The critical revolution of recent decades has changed how we approach the reading and understanding of texts. We have become increasingly sensitized to the fact that we need not—and cannot—always take discourse at its word. For the word often, if not always, covers over more than it makes manifest, conceals as the very condition by which it reveals. We have therefore been relearning to read for what words do not and perhaps cannot say. This entails attending especially to the ruptures and interruptions, to the silences and ellipses, that displace discourse and break the circuits of sense. These gaps open discourse to the non-sense or surplus of sense that it embodies and bears witness to, even without being able to say it. The motivations of discourse lie to a great extent in what cannot be said, and to read for this unsayable that is betrayed especially by impasses to saying is to recognize the moment of apophasis, of silence and unsaying, as constitutive of saying and its meanings.

“Apophasis” is the word used by Plato and Aristotle simply for a negative proposition or denial. But etymologically it suggests even stronger negative meanings such as “away from speech” (apo: away from; phasis: speech or assertion) or unsaying. Among the Neoplatonists, “apophasis” takes on the connotation of a negation of discourse simpliciter, for they concentrate on the inability of discourse per se to affirm anything whatsoever about ultimate reality, for them “the One.” Ever since these ancient and endless speculations, the intrinsic limits of discourse, with its failure to attain its object and to articulate the ultimately real, as well as the silence that follows as a consequence, have been a perennial preoccupation, especially at certain junctures, of the Western intellectual tradition. The great variety of discourses—and inflections of discourses—that have resulted can be considered together as different expressions of an apophatic mode.

As a discursive mode, apophasis arises in the face of what cannot be said. It bespeaks an experience of being left speechless. There are no words for what is experienced in this form of experience, no possibility of a positive description of it. One falls back on saying what it is not, since whatever can be said is not it. By their very failure, however, conspicuously faltering and foundering
attempts at saying can hint at what they inevitably fail to express, at what cannot be said at all. In this way, the unsayable and discourse about it turn out to be inseparable. Indeed, according to at least one view, what cannot be said can only (not) be said: apart from this failure, it would be altogether nought. Certainly it has no objective content or definition, for that could be said. Nevertheless, it can be discerned in perhaps all that is said as what unsays saying, as what troubles or discomfits discourse.

By reading for what cannot be said, we look past expressions themselves to their limits and even beyond, and thereby cull intimations of what they do not and cannot express. The unsayable is inaccessible to direct interpretation, but it can be read in everything that is said, if reading means a sort of interpretive engagement that coaxes the text to betray secrets it cannot as such say. The unsayable shows up in texts as their limit of opacity. Everything said, however clear and transparent, is said from somewhere, which is indirectly intimated yet cannot itself be fully divulged or exhaustively illuminated in and by its own saying. It necessarily remains opaque and off-limits. Rather than discarding this as the inevitable part of non-intelligibility that is best neglected in whatever is said, certain new methods of reading have been bent upon recognizing this as the unsayable that is essential to the meaning of everything said. Such methods can be illuminated by an apophatic tradition reaching all the way back to its ancient theological matrices, for they are in an at least indirect line of descent from these sources.

This book presents exemplary texts of “apophatic” discourse, discourse that in various ways denies and takes itself back. As a newly emerging logic, or rather a/logic, of language in the humanities, this new (though also very old) quasi-epistemic paradigm for criticism, as well as for language-based disciplines and practices in general, can help us learn to read in hitherto unsuspectedly limber and sensitive ways. It can sharpen our critical awareness of what we are already doing even if we do not fully understand how and why. For we have become increasingly attuned to the unsaying and the unsayable within discourse that is covertly undoing its own purported purposes and programs. To this extent, we are reading differently than in the past, yet this very difference has been bequeathed by the past, if we care to know about it, and we can learn to know our own minds and their mysterious ways much better if we do. For what present generations have experienced characterizes also a recurrent, cyclical movement of culture, spirit, and intellect from time immemorial. Most immediately and directly, certain modern and contemporary models have shaped our sensibility for deciphering in discourse these limits of language and what it cannot say.
How do we identify the particular touchstones that can help us understand more accurately the sorts of reading and insight that are enabled and enhanced by this acute attention to what cannot be said? By what criteria are these exemplary texts to be chosen? Claims concerning the inadequacy of language to describe experience are, of course, encountered in all kinds of discourse: literary, religious, artistic, and philosophical alike. But the mode of apophasis need be invoked only where precisely this struggle with language in the encounter with what it cannot say demonstrably engenders the experience in question. The experience of apophasis, as an experience of not being able to say, is quintessentially linguistic: the experience itself is intrinsically an experience of the failure of language. It is not an experience that is otherwise given and secured and perhaps even approximately conveyed—with provisos regarding the accuracy of the description and apologies for the results actually achieved. In apophasis, strictly construed, unsayability or the failure of language is itself basic to the experience—and, indeed, the only experience that admits of description or objectification at all.

And yet the experience in question is not fundamentally experience of language or of any other determinate object, for this could be adequately expressed. The experiencing subject is affected by “something” beyond all that it can objectively comprehend, something engendering affects that it cannot account for nor even be sure are its own. This entails a sort of belief in, or an openness to, something—that is, to something or other that is surely no thing—that cannot be said and that refuses itself to every desire for expression. There is not even any “what” to believe in, but there is passion—for nothing, perhaps, certainly for nothing that can be said: and yet that passion itself is not just nothing. The apophatic allows for belief before any determinate belief, and for passion before any object of passion can be individuated: all definitions are only relative, approximate delimitations of what is not as such any object that can be defined. Apophatic thought thus relativizes every verbal-conceptual formulation and orients us toward the unformulated non-concept, no-word that is always already believed in with in(de)finite passion in every defined, finite confession of belief.

Thus apophaticism is not nihilism. Authors of apophatic discourse may sometimes embrace an agnosticism as to whether language has any meaning at all, but their apophaticism is not nihilistic, if that means somehow concluding all under Nothing, as if “Nothing” were the final answer, rather than making the admission of the inadequacy of all our names and saying an overture opening toward . . . what cannot be said—and toward the inexhaustible discourses that fail to say it. This is typically an opening toward immeasurably
—or immeasurably less—than can be said. In either case, what is said serves to guide an asymptotic approach to the infinite of what cannot be said. I have privileged believers in apophasis as some kind of extra-logical, suprarational revelation or liberation—though this deliverance may be of the most minimalist, desolate sort. There is strictly no saying what the apophatic writer believes in, but there clearly is a passion of belief—or unbelief: indeed, every formulated, expressed belief must be disbelieved and abjured in order to keep the faith in what cannot be said. Just as for mystic writers, who typically cannot define what they believe in or desire, so for apophatic writers the sense of their belief in . . . what they can neither know nor say nevertheless permeates all that they do say and write.

