. Dans son article de 1975 intitulé *Tillich, Frege et Kittel : quelques réflexions sur un thème sombre*, MacKinnon déplore le "manquement de Tillich au niveau de la foi" en revenant sur sa vie sexuelle. Après avoir esquissé l'argument de MacKinnon en détail, l'auteur propose quatre différentes stratégies de réponses disponibles pour ceux et celles qui souhaitent encore affirmer la valeur de la théologie de Tillich à la lumière des considérations biographiques de son éthos sexuel. L'auteur conclut en rappelant – *contra* MacKinnon – la centralité de l'ambiguïté pour la vie de Tillich et sa théologie.

In his highly influential essay "Tillich, Frege, Kittel: Some Reflections on a Dark Theme" (written in 1975), the Scottish theologian Donald MacKinnon passed judgement on Paul Tillich's sex life and ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> Identifying Tillich as "Weimar's theologian," MacKinnon finds in Tillich a "calculated, elaborately defended, yet always elaborately hidden perpetuation of a lifestyle involving an unacknowledged contempt...for the elementary, demanding sanctities of human existence."<sup>2</sup> Glossing MacKinnon's assertion of Tillich's "shameless and heartless sexual promiscuity," the Oxford historian of theology Diarmaid MacCulloch has more recently wondered "how far any of Tillich's theological work can be taken seriously."<sup>3</sup> MacCulloch suggests that "one can without too many ethical

---

1 Donald MacKinnon, "Tillich, Frege, Kittel: Some Reflections on a Dark Theme," in *Explorations in Theology* 5 (London: SCM Press, 1979): 129–137.

2 *Ibid.*, 134–5.

3 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence. A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 202.

problems rely on the professional expertise of a hypocritical car mechanic, but the stock in trade of theologians is honesty, and the same rules do not apply.”<sup>4</sup> MacCulloch goes on to use the issue of Tillich’s supposed sexual corruption to introduce a discussion of clerical child abuse, ecclesial collusion with the Nazi Holocaust and Christian attitudes towards slavery. His endorsement of MacKinnon’s judgement is widespread and for many, this is enough to deny Tillich a place as a legitimate theological voice.<sup>5</sup>

This essay will take up MacKinnon’s critique. I begin with a brief reprisal of MacKinnon’s critique before considering four different strategies of response open to those who wish nonetheless to continue to engage with Tillich. I suggest that MacKinnon’s objection to Tillich hinges on his claim that Tillich “suppresses ambiguity” and consequently, in a more speculative final section, I take up the question of ambiguity raised by MacKinnon to suggest an alternative, hermeneutical image for understanding Tillich as the theologian of ambiguity *par excellence*.

## 1 Life

MacKinnon begins his essay with a brief discussion of Plato’s *Republic* as “pinpointing one central problem of human existence, namely the relationship of moral goodness to intellectual insight.”<sup>6</sup> After a preliminary discussion of the moral failings of Frege and Kittel, he turns to his main (dark) theme:

This topic is of peculiar significance at this time, as surely I am not alone in being deeply disturbed by the books treating of the life of the theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich, one by his wife Hannah, and one by an American psychiatrist who was his friend, Dr Rollo May.<sup>7</sup>

MacKinnon notes that Tillich’s work is “very much discussed” and that he himself was present in Aberdeen when Tillich delivered his Gifford Lectures in 1953 and 1954.<sup>8</sup> He gives a brief overview of Tillich’s career and concludes with these telling words:

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See also Frederick J. Parrella, “Does Life Imitate Art or Art Life? The Ambiguities in Paul Tillich’s Theology and in His Personal Life,” in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Donald MacKinnon, “Tillich,” 133.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

His [Tillich's] boldness in exploration, his frequent insights, his readiness to try to hold together seeming incompatibles – all have contrived to win him praise as well as to occasion exasperation. It is an exploratory quality that has always marked his best writing, and it came through full measure in his lecturing. Yet when I recall now his lectures at Aberdeen twenty years ago, I ask myself what I am to make of the startling contrast between the staid, sombrely dressed, elderly Professor, and the man living in those same years in the USA the life his wife describes.<sup>9</sup>

And here, MacKinnon gets to his point:

