The Crisis of Writing

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Abstract

Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* is often criticised for its theological inadequacies, chiefly its problematic doctrine of God. Consequently, it is frequently located as an interesting moment in Barth’s thought, but one that must be looked beyond. In this paper I linger over the text, putting aside some of the more formal doctrinal problems, focusing on the relation between theological rhetoric and political rationale. Concentrating on these issues, particularly in the early stages of the commentary, will reveal the way political and theological aesthetics are innately linked in the text. This will be seen through Barth’s careful deconstructive use of the language of *Grund* and his play on its resonance both with the *ratio* and the language of *Boden*. This deconstructive rationality is intrinsically political, as it shadows an earlier political logic from his Tambach lecture. Further, we shall see that Barth explicitly articulates his project, in contrast to his teachers, as a playful *Geschichte* rather than *Historie*. It will be argued that built into these plays is a further sense of the inevitability of the failure of theological writing itself. Barth understands that the failure of the theological academy in supporting WW I is as political as it is theological, and vice versa. His respondent theological aesthetic, itself a performative failure of another kind, is equally politically motivated.

Keywords

Karl Barth, religious socialism, theological aesthetics, political theology, *Krisis*.
INTRODUCTION

This paper will argue that tracking the dialectical pattern of Karl Barth’s prewar engagement with religious socialism through to his Romans commentaries reveals an abiding theological commitment to solidarity with those on the wrong side of history. History, as construed in his prewar texts, is the site of class conflict, in which the gospel is disclosed as that which knits various movements for political solidarity together. A historical dialectic is established in which exploitative conditions form the ground of the establishment of the means for resistance. While after the Great War Barth abandons this historical dialectic, he does not abandon his commitment to solidarity. Here solidarity is established between all who find themselves condemned by the divine No—that is, all humanity. With this move, we see in Romans that he disentangles himself from the affirmation of any particular political program, and inhabits a relentlessly critical form of theological negation. This negation, I argue, serves as much of the logic for his abandonment of traditional forms of theological expression, especially of historical-critical inquiry. Barth’s use of paradox, dialectic, and abrupt forms of expression can be seen as a part of a larger strategy to locate theology itself in Krisis with the rest of European culture. The theologian can no more sooner offer a positive political program than she will fall into idolatry.

In order to argue this, I will move through two key texts. First, I will examine the relationship between solidarity, socialist politics, and theological dialectic in Barth’s 1911 “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung.” This preliminary examination will set the stage for an examination of the same logic of solidarity in Romans, in which solidarity is found under the divine No. I will then show how this affects the politics of theological writing with a final examination of Barth’s distinction between Historie and Geschichte, in which the theologian interrupts linear historical time with the eternal history that is the cross.

SOLIDARITY

BARTH’S EARLY THEOLOGICAL POLITICS OF SOLIDARITY

It is well documented that Barth retained strong socialist commitments in this period of his development. While working in the pastorate at Safenwil, he was moved by the
plight of the workers, to the point of even becoming embroiled in industrial disputes. Further, he had been heavily influenced by the work of Swiss religious socialists Hermann Kutter and Leonhard Ragaz. Even through this early period, Barth retained reservations over the program of religious socialism. I will not debate the nature of Barth's indebtedness to these figures here, as this has been documented by others.¹ However, what I do intend to discuss is the way that Barth's speech concerning solidarity among workers in an explicitly socialist grammar, evidenced primarily in the 1911 lecture “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung,” begins to shift into a theological register by the time the first Romans commentary was written in 1919. The fundamental shift is from a set of immanent material social relations of alienation, to a theological construction of alienation that precedes these material conditions forming their ground. In order to accomplish this, we will examine the political significance of the language of solidarity (Solidarität). Earlier on in Barth this refers to the material conditions of alienation which provoke theological reflection, and by Romans is explicitly deployed in order to speak of the place of all sinful human creatures before divine judgement.