It goes without saying that many extremely important and appropriate texts have been omitted. For example, my representation of recent French apophaticism, an area that actually receives considerable attention here, nevertheless begs to be extended to embrace many other writers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault. Even more tempting are Jacques Lacan’s linguistic formulations, which constantly strain beyond their own words toward something that withdraws from articulation, as Lacan himself is well aware: “There is nowhere any last word unless in the sense in which word is not a word. . . . Meaning indicates the direction in which it fails.” Also powerfully expressing these currents in French thought and criticism are Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, the last especially in her analysis of the un-speakably abject in Pouvoirs de l’horreur.

Feminist discourse has been exceptionally fecund in reflection about silence and its significances. Originally, these reflections tended to revolve


around the silencing of female voices and focused sharply on class, color, and sex as motives for the silencing of women writers. Tillie Olsen’s *Silences*, for example, stated emphatically that it was not about the natural silences intrinsic to the creative process but rather about “the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot.”

3 There was frequently a determined effort to divorce the topic of enforced silences of women from any sort of empty, abstract, metaphysical, Romantic concept of the ineffable. Recently, however, feminists have shown a growing interest in silence as more than just negative, more than a lack due to externally imposed interdictions. Apophasis is being discovered in its multivalent potency as gendered in complex ways. Feminine discourse has become sensitive and attentive not only to the silencing of female voices but also to the subversive strategies that cultivate and exploit silence.

4 Silence plays an ambiguous role as an imposed restriction but also an elected source of unlimited power, for example, in the creative silences of a poet like Emily Dickinson.

Of late, a wealth of creative literature by and on women has addressed the paradoxical poverty yet power of their silences. M. Nourbese Philip, in *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*, and Monica Ochtrup, in *What I Cannot Say / I Will Say*, turn this predicament into the empowering premise of a highly potent new poetry.

5 Although these writers do not necessarily regard the apophatic tradition as their own and rarely cite it, with the exception of references to Wittgenstein, it is doubtful that such literature would have been possible in the state in which we find it without the diffuse presence of apophasis as an element in postmodern culture. Clearly this literature is propelled by a sense of the crisis of language. Its denial and even defiance of *Logos*, interpreted, at least implicitly, as patriarchal authority par excellence, resonates, whether deliberately or not, with the apophatic in its many historical manifes-


tations. In theology itself, particular attention is now being devoted to how women’s voices in the pulpit can find the most effective registers for letting silence speak.⁶

Social sciences, too, are producing a daunting bibliography on the subject of silence. The topic is approached from many disciplines, including psychology, linguistics and pragmatics, anthropology and ethnography, discourse and narrative analysis, and systems and communications theory focusing on all manner of media, as well as on “natural” human conversation and interaction.⁷ While not usually interrogating the apophatic directly in its fundamental motivations, these discourses nevertheless reflect upon and illuminate it. They belong to the explosion of new, broadly or tendentially apophatic approaches in every sector of contemporary culture.

Some of the widest and richest areas that I have been barely able to touch upon here are found in the fine arts. Performing arts, such as contemporary theater and dance, have been obsessed with the expressiveness of eluding and even eliminating all determinate form and significance from gesture and movement so as to communicate by the naked, silent power of physical presence—or absence. Aesthetic form and definition are negated for the sake of the sheer evocativeness of neutrality, indeterminacy, and non-statement. Throughout the last century the arts have been especially prolific in negative theologies. The selections of readings and their introductory essays in the anthology begin to suggest some of these directions in contemporary apophasis.

In the case of some of the selections, we are in possession of compact treatises on the subject at hand. In others, I am merely trying to suggest by select samplings the powerfully apophatic thrust or quality of writing diffusely operating throughout an author’s oeuvre, though perhaps nowhere specifically brought into focus as such. The selections vary widely in length and consistency, and the introductions, similarly, are not uniform in purpose or approach. Beyond offering a minimum of context for an informed reading, the introductions to each reading do not adhere to a common mold. They do,

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⁶ See, for example, Silence in Heaven: A Book of Women’s Preaching, ed. Heather Walter and Susan Durber (London: SCM, 1994).

however, attempt to sound the significance of each text, and of its author’s thought and expression in general, for our understanding of the all-important issue of the unsayable. This goal is given precedence over exposition in strict conformity with the commonly accepted views of the current scholarship on each author. Each selection is interpreted in a way that serves to substantiate the theory of apophatic discourse and to elaborate the vision of what cannot be said that the book as a whole creates and advocates. The general introduction to this volume offers a more consolidated exposition of this theory and vision in historical terms.

The territory traversed is vast. Accordingly, I have reduced many of the selections to minimum proportions. They exemplify the sort of discourse typical of a certain author by tendering a few golden nuggets, while the introductions indicate where a full-loaded vein may be mined. The anthology, in this way, rather than attempting to engulf all relevant material within its own covers, becomes a guide to a much larger literature outside itself. Some texts are introduced only by references to the already existing publications. These decisions may have been influenced by issues of publication rights and expenses, but also by the ready availability and familiarity of many relevant works. Especially in these cases, situating the work within the field outlined here is the essential purpose and service of this anthology-cum-history-and-theory of apophasis.

This volume comprises new and often radical currents of thinking from the last two hundred years about the limits of language and what may or may not lie beyond them. It is the sequel to a volume presenting ancient, medieval, and early modern classic readings in apophasis. It thus continues a novel venture in canon formation begun with that volume, by pursuing the project into the modern and contemporary periods and extending it from philosophical, religious, and literary texts into criticism and the arts. The two volumes were conceived and elaborated as a unity, and both are indebted to all those acknowledged in the preface to volume 1.

A Note on Translations

In quoting foreign language texts, I generally prefer to translate quotations directly from the originals, even where English translations exist; unless specific English language editions are cited, the translations are my own. The original language editions cited in my introductions are ones that I have used in the preparation of each volume, not necessarily those from which the translators have worked.
INTRODUCTION

Modern and Contemporary Cycles of Apophasis

I

Periodically in intellectual history, confidence in the *Logos*, in the ability of the word to grasp reality and disclose truth, flags dramatically. Discourses in many disciplines and fields suddenly become dubious and problematic as language enters into a generalized crisis and the currency of the word goes bust. The cyclical collapse of verbal assurance fosters cultures that can be characterized as “apophatic,” that is, as veering into widespread worries about the reliability of words and even into wholesale refusal of rational discourse. This type of culture, in its retreat from language, becomes pervasive notably in the Hellenistic Age in a spate of Hermetic philosophies and Gnosticisms. All in various ways are repudiations of the Greek rational enlightenment. It rises to prominence again toward the end of the medieval period with the surpassing of Scholasticism as an all-encompassing rational system. The thinking of Meister Eckhart is exemplary at this juncture. Eckhart engendered hosts of scions and satellites who carried his inspiration forward into Baroque mysticism, which likewise bursts the measures of reason and word that had been dictated by Renaissance rhetorical norms. Something similar happens yet again with Romanticism in its revolt against the Enlightenment—*Aufklärung*—on the threshold of the period with which the present volume is concerned. Such eruptions arguably have continued with an intensifying rhythm ever since.