Tillich emerges as ready to use his unquestioned powers as a teacher, as an intellectual prophet, to attract women into his orbit, whom it would seem that he often seduced. He emerges as wilfully promiscuous, and in his promiscuity coldly cruel towards his wife.<sup>10</sup>

Reflecting on incidents recounted in Hannah's book and the "discernible elision of awkward material" in Rollo May's, MacKinnon is led to conclude that "it is simply NOT enough to say that one now sees him 'warts and all.'" Rather, "the flaws of which Hannah Tillich writes inevitably infect the texture of her husband's *oeuvre*. We are aware of an element of fraud, of hypocrisy here as so often 'the tribute vice pays to virtue.'"<sup>11</sup>

Warming to his theme, MacKinnon goes further:

But one is also aware of something that is of deeper significance.... Paulus and Hannah Tillich belonged to the world of [the] Weimar [Republic]; but it is not enough to say that Paulus carried its ethos over into the world of his exile. It is the calculated, elaborately defended, yet always equally elaborately hidden perpetuation of a life-style involving an unacknowledged contempt not for traditional churchly forms (the sort of thing that the young Tillich had known as a boy in his father's house), but for the elementary, demanding sanctities of human existence, that demands comment.<sup>12</sup>

Here MacKinnon turns to compare Tillich to Kittel, arguing that whilst Kittel's anti-Semitism was "a deadly infection" traceable to a widely shared misinterpretation of Luther's two Kingdom doctrine, in Tillich's case, by contrast, "we have to reckon with the built-in risk of a deep corruption in a theology that would cultivate a temper of exploration."<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

This, then, finally seems to be MacKinnon's real concern: Tillich's theological temper – which he labels as “romantic” and “heroic” – presumably intending a promethean attempt at daring originality. I quote at length:

The temptation that must beset the theologian whose temper is that of the explorer of the unknown, even the forbidden territories of the world of ideas, is not to be identified too quickly with a superior disdain for the proved simplicities of traditional wisdom. Rather it is one of self-dramatization, of seeing himself in his own eyes as one taking upon himself the most demanding and most frightening tasks, emancipated both by the aims, and indeed by the content of his enterprise from the discipline of a self-questioning that reaches the very substance of what he is in himself...<sup>14</sup>

Against the Christian model of Christ's “acceptance of unbearable ambiguity” in his refusal of Satan's temptation to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, MacKinnon sees in Tillich's theology the “total emancipation from ambiguity” as the key that unlocks his “failure at the level of faith.”<sup>15</sup> He concludes his essay with the following invocation:

All human faith depends upon, and is hardly decipherable *mimesis*, of the *fides Christi*, the faith of Christ, that is itself human expression of God's total fidelity to himself and to his creation. And this faith of Christ we have most painfully to see as something that if we rest our hope upon it, and find in it the source of our flickering charity, we must affirm for what it was, and through the Resurrection, eternally is: response after the manner of God's being and of human need, no wilful wrestling of an unambiguous triumph over circumstance that will, by its seeming transparency, satisfy our own conceit.<sup>16</sup>

Not quite a straight-forward attack on Tillich's sexual *mores*, MacKinnon's underlying argument is more subtle and seemingly of greater consequence than an expression of distaste at Tillich's behaviour. In essence, MacKinnon's argument seems to be that Tillich's sexual life is emblematic of his basic anthropology; derived, MacKinnon affirms, from Tillich's immersion in the decadent culture during the Weimar Republic, symbolized by the images of cabarets and avant-garde expressionism in Berlin after the First World War – a long way from the cultural ambience of Aberdeen in the same period, I imagine! Tillich's anthropology is itself indicative of an even more basic theological metaphysics that MacKinnon labels “romantic” and identifies with a suppression of ambiguity. The implication (which MacKinnon does not fully spell out for us) is that there is a “Chris-

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 136–7.

tian” alternative to Tillich’s un-Christian “heroism” that embraces theological ambiguity and thus avoids objectification and ensures unexploitative sexual relations.

## 2 Sex

As someone who values Tillich’s theology (and the prominent place of ambiguity within it) and who is troubled by the apparently problematic nature of his sexual life, I propose to explore underlying argument of MacKinnon’s essay by considering four responses to MacKinnon in turn, before in conclusion taking up an implication of MacKinnon’s characterisation of the temper of Tillich’s theology as one of exploration of the unknown by suggesting that far from suppressing ambiguity, Tillich’s theology is perhaps best characterised by the theme of ambiguity.