Barth begins his famous 1911 lecture “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung”² by dialectically identifying the social movement and Jesus Christ: “Jesus Christ is the social movement and the social movement is Jesus in the present.”³ We are thereby taken into the heart of Swiss politics in the period. Barth refuses any identification of Jesus with any particular socialist party (primarily the SDP), and instead identifies Jesus with the desires of socialists, stating:

When I speak of the social movement, I do not mean what that and that and all of us Social Democrats do, but what they want. As Christians, we also want to be judged by God and by people after what we want, not what we do.⁴

The identification of Jesus with the desires of the social movement allows Barth to avoid any identification of Christ with any particular political party or program. However, it does not avoid what he will distance himself from later, which

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³ Barth, “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung,” 387. All translations are the author’s.
⁴ Barth, “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung,” 386–87.
is the identification of Christ with immanent historical movements. He states that Jesus is not “the German, French or Aargau Social Democrat,” rather he is “the inner connection that exists between the eternal, the enduring, universal in modern social democracy and the eternal Word of God in the flesh which Jesus has become.” Jesus is the motor of varying historical movements for justice for the downtrodden.

While Barth does distance Christ from any particular political party or program, he does imagine material conditions in which the damaging effects of sin might be overcome, unlike later in Romans. In this lecture original sin is named in a distinct way, as the assertion of “I” and “MINE” over property. Quoting the atheist Joseph Dietzgen sympathetically, Barth notes, “The true original sin against which the human race so far suffers is selfishness.” This selfishness becomes real and concrete in bourgeois capitalist private property relations. The solution to this concrete vision of original sin, then, has real materially imaginable consequences. So, Barth can state that “Jesus’ opinion concerning property is: Property is sin, because property is selfishness. What is mine is not mine at all!” The moment in which sin is overcome is the moment in which private property relations are broken down and a new form of collective “ownership” emerges.

What is apparent is that Jesus functions as the condition for political liberation and its unseen ground, which is concretely envisaged as liberation from the conditions of economic exploitation. Here we see a dialectical pattern emerging which will continue into the Romans commentaries. At first this dialectic functions immanently and historically, as the conditions of political (and economic, not to be sharply distinguished) alienation function as the condition for positive solidarity. Toward the end of the lecture, where he hits his rhetorical crescendo, Barth turns to the Communist Manifesto in order to dialectically articulate a positive political position upon negative conditions. Hence, he grounds socialism positively on the negative, particular, and historical conditions of capitalist exploitation:

The Social-Democrat not only says, the material situation of the proletariat must become another, better. He not only says this for the purpose that human labour

5 Barth, “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung,” 389.
6 Barth, “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung,” 402.
7 Barth, “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung,” 402.
8 Barth, “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung,” 402.
must cease to be a mere augmentation of private capital, but he seizes and manages a means to counteract these goals of realisation. This means is called organisation. The historical program of socialism, the communist manifesto of 1848, concludes with the famous words: “Proletarians of all countries, unite!” Socialism is grounded on the solidarity (Solidarität) already imposed on the proletariat by the capitalist system. Twenty or more pairs of hands are involved in the creation of a single shoe! Socialism now wishes to make the worker aware of this solidarity, which is necessary in itself, as something proud and beautiful, as the source of its strength and its progress. He should think collectively, in solidarity, together, socially learn how he actually worked socially long ago. He should become a class-conscious worker. The saying came from the “workers’ battalions”: the single worker can do nothing, but the working battalions will incessantly bring down the fortresses of capitalism. To be a socialist means to be a “comrade”: in the cooperative society, in the trade union, in the political party. The individual stops being something for himself, he seriously affirms the beautiful Swiss saying: one for all, all for one. He no longer thinks and feels and acts as a private man if he is a true socialist, but as a member of the struggling collective. Solidarity—that is the law and gospel of socialism.9