A particularly dense and destiny-laden nodal point of this history is Viennese culture at the turn of the twentieth century. It pivots on figures such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Ludwig von Wittgenstein, Robert Musil, Rainer Maria Rilke, Gustav Klimt, Karl Kraus, and Arnold Schoenberg. The catastrophe of an entire historical epoch was here felt in all its extremity and was expressed with the utmost acuteness and often pathos too. Hofmannsthal’s “Letter of Lord Chandos” (1901) witnesses emblematically to the collapse of cultural values that had guided Western civilization since classical antiquity.
The failure of classical reason, the bankruptcy of bourgeois culture, and the
general demise of civilization are registered as events that radically invalidate
and undermine the value of language. The great discourse which the West had
entertained for centuries, based on confidence in reason, suddenly seemed to
have become null and void, and even somewhat obscene. No longer able to
carry on this conversation, many of the most sensitive and honest intellects of
the time found themselves faced with an imperative of silence. Freud’s discover-
y of the unconscious as what unsays language by its “slips” is symptomatic of
the widespread emphasis specifically on the linguistic dimensions and deriv-
ation of the disaster. Franz Kafka, from the Jewish quarter in Prague, is thor-
oughly imbued with this Mitteleuropean mood of doom that presided over the
decaying Hapsburg Empire. Though living at different times and places, Victor
Benjamin and Samuel Beckett are both responding to this same experience
of collapse. So are numerous leading beacons, Jewish and non-Jewish, across
all arenas of art and culture: they are indelibly marked by the specific form of
apophasic crisis that was given expression by these late-nineteenth-century
and early-twentieth-century Viennese writers and artists.1

Beckett is linked to precisely this ambience of the crisis of language
through his involvement with the linguistic skepticism of the Austrian phi-
osopher of language Fritz Mauthner. As a young man, Beckett read Mauth-
ner’s Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache (1901) aloud to James Joyce, whose eye-
sight was failing him. The nominalist philohisophy of language expressed with
great stylistic vehemence in Mauthner’s work in fact turns out to bear close
affinities to the representations of language in Beckett’s texts.2 Mauthner’s
views were formed, like those of Kafka and Hofmannsthal, in the context of
the fall of Austro-Hungarian civilization—a metonymy for general European
decay and the demise of the West—and the consequent cultural hollowing-
out that resulted in mendacious verbal manipulation and a rigid insistence on
empty formalities in the attempt to stave off the inevitable collapse. Beckett’s

1. See Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, Wittgenstein’s Vienna (New York: Simon
   & Schuster, 1973). The story of this epoch is told suggestively by Franco Rella in Il silenzio
e le parole: Il pensiero nel tempo della crisi (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988 [1981]) as it revolves
around the now largely forgotten Otto Weininger and his Geschlecht und Charakter
(1903), which was followed by the definitive silence of its author’s suicide at the age of
twenty-three.

2. See Linda Ben-Zvi, “Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Lan-
guage,” PMLA 95 (March 1980): 183–200. Beckett thus serves as a bridge to the postwar
Parisan culture of shock at the unspeakable in the wake of Nazi atrocities, as detailed, for
example, by May Daniels in The French Drama of the Unspoken (Edinburgh: Edinburgh
University Press, 1953).
distrust of language and his resulting determination to write in an apophatic vein shapes, from this early period, his sense of his mission as a writer: “The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement, between the flowers that cannot coexist, at the antithetical (nothing so simple as antithetical) seasons of words, his experience shall be the menace, the miracle, the memory, of an unspeakable trajectory.”

This culture of crisis leveraged from linguistic collapse continued to evolve, with a new wave of apophatic expression by post-Holocaust writers in Germany and Austria, as well as by French thinkers of “difference” a generation later. It lives on in various tendencies within postmodern culture—across its many channels of expression—that issue in an evacuation of the real. Contemporary America has emerged as a leading venue for a new apocalyptic apophaticism. American abstract art was once in the vanguard of this tendency. Now discourses of silence are conspicuously gaining ground in humanities and social science disciplines in the American academy. Apophatic discourse, paradoxically, is assuming the role of a common language, a koiné, like Hellenistic Greek, for many expressions of the postmodern predicament. This “language” of apophatic discourse, which is rather a constant reminder of the lack of any adequate language, is also proving to be the key to interpreting postmodern culture’s unsuspected, only recently rediscovered precursors in tradition. We can now appreciate certain cyclical cultural crises of the past as intimately bound up with typically apophatic failures of language.

The proximate intellectual precedent for all these various forms of apophaticism in Western thought over the last two centuries can be found in the rebellion against Hegel and his System that was staged by his Romantic contemporaries and post-Romantic opponents. This suggestion may appear paradoxical, at first, since the history of German speculative mysticism—one of the most fertile seedbeds for apophatic thought from Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa through Jakob Böhme and Silesius Angelus—is often taken to culminate in Hegel. But precisely the apophatic emphasis of this tradition

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3. A Dream of Fair to Middling Women, ed. Eoin O’Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), p. xiii. This first novel of Beckett was written in 1932, when the author was twenty-six years old, though it was published only sixty years later.

4. See, for example, F.-W. Wentzlaff-Eggebert, Deutsche Mystik zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit: Einheit und Wandlung ihrer Erscheinungsformen, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969), and Marco Vannini, Il volto del Dio nascosto: L’esperienza mistica dell’Iliade a Simon Weil (Milan: Mondadori, 1999). The argument for viewing Hegel as a proponent of negative theology is also made by Rowan Williams, “The Mystery of God
is erased by Hegel. Hegel’s main premise is that everything that is real can be said. He eliminates anything that is supposed to lie definitively and irretrievably beyond the grasp of Logos. The whole line of apophatic speculation stemming from Eckhart and ultimately Plotinus, based on being or existence as exceeding verbal and conceptual grasp, passes rather through the later Schelling. The discovery of existence as radically open, for lack of any rational or sayable ground, was further developed in original ways, under the direct influence of Schelling, by Søren Kierkegaard, and then in currents reaching from Kierkegaard to Dada, Expressionism, and Existentialism, each in different ways assaulting the word by a reality gone mad beyond saying.\(^5\)

The predominantly German strain of apophatic speculation that gathers in Schelling, together with Jewish thought in the tradition of the Kabbalah, flows into the work of Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin. Franz Kafka unites the same elements and produces texts that are seminal for subsequent apophatic writing. However, it is Rosenzweig who most convincingly elaborates an original apophatic philosophy in a contemporary key that is attuned to language as the paradigm of all knowledge. By gathering together the German and Kabbalistic philosophical and religious traditions, and responding to the crisis of language that shook European civilization in the years leading up to the Great War, with its epicenter in Vienna, Rosenzweig emerges as arguably the preeminent apophatic thinker of modern times. The second section of this introduction offers a new exposition of his thought from this perspective.