The first possible response to MacKinnon’s reflections is to affirm that MacKinnon defames Tillich, who led a relatively normal and unproblematic sexual life. It is not my intention to develop this response, but I do think that it is important to note a number of cautions to the unrestrained acceptance of Tillich’s sexual life as unambiguously problematic. Hannah Tillich’s account and Rollo May’s response, which provide the context for MacKinnon’s reflections, are far from unbiased neutral texts – both have a stake in presenting Tillich in a certain light, which must be acknowledged. At the same time, care must be taken to avoid tarring Tillich with the unambiguous brush of sexual predator; he was clearly a charismatic and to some extent naive character – a powerful and potentially dangerous combination. Finally, it is worth pausing to reflect before casting the first stone: however one characterises Tillich’s sexual life, one must consider to what extent is it uniquely problematic compared to those of other theologians, much less subject to the kind of intense scrutiny that MacKinnon’s essay epitomises.<sup>17</sup> MacKinnon concludes his Reflections with reference to Christian life as

---

<sup>17</sup> A recent review of a volume of essays on the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder commends the collection for including an essay engaging with claims of Yoder’s sexual abuse of women, before noting that “Tillich, Bonhoeffer and Barth’s reputations have also been tarnished by subsequent discoveries of their treatment of women.” Robin Gill, “Review: J. Denny Weaver (ed.), *John Howard Yoder: Biblical [sic.] Theologian* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2015),” in *Theology* 119:1 (Jan-Feb 2016): 78. The essay referred to is Ted Grimsrud, ‘Reflections from a Char-grined “Yoderian” in Face of his Sexual Violence,’ in *John Howard Yoder. Radical Theologian*, ed. J. Denny Weaver (Eugene, Oregon, Cascade Books, 2014), 334–351. To my knowledge, there is scant published reflection on this aspect of the lives (and theology) of Bonhoeffer and Barth.

the “hardly decipherable *mimesis* of the faith of Christ:” we may at least question what such a faith might look like in sexual terms. MacKinnon does not give us an account, save to insist that it will have little to do with the “emancipation from ambiguity” that he (mistakenly) identifies as characteristic of Tillich.<sup>18</sup>

A second possible response would be to assert that MacKinnon is wrong to link Tillich’s sexual life to his theology and to suggest rather that the two should be kept apart, much like the non-overlapping magisteria of the science-and-religion literature. To some extent, this approach repeats a laudable articulation of the dangers of the *ad hominem* fallacy and it is surely necessary to affirm some degree of separation between a thinker’s life and their ideas to be able constructively to engage with anything written or taught by an imperfect person. As MacKinnon himself confirms, Kittel’s racism does not invalidate the usefulness of the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, and as another example, it is at least plausible to argue that the philosophical significance of Martin Heidegger’s work is not diminished by his own political stance (a question that has, of course, recently been revived by the publication of the so-called ‘black notebooks’).<sup>19</sup> However, it is equally clear that when a person’s basic theoretical positions impact on their basic interpersonal relations, something needs to be said. It is not that we should somehow expect better from religious leaders or theologians (as opposed to car mechanics and philosophers); rather this response would insist that it is precisely Tillich’s own theology that demands that we rec-

---

For some information and commentary on Bonhoeffer’s late engagement to and relationship with Maria von Wedemeyer, see the editorial materials in *Love Letters from Cell 92: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer*, ed. Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and Ulrich Kabitz, trans. John Brownjohn (London: HarperCollins, 1994). See also Charles Marsh’s recent biography for further suggestions about Bonhoeffer’s relationship with Eberhard Bethge, as well as Bethge’s own reflections on friendship: Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory. A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Vintage, 2015), and Eberhard Bethge, *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). For Barth, the discussion concerns his relationship with his academic secretary Charlotte von Kirschbaum and its implications for his family. See the discrete references from Barth’s later assistant Eberhard Busch: Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1976), and Eberhard Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth. Tagebuch 1965–68* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2011). For more details, see Renate Köbler, *In the Shadow of Karl Barth. Charlotte von Kirschbaum*, trans. Keith Crim (Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1989), and Suzanne Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth. A Study in Biography and the History of Theology* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>19</sup> For a recent, balanced engagement with the controversy caused by these publications, see *Reading Heidegger’s Black Notebooks 1931–41*, ed. Ingo Farin and Jeff Malpas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