We can observe several things at this point. First, Barth has identified the negative solidarity among workers generated by the conditions of capitalist exploitation with the positive power of the gospel, giving rise to a dialectic of alienation and liberation. This reflects the way he has identified original sin as selfishness manifest in private property. The accumulation of private wealth is the generation of deficit, and so the creation of inequalities. Yet, these inequalities produce forms of solidarity among the excluded. Sin, then, generates the conditions in which it can be overcome. This means that, second, he is able to identify the political struggle of the united workers and the gospel in solidarity: “the law and gospel of socialism.”10 Solidarity becomes the critical principle driving the motor of history, ordered toward the vanquishing of sin, as the oppressed awaken to their oppression and mobilise together. Finally, we can see how this dialectic is entirely historically contingent. These economic and social relations take place in real historical space and require

9 Barth, “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung,” 403.
10 Barth, “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung,” 403.
historical movement to be actualised. The movement of the gospel, then, takes place in this horizontal historical dialectic.

**ROMANS AND THE SHIFT TOWARD A THEOLOGICALLY FORMED SOLIDARITY**

Before turning to the second edition of Romans (hereafter referred to as 2 Romans), it is instructive to note that the discomfort Barth felt with any identification of any particular socialist party or program with the gospel is only amplified by the crisis of WW I. When we arrive in 1919 in Barth’s lecture, “The Christian’s Place in Society,” delivered at the religios-soziale konferenz at Tambach, we can see how the historicised dialectic of 1911 has shifted. Where in 1911 it was grounded in immanent material conditions, now it is driven vertically by theological alienation. Here God is spoken of as the “Wholly Other,” something “whole and complete in itself” over and against the world. Therefore, there can be no historical struggle that is even analogically indicative of the kingdom without the attendant risk of “secularising Christ.”

Turning to 2 Romans directly, we see at Rom 3:23, what Barth names with Luther as the “very centre and kernel of the Epistle and all Scripture,” the language of solidarity emerges again under the conditions of negativity. The ground of human “solidarity” here can only ever be wholly epistemologically negative, unlike in 1911 where it can be named as exploitation. That is to say, it is in the light of the fact that all humanity stands together condemned as sinners that we see “the sublation of all difference [die Aufhebung aller Unterscheide].” This Aufhebung is the negation of the negations that are positive political positions which are “productive of

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13 “Es kann nicht etwas menschlich Positives sein, worin unsere Solidarität untereinander begründet ist [It cannot be something humanly positive upon which our solidarity is founded].” Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 82. Author’s translation.
14 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922* (Zürich: TVZ Verlag, 1940), 82. Barth, *Romans*, 100. Hoskyns translates: “the dissolution of every distinction.” Despite the German *Differenz*, I have translated *Unterscheide* as ‘difference’ for the sake of generating a sense of the qualitative nature of the distinction, as this would be heard in contemporary philosophical literature. *Differenz* conveys a sense of quantitative, even mathematical, difference. Hoskyns has attempted a similar distinction in his translation.
difference.” In this instance, these differences are thought negatively as those things which create distinctions or hierarchies between persons, i.e., idols. Being sinners is, then, the ground of our solidarity in that it is “when we recognise that we are sinners do we perceive that we are brothers.”

The epistemic language of perception is critical here. God is both unintuitable (Unanschaulichkeit) and intuitable (Anschaulichkeit) in this negative positioning of the sinful agent. Barth can state at once that “All flesh must be silent before the inconspicuousness [Unanschaulichkeit] of God, in order that all flesh may see his salvation” and, “The glory of God is His conspicuousness [Anschaulichkeit] . . . For us this conspicuousness [Anschaulichkeit] is lacking; and herein we are united.” God has not become conspicuous to the sinful human agent, and it is precisely this lack of conspicuousness, shared by all sinners, that is the logic of our solidarity. Therefore, faith must be present “where the conspicuousness [Anschaulichkeit] of God is lacking.” For, “they have not seen, and yet they have believed.”