It is essential to recognize how extensively and incisively Jewish thinkers, writers, and artists have contributed to apophatic tradition and culture throughout Western intellectual history. This contribution is particularly intense through modern times up to the present. The biblical interdiction on images to represent God acknowledges the transcendence of an unrepresentable deity. This God, nevertheless, remains at the root of a great genealogical tree that branches all the way to the twentieth century. It is a vigorous growth that even the Holocaust was not able to truncate so much as stimulate. Still, the imagery of cutting and rupture has deeply scored recent apophatic expression, especially that of Jewish provenance. Images of tearing and rending, as well as of shattering into fragments and destroying—for example, the

\(^5\) An emblematic figure here is Hugo Ball. See Dionysius DADA Areopagita: Hugo Ball und die Kritik der Moderne, ed. Bernd Wacker (Munich-Vienna: Schöningh, 1996).
vase of pure language breaking into the babel of historical languages envisioned by Benjamin, or the conceit of the broken vessels of Creation relayed by Edmond Jabès from the Lurian Kabbalah—give this literature and this philosophical reflection their characteristic accent.

Poets, particularly Jabès and Paul Celan, use the imagery of cutting and splitting of the word and its meaning to convey this sense of openness toward what hurts and haunts the word. Meaning cannot be contained within or communicated intact by a word that has been torn apart and rent asunder. Rather, an aura of what the word cannot say hangs over the desert landscape left by the Holocaust and its concentration camps. Bodies and souls alike are just such words, rent and wracked and thereby opened to what is no longer meaning of any definable sort and yet remains superlatively significant as beyond the reach of meaning.

Celan’s poems reflect on and resonate provocatively with both Jewish and Christian traditions of apophasis and negative theology. Especially characteristic is his insistence on images such as the “prayer-sharp knives of my silence” (“ihr / gebetscharfen Messer / meines / Schweigens,” from “. . . Rauscht der Brunnen”) and “grass, written asunder” (“Grass, auseinander geschrieben,” from “Engführung”) on the terrain of a concentration camp. Such images suggest a breaking open of meaning to what cannot be defined and so remains unlimited in meaning that relates to an experience that is cryptically evoked as nameless and indescribable. The limits and failures of language are a recurrent trope and theme. Language is brought into check as it issues from “the mouth stammered true” (“wahr- / gestammelten Mund,” from “Hohles Lebensgehöft”). In poem after poem, Celan explores in linguistically amazing and original ways the modes of inexpressibility. The experiences to which the poetry alludes but leaves locked and indecipherable are at the extreme limits of possibility and cannot be represented. They are best conveyed or witnessed to by linguistic annihilations.

For Jabès, every human word and letter bespeaks the absence of God. As part of the totality of language, a word evokes the plenitude of meaning that it is missing. For it is but a fragment of the infinite, which it cannot re-present. Voided of absolute presence, “the word is a world of emptiness” (“Le verbe est univers du vide”). It cannot represent what it has been broken off from, the infinite that is its hidden root (“l’infini est racine cachée,” El, p. 121). The human word in no way contains this original wholeness, yet it is a

reminiscence: for in its very brokenness it exceeds all determinations of meaning and evokes an anteriority to sense. As wounded and bleeding, moreover, the word disperses significance that is in fact without limit because it is without any definition that does not at the same time give way and redefine itself in the flood of infinite meanings in which it issues, or to which it is exposed. This deluge becomes inevitable, once the semantic skin that contains meaning has been violated and broken open. Every finite, determinate sense is swamped in the ocean of other possible meanings that pour into it.

The discrete, circumscribed sense attributed to language is like a decoy that prevents or protects us from contemplating its gaping wounds (“les béantes plaies d’un / leurre que le sens attribué à nos mots—et à / nos maux—empêche autrui, comme nous, de contempler,” El, p. 99). When their sense shatters, as it does in Jabès’s texts, words are opened to an uncharted and unchartable region or dimension. An openness to the infinite is enacted beyond all boundaries of the senses of words. It is discovered in the abyss of the unsayable divine Name as the emptiness at the core of every word. The Hebrew name for God, “El,” happens to reverse the masculine definite article in French—“le”—designating substantive things in general, and this, in a certain manner, builds it implicitly into everything that is said in that language.

In the post-Holocaust period, from within and beyond Jewish culture, many have emphasized the brokenness and shattering of meaning as necessary to opening it up to the indefinable, the unsayable. The incidence of alterity, that is, of confrontation with what is unassimilable and unsayable, and what therefore interrupts the circuit of the self and the same, is the starting point for Emmanuel Levinas’s thinking on the topics of externality and infinity. In close conjunction with Levinas, Blanchot has worked out his thought of “dés-aster,” of the dis-order of the universe as a coming undone and falling apart. Closely intertwined with these ideas are also Bataille’s and Derrida’s disintegrative, heterogeneous biases and outlook.

Both German speculative and Jewish mystical elements, transmitted especially through the writings of Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Levinas, are part of the most important and direct background for recent French thinkers of alterity, or difference. These writers have taken up many of the characteristic concerns and turns of apophatic thinking. They have placed a vigorous new accent particularly on the theme of the Other. This emphasis is an original departure in thinking through the problem of the unsayable that is less metaphysical or ontological and more fundamentally ethical—and sometimes overtly political—in orientation. This orientation is programmatic in Levinas, who, together with Bataille, opens up the path pursued by Derrida and Blan-
chot. These deontologized approaches to the unsayable focus not on the ground of being, the *Urgrund*, but on absolute alterity as what is beyond saying. It is because of radical difference, which cannot be mediated in any way, that nothing can be said in the face of the Other.

With Levinas as the connecting link, the French thinkers of alterity are in deep continuity with Rosenzweig. The key motif of Rosenzweig, and perhaps of Jewish thinking generally, is that of separation. Recognizing separateness is the first step toward any possible knowledge, or rather the first step toward unknowing, a step that both lames and empowers. Certainly words are impotent to reach what is radically separate. However, Rosenzweig also concentrates on how to interpret *discourses* concerning unassimilable difference: they unite in being surpassed by what lies beyond discourse. While emphasizing separateness and alienation, Rosenzweig also envisions unity in a “new” form. This too, I argue, is what cannot be said. Indeed, there is more than can be said to unity, too. Throughout Western intellectual history, Jewish thinkers have taken an important lead in exploring the Divine Name, in which all names unite, as the prime instance of what cannot be said. This reflection, too, lies at the heart of Rosenzweig’s thinking. The configuration of writers and thinkers of difference that has just been sketched is, to a considerable extent, working out the destiny of Jewish apophaticism in a radically secular cultural context today, and all are indebted to Rosenzweig in this undertaking. But Rosenzweig also anticipates another, very different perspective that has recently emerged—one that is increasingly being called “post-secular.”