ognise that everyday acts of making our way through the world have theological significance for us and for others. The theologian of culture could hardly expect us to prisme apart sex and God, without cutting against the grain of the fundamental theological insight that religion and culture (including thereby theology and sex) are inextricably interdependent. Thus, to claim that Tillich's sexual ethos and his theology have no relation would be to seek to isolate religion from culture – precisely that which Tillich railed against his whole life.

An alternative third response would accept that MacKinnon is correct to be concerned about the relation between Tillich's sexual life and his theology, but would affirm that MacKinnon is wrong in his diagnosis of the problem. Instead of MacKinnon's claim that Tillich's theology undergirds and supports his lifestyle, this response asserts by contrast that Tillich is inconsistent in applying his theology to his life and, in effect, fails to live up to his theology. Had Tillich lived consistently according to the fundamentals of his theology, then there would be a very different story to tell. The claim here would be that Tillich's theology is not "romantic" in MacKinnon's problematic portrayal of that position, but is instead "romantic" in a more genuine sense of being riven by ambiguity. Tillich's sexual life is, on this view, far from consistent with his theology and represents not its expression but its betrayal. With MacKinnon, then we might well be disappointed in discovering tales of Tillich's sexual lifestyle, but against MacKinnon we could affirm in Tillich's thought precisely the corrective criteria that militate against such sexual failings. Tillich's status as a thinker of the boundaries, his persistent attention to the ways in which Christian faith falls foul of its own prescriptions (epitomised in his notion of the Protestant Principle) and his unflinching recognition of the impermanence even of the most apparently unshakeable religious symbols, all give us reason to question MacKinnon's appellation of Tillich as a "romantic" (in MacKinnon's sense). Indeed against MacKinnon's claim that Tillich suppresses ambiguity, MacKinnon's account of Christian faith as the "acceptance of unbearable ambiguity" could well have been written by Tillich himself.<sup>20</sup> The real scandal, then, would be not that Tillich's theology undergirds his sexual life, but that it fails to do so.

---

<sup>20</sup> Possible citations in support of this claim abound, see, for instance the following characteristically Tillichian discussion of doubt as a structural element in faith: "There is no faith without an intrinsic 'in spite of' and the courageous affirmation of oneself in the state of ultimate concern. This intrinsic element of doubt breaks into the open under special individual and social conditions. If doubt appears, it should not be considered as the negation of faith, but as an element which was always and will always be present in the act of faith." Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 24–5.

Perhaps, but finally, I want to suggest there is a fourth, more risky alternative response that would move us beyond Tillich specifically and towards a more constructive consideration of the difficult issues surrounding the theological implications of sexual embodiment. In essence, my suggestion is that maybe MacKinnon is actually simply a prude, whose attack on Tillich's theology via his sexual life is motivated more by his bourgeois morality than it is by genuinely theological considerations. To put the point in a less *ad hominem* manner, my claim is that Tillich's sexual lifestyle does indeed enact his theology, precisely as it moves beyond morality into theology of culture. Here a parallel is affirmed between Tillich and Kierkegaard, in the recognition of a religious movement beyond 'the ethical,' that returns us to the first response, but from a different perspective. No longer is the concern one of condemning or justifying Tillich's sexual life in terms of the accepted criteria of morality; rather the issue now becomes one of an interrogation of a theological account of sexual relations beyond the perspectives determined by morality.