Continuing, Barth finds that we can only navigate the darkness of divine inconspicuousness through a faith we share. Faith produces solidarity, for faith is the “common recognition of the need for grace” in our blindness. As it is the recognition of the negative it is the negation of the negation, the “sublation of all difference.” It is not, then, grounded in divine conspicuousness, or in the conspicuousness of class struggle, but in divine hiddenness and the consequent incapacity of humanity to perceive and act in accord with reality, which is only to be seen in and through God. God is hidden because we are creatures of “Die Nacht,” as Barth has stated earlier commenting on Romans 1–2 (with reference to Max Beckmann’s famous painting [1918–19]). Here Barth turns from metaphors of sight to listening. We only realise that we are in the night as we are told that we are in the night; we can only take it on faith, for one cannot see in the dark:

15 Barth, Der Römerbrief, 82; Romans, 101.
16 “Our solidarity with other men is alone adequately grounded, when with others—or apart from them, since we may not wait for them!—we stretch out beyond everything that we are and have, and behold the wholly problematical character of our condition.” Barth, Romans, 101.
17 Barth, Romans, 101.
18 Barth, Romans, 101.
19 Barth, Romans, 101.
20 Barth, Der Römerbrief, 82.
God declares . . . He declares that we, His enemies, are His beloved children. He declares his decision to erect justice by the complete renewal of heaven and earth. This declaration is creatio ex nihilo, creation out of nothing. Uttered by God from his tribunal it is grounded in Him alone, and is without occasion or condition. . . . This “Something” which the Word of God creates is of an eternal order, wholly distinct from every “something” which we know otherwise.21

This is to say that all political order must be reduced to rubble, wholly destroyed and re-created. We find our solidarity in our refusal of the finality of any political structure (even socialism, religious or not). In a very real sense, faith is a form of revolutionary refusal of the political status quo. This movement can be seen paradigmatically as Barth turns to Christology: “What is there, then, in Christ Jesus? There is that which horrifies: the sublation [Aufhebung] of history in history, the destruction [Zerißung] of the order of events within their known structure, the end of time in the order of time.”22 Jesus himself becomes the negation of the negation, which can only appear as the destruction of things as they are now and their resurrection in his body. Jesus is the negation of all things, for all things stand in opposition to him by virtue of having been constructed by agents who stand under the divine No. However, precisely as the negation, he is the negation of a negation—which is the positing of a wholly other political order which for the moment is inconspicuous as we for our part remain bound up with the conditions of the night, of our negativity.

We stand between the negation, the divine No, and the negation of the negation, the divine Yes—the totally other order of things. And yet these are two sides of the same dialectic in which God says Yes by saying No. Hence the possibility of rehabilitated agency is “where every claim is surrendered and broken down by God Himself; where His negation is final and His wrath unavoidable; when God is recognised as God. This claim is where the history of the relation between God and man begins; where there is no history to record, because it only occurs, and occurs eternally.”23 The eternal occurrence of this history still does not permit a positive

21 Barth, Romans, 102.
22 Barth, Romans, 103.
23 Barth, Romans, 103.
political program to emerge, however. It is precluded by virtue of Barth’s positioning any constructive endeavour under the divine No.

THE PARADOX

FAITH AND THE ABSURD

So far, we have seen that in 1911 Barth was quite willing to identify Jesus Christ with the desires of socialist movements. This affirmation allowed Barth to, while refusing any identification of Jesus with any particular party or movement, inhabit his own rendering of a form of socialist historicised dialectic which maintains a distinct political vision (the desires of the socialist movements). By the advent of Romans, however, Barth is entirely unwilling to identify Jesus with any historical movement that might be considered “conspicuous.” Human sinfulness, rendered in terms of blindness, inhibits the possibility of creating any political movement that could be identified with the gospel. The shape of the dialectic remains similar, however, in that the negation, be it capitalist alienation or the devastating divine No, generates solidarity. In Romans Barth has established a motion of reduction and reconstruction which is reflective of his scepticism of all forms of humanly constructed political order, bracketing all things with the divine No, and placing all within an atemporal apocalyptic eschatological horizon.24 The articulation of solidarity as solidarity under the divine No that follows this, and which would seem to paralyse political participation, needs to be seen alongside what follows in Barth’s articulation of the No as the possibility of human action. In order to understand this further, we need to develop further how Barth is speaking about faith, and how it serves as the rationality, the absurd Grund, of human life.