II

Innovative and rebellious as he was, Rosenzweig nonetheless extends traditional theological reflection on pure being, or existence per se, viewed in a creationist framework, as quintessentially what cannot be said. This line of


reflection developed from Neoplatonic speculations on the One as irreducibly beyond the reach of words. Although the One was placed originally “beyond Being,” in the course of tradition this came to mean that it was beyond qualified being, that is, beyond being this or that being; in contrast, the unsayable One could be identified with unqualified, that is, pure being. This move to equating the absolute, unsayable principle, or the One, with pure being was already evident in Porphyry, among the Neoplatonists, and it became standard Christian doctrine with Saint Augustine. It continued through medieval Scholastic philosophy, which conceived God as Being itself, *ipsum esse*, and on into Renaissance Neoplatonism.

Rosenzweig, however, adds a sharply existentialist and even “empiricist” accent: he interprets pure being in totally immanent terms as the actual and factual. In a letter in which he first spells out the blueprint or “original cell” of his “new thinking,” he defines the distinguishing mark of revelation, over against mere human knowledge, as “the relation of pure facticity.” Pure facticity cannot be deduced by reason; it is simply there, to reason’s utter astonishment. The world as Creation is such a revelation. The principle that brings it into being is not accessible to reason. The world, together with its unaccountable order, is revealed thereby as a miracle. But to know the world purely as a fact is to know nothing about it. For all that knowing and saying can tell, the world as pure fact is nothing. The fact that the world is tells us nothing about what anything is.

This facticity eluding knowledge is found not only, nor even primarily, in the created world. “God,” too, is factual. We know nothing of God (“von Gott wissen wir nichts”). But all the richness of factual existence, understood in relation to what or whom we know nothing about, informs the maximally positive concept (“höchst positiver Begriff”) of God’s reality (“die Wirklichkeit Gottes”) toward which Rosenzweig strives in *The Star of Redemption*. This is a concept not directly of God or his essence but of our relation to the God of whom we have no conception. It begins from the not-nothing of our ignorance of God. Even our ignorance of God, an ignorance that fundamentally characterizes and conditions human existence, is not nothing. It is a powerful determination of our existence toward that which we do not know, that of which we know nothing except that we do not and cannot know it. Everything

in our existence is thereby directed toward and defined in terms of what cannot be known or said.

In this manner, the nothing of God (“das Nichts Gottes”) from which we begin, God’s nothingness to us, becomes the absolute facticity (“absolute Tatsächlichkeit”) of existence. This beginning, from negation, of our knowledge of God and therefore also of our own reality actually begins, without saying so, from existence as positively given (following the lead of Schelling’s “positive philosophy”). But by simply negating our knowledge of God and reality, we do not try to hang any concept on this unaccountable givenness or assert it. Rather, our discourse begins by negating itself—with the denial that this discourse is in any way a knowledge of God or of any reality. The positively given and factual, which is originally articulated only by the negation of our knowledge of it, is not defined and delimited but is opened to its infinity and lack of any definable ground. Only what it is not has been specified, while its own intrinsic meaning and purport are rendered totally open and indeterminate, so far as words and concepts are concerned. And yet, even while remaining undefined and unsayable, this meaning becomes fully concrete and specific in actual human existence. When any given individual confronts this positive existence as nothing knowable or sayable, it is no longer the general concept Nothing, the Nothing for all, but rather takes on concrete and singular significance in the life-and-death struggle of a particular person in their own unique existence.

This sort of reasoning, already found in Schelling’s “positive” philosophy, could be viewed as an existential version of the ontological argument. It starts from the nothing of any conceptualization of God. Yet this very nullity is itself something. We conceive of something which we cannot conceive. That is an extraordinarily revealing fact about human existence as standing in relation to what is not given or manifest to it. Our conceiving and saying relates itself to what cannot be conceived or said. The capacity for such relating (without concepts and language) can be verified as an existential fact by every individual who attempts, for example, to conceive of “God,” and the tradition of discourses on what cannot be said documents this curiously contradictory, yet superlatively revealing predicament as a historical fact.

The nothing from which Rosenzweig begins is a nothing of knowledge and, in every case, of an individual existing in unknowing. But the negation of any determinate, knowable object already entails an affirmation of something greater than is—or ever could be—known or said. There is no object for this affirmation, and so logic cannot pick it up and deal with it. Yet the “grammatical method” expounded by Rosenzweig finds this affirmation within negation
itself, just as it discerns a “Yes” silently accompanying every word that is said: to say a word is, after all, to affirm what it says—even though this is merely a determinate way of negating the Infinite that it does not and cannot say. A word is a delimitation, a negation, but as a pure act of positing, that is, before conceptual determination, the word is infinitely positive. The gesture of naming, taken in and for itself, posits what is undefined and infinite, so long as it is not determined as to what it names.

Rosenzweig invents, in effect, an apophatic logic or rather grammar that begins not from a given object but from what cannot be said, from an indeterminate Nothing in terms of speech and concepts. Such are his “elements”: they are called “God,” “Man,” and “World” only proleptically. In themselves, they are nameless and without identity in a protocosmos from which they will be forced to emerge only with the advent of language. More primordial than any linguistic fabrication, they swim in a linguistically amorphous state. At the level of these elemental proto-realities, there are no objects and therefore no Logos—no logic and no words. Nevertheless, the web of words is the only basis for projecting back to the pre-res of this protocosmos. And only on this basis do the elements become objects, first of all objects of discourse. To this extent, language is prior to things as logical objects capable of being adjudged real or true, even though Rosenzweig loathes the linguistic idealism that denies the miracle of created reality in order to treat everything as the invention merely of language. While any determinate reality presupposes language, this reality is itself already a result: it is a linguistic delimitation of a positively, infinitely Unsayable that as such knows nothing of language.

In fact, Rosenzweig calls his method not a logic at all but rather a “grammar,” since it is based on the nature and dynamics of language, not on the laws of conceptual thinking. Logic requires determinate objects—A and B, x and y—to be given before it can proceed. By contrast, for language there are no givens entirely outside its scope: whatever it touches becomes, in some sense, language, and to this extent it conjures its elements out of nothing but itself. In language, the original presentation of the elementary terms is itself a linguistic production: a named object, as opposed to a logical object, already has a contour that is inextricably linguistic. Without its name, this element is . . . nothing—nothing that can be said, anyway. It is precisely this original nothing, what language does not and cannot grasp objectively and as separate from itself, that constitutes the element which Rosenzweig’s “new thinking” discovers. He begins with the original Nothing—for knowledge and language—of the elements God, World, Man. We know—and so can say—nothing of them. This is the Archimedean point for everything Rosenzweig then goes on to say.
Since language does not have an object that is given to it in a wholly external manner, in the way that logic does, but rather always has a hand in fashioning its own object, it always remains in touch with the nothing, no-thing, or no-linguistically-determinate-thing lurking below the surface of the things that it dextrously handles with names. Precisely this Nothing is the “ground,” or rather background, to which Rosenzweig constantly calls attention in expounding the elements of his new linguistic thinking. Because language remains conversant with the nothing of its elements, a linguistic thinking is able to keep in view, peripherally at least, the Nothing underlying every revelation, every articulation of being and essence. From beyond all manner of verbal determinations in which our experience consists, language can recall and call forth the unrepresentable, unsayable sea of Nothing on which it skims. Only this skipping and skidding of language temporally demarcates the eternal abyss of Nothing—that is, nothing sayable—by giving it positive inflections through delimitation and qualification. Otherwise this abyss remains imperceptible.