When considering Tillich's immersion in the "often widely experimental period of the Weimar Republic," MacKinnon refers to the welcome given to the Nazi attainment of power in 1933 by many theologians, notably Karl Heim, who endorsed the 'moral renovation' of German society by the purification of morals being meted out by the Brownshirts.<sup>21</sup> Heim and others, of course, were tragically mistaken in their conflation of their repulsion at the lax morality (in particular sexual morality) in the Weimar Republic with an embrace of Nazi puritanism. In their moralistic distaste for the sexual experimentation of the post-War period, they were too quick to reach for an apparently wholesome alternative. MacKinnon shares their distaste, even as he resolutely turns to his understanding of the demands of Christian theology (and not an alternative alluring political programme) as his source of moral renovation. For MacKinnon, the Weimar ethos is characterised by a contempt for "the elementary, demanding sanctities of human existence" but we are never really given the reasons for this claim, although we are to presume that it is related to his later characterisation of Tillich's theological temper as that of exploration.<sup>22</sup> But why, and specifically why in the arena of sexual relations, should Weimar experimentation (and its associated theology of exploration) be any less respectful of the sanctities of human existence? Why, in other words, should such sanctities be grounded in (presumed) moral certainties (as exemplified in its extreme form by the Nazi neo-puritanism) and not in cultural and theological uncertainty?

---

<sup>21</sup> Donald MacKinnon, "Tillich," 134.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

For MacKinnon, it seems, exploration (in theology as much as in sex) is unavoidably detrimental to life. To venture beyond accepted convention is for MacKinnon to contest the authority of a given *positum* (be that of a particular society or a particular received version of Christianity). We might share MacKinnon's concerns about a theologian who, knowing better than the tradition, seeks single-handedly to reinterpret it for himself (I use the male pronoun deliberately!); and yet surely we must be equally wary of the theologically quietistic model of unquestioning acceptance. Of course, MacKinnon was no fideist and nor was he a *Kulturprotestant*, and yet his confidence that experimentation can only cause harm resonates with precisely the kind of theological positivism that Tillich's whole theological programme seeks to resist. For Tillich, theology is intrinsically uncertain and it is perhaps precisely by embracing that uncertainty in life – as well as in thought – that its basic demanding sanctities can be respected.

### 3 Ambiguity

In my third and final section, I turn more explicitly to the main theme of our *Colloque*: ambiguity. And here I wish to move beyond the debate about Tillich's sexual life and take up a line of thought provoked by MacKinnon's characterisation of Tillich's ethos (both his life and thought) as marked by a "total emancipation from ambiguity." The context is very different, but I cannot help but hear here echoes of the postmodern condemnation of Hegelian modernity for its hubristic desire comprehensively to enfold the world and all its ambiguities into the all-embracing arms of sameness. This point is made specifically of Tillich and his understanding of *eros* in the context of a 2010 article in *Modern Theology* by Jan-Olav Henriksen.<sup>23</sup> In the course of comparing Tillich to Jean-Luc Marion, Henriksen, without further elaboration, writes that "as a typically modern thinker, Tillich is more concerned with unity than difference."<sup>24</sup> Henriksen does not elaborate, but such a view resonates with Thomas J. J. Altizer's disappointment with the third volume of Tillich's *Systematic Theology*, with its apparent collapse of all of Tillich's dialectical subtleties into the "end of history and the final conquest of the ambiguities of life."<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Eros and/as Desire – A Theological Affirmation: Paul Tillich Read in the Light of Jean-Luc Marion's *The Erotic Phenomenon*," in *Modern Theology* 26:2 (2010): 220–242.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 4.

All three (MacKinnon, Altizer, and Henriksen) in their very different ways seem to lament Tillich's 'heroic' 'modern' 'systematicity' and, to the extent that Tillich's theology is read backwards as one of the last great monuments to the power of human reason to comprehend and encompass the mysteries of the Christian faith, the charge is perhaps not without merit. However, it is my suggestion that such approaches significantly overemphasise Tillich's 'liberal' system-building aspirations by, in effect, portraying him as always a crypto-confessional theologian in thrall to that dangerous (Hegelian) temptation to identify the insights of supposedly universal reason with the specifics of one particular tradition. Of course, Tillich is, undoubtedly, a Christian theologian and he does, undeniably, have a penchant for systemic structures (his thought is remarkable for the rigour of its formal architecture, notwithstanding its frequent essayistic presentation), and there is a fairly strong dose of Hegelian modernism in Tillich's unstinting endeavour to correlate the message of the Christian faith to the situation of "modern man." And yet, there is another Tillich – more radical perhaps? – whose life and thought subvert the liberal modern project and for whom unresolved ambiguity is key. Far from an emancipation from ambiguity in favour of speculative unity, this Tillich is unflinchingly committed to the embrace of difference and to the fractured – and fracturing – polyvalence of life, in all its forms, conditioned and unconditioned.<sup>26</sup>