Commenting on Paul’s rejection of boasting (Rom 3:27–28), Barth rejects any form of human performance that might be seen to correspond to the divine negation. Even bowing before the divine negation in anticipation of affirmation is a work of the law (here he casts his ire upon the so-called “mystical traditions”). Instead, “the solid ground [Boden] upon which the law of works stands must be completely broken

24 It is crucial to remind ourselves that the dialectic of Romans is not temporal, but the history of Jesus is an eternal history. This crucial distinction allows Barth to maintain a coincidence of the No and the Yes in historical time.
The ground is, in this instance, any mode of existence that might be imagined to correspond to the divine negation. That is, any attempted self-sublation (selbst-Aufhebung)—our own attempt to overcome (negate) sin (the negation). This would be the “triumph of Pharisaism appearing in a new and more terrible form; for it is the Pharisaism of humility taking the place of the Pharisaism of self-righteousness.”

There are two things to note here. First, as I have indicated, Barth has continually used Aufhebung to refer to the divine negation of the negation, hence selbst-Aufhebung is the attempt to usurp God’s unique activity in Christ; it is an attempt to become self-grounding precisely in negating oneself—an act which can only be accomplished by God. Second, and following from this, the Boden, the ground upon which we stand, shifts in the divine sublation. As Barth continues,

In fact, our experience is that which we have not experienced; our religion consists in the sublation [Aufhebung] of religion . . . Nothing human which desires to be more than a void and a depravation, a possibility and a sign-post, more than the most trivial thing in the midst of the phenomena of this world, survives . . . Faith is the ground [Boden], the new order, the light, where boasting ends and the true righteousness of God begins . . . Regarded from our human point of view, what was once religion and law and a method of life becomes anarchy and a void and an abyss [Bodenlose].

Here Barth shifts the ground of existence itself. In fact, what we thought was existence was nothing more than the abyss, for faith is the only ground of the possibility of existence. Hence, all boasting is excluded, for there is no possibility of being other than as suspended over nothing by the hand of God.

Barth is aware that this sounds like a form of fideism, and he doubles down on this in the next section. “The ‘Moment’ does not belong in any causal or temporal or logical sequence: it is always and everywhere wholly new: it is what God—who only is immortal—is and has and does. Credo, quia absurdum.” The moment is an indicator of the radical interruption of human affairs by the divine negation. This is a

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25 Barth, Romans, 110.
26 Barth, Romans, 109. Translation amended.
27 Barth, Romans, 110. Examination of Barth’s later engagement with Nietzsche here is fruitful, see Romans, 140–41.
28 Barth, Romans, 112.
historical event in the cross, but it is not reducible to this event, for this event “does
not belong in any causal or temporal or logical sequence.”29 In this sense, the moment
appears as the realisation of absurdity of the cross; the absurdity of a political criminal,
shamed, condemned to death, and identified with God. It is the realisation of Luther’s
theologia crucis in which that which is despised is named as that which is glorious.30