Rosenzweig characterizes his thought as a “speaking thinking” (“das sprechende Denken”), as against the “thinking thinking” (“das denkende Denken”) of virtually all earlier philosophy. Whereas thinking-thinking knows its own thought before expressing it and must simply complete the outward expression of itself in speech, speaking-thinking does not know what it is going to say, for it is open to time and the other. It does not know where it is going, for it depends in its inmost core and content on what the other will say. In this sense, speaking is time-bound; it is given its cue by the other and lives from the life of the other. Whereas thinking aspires to be timeless, to make its beginning and end coincide, speaking “does not know in advance where it will end up; it allows itself to be given its theme from the other. It lives fully from the life of the other . . . while thinking is always alone.”

The thinker knows his thought before he expresses it, and the time that this expression takes cannot add to the thought except in accidental and distracting ways. In conversation, by contrast, I do not know what the other will say, nor even what I will say, or whether I will say anything at all. In Rosenzweig’s view, this openness to the Other in speaking is the origin of thought.

Of course, this Other is what can never be expressed in language. But speaking nevertheless stays in touch with this Other that it cannot say—precisely because it cannot say it. The otherness that cannot be said is also the origin of time, of division into distinct tenses that do not comprehend one another. Language transpires in time, present time, but it is open to other times, past and future, that are not sayable and that, as such, remain unsayably other. This unsayable otherness can be phantasized in story or myth, making an image of the irretrievable past, or again in ritual and hymn, which intimate an eternal future that likewise cannot per se be made present in language. The perennial past is commemorated especially in the traditions of paganism, while Judaism and Christianity reveal images of the eternal future that is by its nature unsayable.11

In fact, this what-cannot-be-said as it appears nevertheless in the images of pagan myth and Judeo-Christian religion turns out to be the whole point of Rosenzweig’s philosophy. These pagan and biblical figures are a sort of discourse, not logical but apophatic in nature, concerning the always-perduring (“immerwährende”) past and the eternal future of reality as a whole. These dimensions are glimpsed from language and are even elaborately articulated by Rosenzweig, but in a language of pure projection, a speech of the unspeakable that is in different ways like the languages of art and ritual or religion.

In Judaism and Christianity, “the secret of God, the world, and man that is only experienceable, not expressible, along the way of life becomes expressible.”12 Deeply considered, this revelation of life in religion is the invention of a language for the unsayable. Judeo-Christian religion emerges as a compelling interpretation of human ways of relating to the all-pervasive, all-important Unknown. It discloses life in its intrinsic openness and mystery. To know nothing of God is a way of being in relation to the whole of life and existence as infinite and unknowable. This unknowing is far more vital and potent than any positive knowing; in fact, all positive knowing is contained proleptically therein and can only be a working out and an articulating of a relation to some virtual wholeness that is as such unsayable—a relation to “God,” “Man,” or “World” as what we can know absolutely nothing about.

The existence of the universe exceeds any logic that can account for it. It is “metalogical.” It is simply given as a miraculous fact—Creation. Likewise, hu-

manity is discovered as “metaethical,” as having a unique self or character that is simply there in its singularity and that cannot be communicated in the common language or be subsumed under ethical norms. It is represented by the isolation of the tragic hero of Greek drama in his or her truly unspeakable, unthinkable individuality (“wahrhaft ‘unausprechliches’ ‘unausdenkerbarer’ Individualität,” *Stern der Erlösung*, p. 53). Rather than deny such an irreducible individual existence and dissolve it into a set of character traits, Rosenzweig admits it as an unrevealed, undiscloseable, and unspeakable reality. This is the facticity of existence that cannot be expressed. This positive facticity of existence also has a “metaphysical” dimension; it is “metaphysical” when apprehended as the mystery enshrined in the unsayable Name of God.

For Rosenzweig, knowledge and its articulation in language, namely, the whole intricate network of mutual relations and disclosure of things, is a veiling of the separate, unspeakable reality of each of the elements—God, World, Man—which are not as such all one, or not any All. In the relations of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption, these elements are disclosed and articulated in relation to one another, but in themselves they remain pure enigma. Each is an ineffable mystery that no concept can grasp. We experience only the bridges between them; our experiences are such “over-bridgings” (“Brückenschläge”). Rosenzweig insists on the separation of his elements because only thus can they remain fundamentally unknown fragments that do not fit into any pre-existing All. And as such they are inarticulable. In relation to one another, they become disclosed and articulable as part of an overarching system—a revelation, a language. In their separateness, they resist language. And this separateness is their truth, not the factitious constructions of language, in which everything communicates with everything else and all is one.

There is, for Rosenzweig, a present of disclosure, a “revelation to Adam.” Apart from religion and its revelations, language itself naturally is a disclosure of life in the present. This is what Part II of the *The Star of Redemption* expounds. But this presentation of language between his discussion of the ever-enduring night of paganism in Part I and the eternal future of Judeo-Christianity in Part III contextualizes it in such a way that these prior and posterior truths of origin and of eschatology are precisely what it does not and cannot say. The dumbness of the protocosmos (Part I) and the silent ritual intimating eternity of the hypercosmos (Part III) underlie and overlay every articulation in the present of the cosmos (Part II).

Being as it occurs in existence—and that means in language—is always significant of something other than what we actually see and experience. It is hemmed in and conditioned by a protocosmos or Pre-world (“Vorwelt”) and a hypercosmos or Over-world (“Überwelt”). It is precisely the limit of
language, the unsayableness at the limit of existence, that betokens these other, unsayable realms. To speak of a “realm” is, of course, improper, since the unsayable neither is nor is not, and “realm” seems to reify what cannot in itself be concretely characterized. Yet this limit is experienced in everything in the linguistically reified world that we do experience, and it suggests a correspondence of this world to an other world which, however, never appears objectified as such. The only manifestation of this other world is in the pre-language of myth (paganism) and in the post-language of ritual (Judeo-Christian religion). It is out of these limits of experience that Rosenzweig interprets a Pre-world and Over-world in the opening and closing parts of his work.