John Thatamanil affirms Tillich's postmodern credentials as 'JewGreek;' Mike Grimshaw writes of the 'impurity' of Tillich's thought, and Dan Whistler identifies Tillich as a 'critical' thinker, in whose work the drive for system is always held in tension with its crisis in freedom.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps, ambiguity can provide an interpretative key to understanding – and appreciating – Tillich afresh: no longer as a liberal accommodationist who either subdues traditional Christianity to the latest shiniest forms of cultural expression or who answers such cultural

---

**26** For a related discussion of Tillich's embrace of ambiguity, even in his doctrine of God, see my "The Incompleteness of the Completed': Eternal God, Eternal Life, and the Eternal Now," in *Eternal God, Eternal Life. Theological Investigations into the Concept of Immortality*, ed. Philip Ziegler (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), 169–187. More concretely, see the evidence for Tillich's ambiguous lifestyle as displayed during his trip to Japan in 1960, somewhat perplexingly to his hosts: *Paul Tillich – Journey to Japan in 1960*, ed. Tomoaki Fukai (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013).

**27** John Thatamanil, "Tillich and the Postmodern," in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 288–302; Michael Grimshaw, "The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Radical, Impure Tillich," in *Retrieving the Radical Tillich. His Legacy and Contemporary Importance*, ed. Russell Re Manning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 113–132; Daniel Whistler, "The Critical Project in Schelling, Tillich and Goodchild," in *Retrieving the Radical Tillich*, 209–232.

impermanence with the comforting balm of a newly palatable traditional Christianity. Instead, this is the Tillich for whom theology is always theology of culture (even when presented as ‘Systematic Theology’) and for whom nothing – neither contemporary culture nor traditional Christianity – can be allowed to ossify as the last word.

Tillich’s systematicity is constantly self-subverting; he is constantly drawn to re-writing, spinning out system after system; not merely in light of new circumstances but rather on account of the basic instability of his thought. Here, the helpful comparison is not with Hegel, who sought to impose the self-same structural rigour in every domain he encountered, but with Tillich’s real mentor, Schelling, whose own career was marked – as was Tillich’s – by a constant re-systematizing.

Ambiguity is defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as “the quality of being open to more than one interpretation; inexactness” and this, I suggest, gets us to the heart of Tillich. From the Latin *ambigere* (*ambi* and *agere*) ‘to dispute about,’ ‘to wander about,’ [or] ‘to err,’ ambiguity captures perfectly the ‘double dealing’ that makes Tillich matter (and, perhaps, accounts for MacKinnon’s inability to recognise the staid professor he heard lecturing in Aberdeen as the same man whose sexual lifestyle he read about with such distaste).

A final reflection. To characterise Tillich as a theologian of ambiguity presents a *hermeneutical* alternative to the predominantly *topological* images of Tillich that we have become habituated to, notably the image of the boundary, which Tillich himself invoked of course.<sup>28</sup> The boundary image has served us well, but perhaps it is time to supplement it with an alternative that allows Tillich’s genuinely dialectical duplicity to take centre stage. The image of the boundary captures well the dual-faceted Tillich, but boundaries just as they demarcate are also themselves located; to be on the boundary is, in the end, to be somewhere – and not somewhere else; it is, albeit in the most qualified sense possible, still nonetheless an identity, an either/or. By contrast, the image of ambiguity allows for a thoroughgoing both/and; to be ambiguous just simply is to be unresolvable – like the ambiguous image of the Necker Cube or the duck-rabbit. I finish with a few lines from Philip Roth, another master of ambiguity, from his 1986 novel *The Counterlife*, that capture the thoroughgoing sense of ambiguity characteristic of Tillich – his theology and his life:

The burden isn’t either/or, consciously choosing from possibilities equally difficult and regrettable – its and/and/and/and/and as well. Life is and: the accidental and the immutable, the elusive and the graspable, the bizarre and the predictable, the actual and the po-

---

<sup>28</sup> Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary* (London: Collins, 1967).

tential, all the multiplying realities, entangled, overlapping, colliding, conjoined – plus the multiplying illusions!<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Philip Roth, *The Counterlife* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 306.