After inserting the absurd, Barth turns to language of ground again, but not as
Boden, rather as Grund. “In the paradox of faith the faithfulness of God is sufficient,
for through it we stand on a firm ground [Grund] and move forward with assurance.”31
Grund can be rendered likewise as both ground or rationality, and in this instance
the translation doesn’t quite provide us with the ability to see the distinction Barth is
making. In shifting from Boden to Grund via the absurd, Barth is making the explicitly
Lutheran gesture of reordering the ratio on the ground of cruciformity.32 In this sense,
faith cannot function simply as the negation of reason, but must become an entirely
other order of reason—and so an entirely other political/social order. As he states, “A
negation that remains side by side with the position it negates must itself be negated,
and is therefore no truly radical negation. Resurrection ceases to be resurrection, if it
be some abnormal even side by side with events.”33 The consequence of this is clear:
the order of things as we inhabit them now is to be done away with entirely, as the
radical alterity of the cross and resurrection have indicated they must. Nevertheless,
we know not what is to come, for we remain “nothing but a void and a depravation”
in our acknowledged sinfulness.34

_Historie and Geschichte: Theology among the Rubble of War_

So far in this section, we have seen that it places the political subject in a paradoxical
position. She is at one and the same time under the negation of the divine No, which
is a response to human sinfulness, and yet she is a “signpost” to something other. This
alterity, however, is unavailable as anything other than absurdity. It is instructive here

29 Barth, _Romans_, 112.
30 Given more time I would examine how Barth’s epistemic construction of sin through visual metaphors follows Luther’s highly visualised
logic of the _theologia crucis_.
31 Barth, _Romans_, 113.
32 Indeed, just a few pages later Barth will turn to Luther’s image, from _Table Talk_, of faith grabbing reason, the beast, by the throat and
wrestling it into submission. _Romans_, 115.
33 Barth, _Romans_, 113.
34 Barth, _Romans_, 110.
to examine the relationship between temporal history and eternal history as this is where this paradox is played out for the writer of theological text. Barth speaks of history in two voices: Historie and Geschichte. Later in the Church Dogmatics this distinction will become less and less meaningful, for a variety of reasons, not least the shifts in Barth’s theological ontology. But, here, the distinction might be thought of along two axes, horizontal and vertical. Historie becomes history as temporal sequence itself, horizontal history. Geschichte comes to signify something vertical, bound up with the idea of the “Moment,” it is the possibility of making sense of the chaos, history as existentially instructive. These horizontal and vertical axes are analogous to the earlier distinction made between Barth’s very early historicised dialectic and the atemporal dialectic of Romans.

Commenting on the study of Historie Barth states, “History [Historie] reveals its importance, when . . . the present becomes aware of the unity of meaning that is in all history [Geschichte] . . . quite apart from the study of documentary sources, there exists a living perception of the one constant significance of all human occurrence, history becomes merely a sequence of epochs . . . it teems with phenomena which charge about in all directions. This is non-sense.” History along the horizontal axis [Historie] can only be spoken of by drawing connections between distinct moments, to the exclusion of the seemingly endless complexity of relations in which each particular moment stands. As interesting as the study of Historie may be, then, for Barth this “is not History [Geschichte]: it is photographed and analysed chaos.” The possibility of sense is then only possible as we think of history as “a synthetic work of art.”

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35 Barth will state that, “The atonement is history (Geschichte). To know it, we must know it as such. To think of it, we must think of it as such. To speak of it, we must tell it as history. To try to grasp it as supra-historical or non-historical truth is not to grasp it at all. It is indeed truth, but truth actualised in a history and revealed in this history as such-revealed, therefore, as history.” Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, volume IV, 11, trans. G. W. Bromley and T. F. Torrance (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 157. The strict verticality of Geschichte is done away with here in the hypostatic union of divine and human history in Jesus (note, in Jesus, not in history as such). The distinction, as it emerges in Romans, is rough-hewn. But, Barth is drawing on a distinction that emerges in nineteenth-century historical scholarship as Historie, in distinction from the older Geschichte, became a way of speaking about history as a science. Wissenschaft. He will state later “Historic,” something that can be proved by general historical science, whereas ‘Geschichte’ is something that takes place in real time and space, but may or may not be proved.” Karl Barth, Karl Barth’s Table Talk, trans. John D. Godsey (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1962), 45. In this sense Historie and Geschichte are both occurrence in the same temporality but are to be distinguished epistemologically. In Romans, however, both Historie and Geschichte remain unstable in that temporality itself evades narration.