What is revealed in language, the “organon of revelation,” is existence, but also, indirectly, the unsayable “realms” of the protocosmos and hypercosmos—the irretrievable past and the unimaginable future. Revelation is always totally in the present, but this is a vanishing present. It vanishes into the eternal past and eternal future, which remain in themselves and as such unrevealed. They are the unsayable par excellence. Nevertheless, languages of the unsayable exist for them, namely, story or myth and hymn or ritual. These are the fundamentally improper languages of art and religion, languages that intimate what is not linguistically expressible.

Rosenzweig also develops a “negative cosmology” and “negative psychology,” which are parallel to the negative theology that he actually disavows—or rather reverses, in order to insist on the positive result at which he aims. This reversal, however, is still complicit with negative theology as it can be rediscovered in the traditions of discourse on what cannot be said. In either case, something inexpressible is exposed. Rosenzweig insists that unknowing and the limits of language for him are not the end of thought but only the beginning. However, this holds true for apophaticism and negative theology in general, even if they are often accompanied by a rhetoric exalting limits for their own sake. The infinite possibilities opened by apophatic discourse have always been what motivate this “negative,” that is, eminently positive quest—it negates the finite and articulable only in order to open them to the infinite.

Rosenzweig furnishes the essential elements for a thoroughgoing apophatic revolution of thought capable of proposing novel answers to the fundamental questions of philosophy and, beyond that, of life. He rethinks the positivity of existence as given in experience on the basis of the negativity of knowledge as constituted in human discourse. All knowing is more fundamentally an unknowing, for language can have any meaning at all only on the basis of what it cannot say. Such is the meaning of recognizing the Name of God as the source and foundation of language, and thereby of knowledge,
for the divine Name represents the quintessence of the unnameable and unsayable.

In the Parmenides commentary tradition of Neoplatonism, the One as unsayable was generally deemed beyond being. In certain monotheisms, pure, positive being as such became the unsayable par excellence. Rosenzweig and other Jewish thinkers, by contrast, emphasize that the revelation of the Word is more original than any revelation of being. Correspondingly, there is an unsayable of language prior to the unsayability of pure being and prior to the unsayability of the being-transcendent One. This is explored in theories of the divine Name as the transcendent source of language. Speaking and relationship between persons, not perception or intellection of things in the world, are taken to be the fundamental situation in which reality is first disclosed. But here, too, there is an infinite, indefinable instance, in this case of language rather than of being, upon which all that is sayable depends and from which it devolves: the Name of God. The Name of God, which cannot itself be said, is latent in every part of language and alone guarantees the power of language to speak and mean. But it withdraws itself from speech and meaning as an absent foundation, as an abyss—the unsayable, the undiscloseable. It marks the gap in reality that leaves us speechless.

Rosenzweig’s work thus juxtaposes the ontological approach to unsayability that characterizes the Greek tradition from Parmenides to Heidegger with another approach through language and the problematic of the divine Name that stems from Judeo-Christian tradition: alongside the unsayability of existence, the emptiness of language and the ineffability of the Divine Name testify to the apophatic at the center of all we say and express. Indeed, language exposes perhaps yet more intractable grounds for inexpressibility than are found in existence. The Divine Name is without content; it names nothing determinate or articulable. It is not even considered to be pronounceable in Hebrew tradition. When language is explored thus to its empty core, it testifies to . . . what cannot be said.

The unnameable Name of God is a constant reminder that we relate to God, or to the source and ground of all that is, in a way that no language of ours can grasp. In this regard, the divine Name is paradigmatic of the proper name in general. Proper naming, as revealed exemplarily by the Name of God, marks the site of the unnameable in the midst of every naming and thus at the foundation of language. Pure proper naming can only be a naming of nothing, at least of nothing that is sayable. Any kind of semantic content ascribed to it violates the nature of the proper name and is idolatrous in relation to God. The Names of God were taken in traditional metaphysical discourse to
comprise the categories of being. But they also have a profoundly apophatic significance as ciphers of namelessness, which is brought out by the speculative traditions that Rosenzweig both transmits and elaborates.

Rosenzweig does not present his philosophy expressly as apophatic. Nevertheless, he effectively gives a philosophical rationale for the sorts of theosopies that traditionally have been overtly apophatic in purport and intent, and which he does expressly acknowledge as akin to and as crucial precedents for his own thought. Theosophy, to his own astonishment proves integral and necessary, alongside theology and philosophy, to his project. Theosophy is precisely the triangulation of theology and philosophy. It affords a “scientific” knowledge pointing beyond words, whereas any approach based on words—“philology”—cannot but remain silent about the mystery in question: “With theology and philosophy, thereby completing the trinity of the sciences—I am stunned and repulsed by this thought—theosophy keeps company. The rest is philo-ology, i.e., silence.”

Rosenzweig forges a strangely hybrid discourse for the quasi-theological, quasi-philosophical non-object of his thinking. Loquacious and eloquent, it is different from reasonable, “normal,” philosophical discourse, as well as from any average theological language, and its difference has to do with what it does not and cannot say. It is ingeniously resourceful, nevertheless, in inventing ways to talk about the protocosmos and hypercosmos that by rights are purely antithetical to language.

Wittgenstein, like Rosenzweig, discovered the religious, together with the ethical and aesthetic, as the unsayable at the limit of language. However, he did not appropriate the positive content of religious revelation as indirectly articulating and expressing this Inexpressible, in the way Rosenzweig does. On the contrary, it remained mute for him. Hence his famous injunction: “About that of which we cannot speak we must remain silent.” Although he realizes that what we cannot speak about is what inspires art, religion, and ethics, he does not recognize these discourses as languages for the unsayable: it remains for him simply and strictly inexpressible. He is focused on the moment of collapse of logical sense (and thus of language, for him) vis-à-vis the unsayable. Wittgenstein considers the value-discourses of ethics, art, and religion as forms of nonsense rather than of language. He recognizes something

miraculous about them, but he does not, like Rosenzweig, follow up the vari-
ous “theosophical” attempts to lend language beyond rational discourse to this
unsayability. For Wittgenstein, the way of exploring this *terra incognita* is not
available to philosophy. One needs other means and methods: those of art,
ethics, and religion.

Heidegger, like Wittgenstein and contemporaneously with Rosenzweig,
undertook a rethinking of philosophy in linguistic terms—and he, too, dis-
covered the apophatic dimension of language. Rosenzweig’s realization of the
“linguistic turn,” however, has a special twist to it in that the biblical tradition,
out of which he thinks, was based all along on revelation by the Word rather
than on the purely intellectual contemplation of being or the pure empirical
intuition of sense-perception. Whereas the Greek tradition, especially as Hei-
degger rediscovered it, was a thinking of being, Rosenzweig’s Judeo-Christian
tradition in its deepest sources and inspiration is already a thinking of the
word. Here the unsayable at the origin of all possibility of saying is not funda-
mentally Being or the transcendent One but the Word in its transcendent in-
stance, paradigmatically, the unnameable Divine Name. This provides differ-
ent motives for unsayability, even though the ineffability of the Name and that
of Being or the One are tightly intertwined from early on in the Western tra-
dition.