36 Barth, Romans, 145.
37 Barth, Romans, 146.
38 Barth, Romans, 146.
This gets to the heart of how Barth is distinguishing himself from his teachers at the level of theological writing itself. History as Geschichte is the communion of the past with the present, the unity of the diversity of the past (what had earlier been named in the social “movement” as the unification of diverse struggles, but now placed on a vertical axis). Hence, “when the intercourse between past and present becomes a contemporary intercourse, the meaning of both is discovered in the non-historical [unhistorichlichkeit] factor which is the beginning and end of history . . .”\(^{39}\) This non-historical history is history as Krisis, history standing under the divine negation. Hence, the writer of history (as Geschichte) herself is existentially positioned under the divine negation and can do naught but represent this in her writing. The writing of history, which is the writing of theology, is the Krisis of writing itself as it must be continually undone by communion with the divine No standing over historical occurrence.

Internal to the logic of Barth’s distinction here, and manifest in the formal features of his literary style is an exposition of the inevitability of the failure of theological writing itself. As the writer of Geschichte, the theologian can only ever write of the inconspicuousness of God, and so speak of a ground which is the absurd—that which remains veiled by the cross and yet is the cross. The cross, however, for Barth in this period, can only ever be that which negates forms of human performance which might seek to represent God in horizontal history. In a very real sense, the theologian can only ever write her own destruction in solidarity with the rest of humanity.

**Writing Failure**

Barth, then, attempts to write himself into a form of un-mastery in several ways. This is a commentary on the scriptural texts. While it remains unconventional, it is the lack of convention that makes the piece such a risk. Barth is, in a way that he will seldom do throughout the rest of his career, experimenting with literary form. For instance, we see this experimentation in his well documented use of Dadaistic formulas such as “God is God” or “The faithfulness of God is the faithfulness of God.” We also see it in his use of paradox, dialectic, and wordplay in order to disrupt

\(^{39}\) Barth, *Romans*, 146.
ordinary meanings, to stretch language to a certain kind of limit, to give it a plasticity it might not have otherwise had, and his insistence on thinking history beyond simple forms of representation. All of this ultimately, however, fails. And Barth knows it is failing as he is stating it. For it is precisely these forms themselves which bear witness to the impossibility of saying “God.”

Further, to state that Barth’s text is theopolitically charged is to state the obvious. What is perhaps not quite as obvious is the way the movement from solidarity under the divine No to the creative exposition of divine history works. Writing at the limits, Barth inhabits the impossibility of a determinate political vision. He can no longer say, “Jesus Christ is the social movement and the social movement is Jesus in the present.” Rather, God’s disclosure is the condition for the possibility of bringing these kinds of political rationalities to crisis. Barth then performs this crisis in the very style of the commentary. It is not a question of relativising the tools of historical or rational theological inquiry, it is a question of exploding them from within the radical interruption that is the cross—that which knits all things together in solidarity. This is always and already a political judgement. It is impossible to disentangle Barth’s well-documented objection to his teachers’ methods of historical-theological inquiry here from their decision to back the Kaiser’s war. The cross is the interruption of this rationalisation of violence with a wholly other order. It is the question mark held up against all theological collusions with power. In this sense it is positive, again, as the negation of the negation. A marker of an alternate order to come, to which we can only witness by taking up our own crosses: the disavowal of our political projects in the creation of cruciform solidarity. The world is as it is, we are caught Zwischen den Zeiten, and we are powerless in ourselves to change it. There is, then, no way of reifying this politics of the cross. As with Luther, for the theologian of the cross there is only the possibility of living it and writing it again and again.

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40 Barth, “Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung,” 387; All translations are the author’s.