Beings have their unsayable origin in Being itself, as Heidegger demon-
strates, but there is also an unsayable instance within language. The revelation
of the word itself reveals something unsayable. This unsayable is a stranger to
being and is perhaps much more radically unsayable or, more properly, un-
nameable. This, for Rosenzweig, is to forsake Athens for Jerusalem: the latter,
not the former, is claimed as cultural source of a true and eternal tradition. It
means beginning from responsibility to the Other rather than listening for in-
timations of the disclosure of Being, as in the presocratic thought revived by
Heidegger. The relevant watchwords are not those of perceiving or conceiving
things, but rather of relating to others and to the absolutely Other. This, ac-
cording to Rosenzweig, is the interruption interjected by Hebraism into the
philosophical tradition of the West as a perennial challenge, particularly since
Christianity appeared on the Hellenistic scene, reviving the biblical prophets’
proclamation of a transcendent, divine Word. This specifically Hebraic in-
spiration was vigorously reasserted by Maimonides in the Middle Ages, and it
still is asserted in various forms of poetry and theory today. We have seen that
this is a distinct approach, distinct from apophasis vis-à-vis pure Being. What
it approaches, however, may turn out to be indiscernibly inexpressible in any
language whatever.
Rosenzweig’s work is continued directly by Levinas. The language of Levinas’s philosophy is apparently very different, for he does not adopt the systematic terms and structures of his predecessor. Yet he was acutely aware of his unsayably great indebtedness to Rosenzweig.14 The claim of a distinctly Hebraic thinking that is fundamentally a thinking of language rather than of being unites these two philosophers in a radical critique of all philosophy governed by Logos. As a thinking and saying of being, the Logos always has its object before it. The Logos of philosophy is nothing but what it can say. It says what is, and in doing so forgets what is before being and saying. Logos is purely a knowing and is circumscribed by this knowing. Language, in contrast, originates in an unknowing and retains the traces of what precedes being and is radically other to itself: it is open toward what it cannot comprehend or say. Language is always already open toward an other in and with which it originates as address or call. It is not grounded on anything manifest and given like being. From this perspective, Levinas’s philosophy in its entirety reads as a highly original development of the seminal insights of Rosenzweig.

Levinas’s thought turns on the idea of an alterity that withdraws from the world of reckonable, commensurable, articulable values and meanings, and this means essentially from all that can be expressed in language. Levinas probes human reality in ways that burst asunder the schemata of philosophy and of any Logos. Nevertheless, it is precisely language that announces this absolute, incommensurable alterity. Following cues of Heidegger concerning “das Sagen,” Saying, and even more directly Rosenzweig’s ideas about language, Levinas interprets language fundamentally not as system or sign but as “address.” This “address” of language as such—language defined as transcending all manifest linguistic forms and as simply the naked appeal of the Other—Levinas calls the Face of the Other. The Face of the Other speaks as an irrecusable ethical appeal that obligates me even before I am free to choose.

Although not in any manifest phenomenon of language, of words or sounds, the Face speaks. It calls those who see it to unconditional responsibility in relation to the Other. It does this by undoing the normal function of language to thematize or to categorize beings in some way: “The face is a living

14. In the preface to Autrement qu’être et au delà de l’essence (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990 [1974]), Levinas avows that his debt to Rosenzweig is too pervasive to be specified, though he does manage to say more about it in his preface to Stéphane Mosès’s study of Rosenzweig, Système et révélation.
presence, it is expression. The life of the expression consists in undoing the form wherein the being, exposing itself as theme, by that very token is dissimulated. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse.”

For Levinas, the face-to-face of relation of one human being with another is an origin for the intelligibility of things that does not presuppose any prior disclosedness of beings. Our being in relation to others, blindly and helplessly, without any conscious control or conceptual mastery, precedes all sense and intelligibility of objects that we are able to grasp and conceptualize. It is the hidden ground or precondition or, better yet, incondition for anything making sense or being significant to humans. This ethical situation also translates the underlying sense of the Word of God. The constant message of the Bible is responsibility for the other: not to forget the widow, the orphan, and the stranger within your gates, as the prophets relentlessly insist. The Word of God speaking in the Face of the Other has a sense or significance beyond being and transcending all that can be said. It is a signifyingness that no being can contain, nor any saying confer. They can only reduce it to their own immanent terms, losing the ethical significance of relation to transcendence.

Levinas presents this inherently ethical thinking as more originary than the originally Hellenic thinking of being. Hebraism thus takes on universal significance. It lays claim to harboring the deepest root of philosophical thought, which emerges, like all forms of human sense, out of relation to the Other—to human others and thereby also potentially to a transcendent Other. It begins from transcendence rather than immanence—from the transcendence of the Other, that is, the other person, rather than from the immanence of Being. Before any Logos that discloses Being, and beyond the reach of language and Logos and disclosure, the unsayable, undiscloseable Other orients and gives meaning to all possibilities of discourse. In this sense, Levinas’s thought is originarily attuned to the unsayable.

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And yet, paradoxically, Levinas finds this unsayable precisely in Saying. The Face itself, in its very muteness, is a Saying, an appealing for ethical responsibility and justice. As such, the Face speaks. Levinas interprets the message that speaks to me from the Face as the Dire (Saying) in contrast to the Dit (Said). Not any visible phenomenon but a Saying that cannot itself be said is the ethical import of the Face. It claims me by its naked vulnerability and neediness and makes me its unconditional servant, a “hostage.” This is a Saying which can never be said, for that would reduce its absoluteness to common terms of rationality. It is to this extent apophatic: there is an unbridgeable distance, beyond logical or analogical mediation, between Saying and the Said.

Levinas devised this vocabulary at least partly in response to Derrida’s objections to his Totality and Infinity (Totalité et infini, 1961). Derrida pointed out that it was not possible for Levinas to escape the language of being so long as he was still saying all this in philosophical language. In his later work, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (Autrement qu’être et au-delà de l’essence, 1974), Levinas maintained that the ethical instance beyond being, as what cannot be said, is nevertheless betrayed by the “indiscretion” of what is said. This indiscretion of the Said provides the language that makes it possible to say that which is otherwise than being, the “outside” or the “ex-ception” to being. By dint of such indiscretion, the Other occurs as an event within being. But this translation of Saying into the Said is inevitably a betrayal of the unsayable. Traduction cannot but be trahison: “Betrayal at the price of which all shows itself, even the unsayable, and which renders possible indiscretion with regard to the unsayable that is probably the very task of philosophy.”

Philosophy’s task, as Levinas understands it, is to foster and presumably to interpret this indiscretion with regard to the unsayable. This means “reducing” the Said that betrays and covers over Saying in a way that lets us discern the Saying: “The unsayable Saying lends itself to the Said, to the ancillary indiscretion of abusive language that vulgarizes or profanes the unsayable, but lets itself be reduced, without effacing the unsayable in the ambiguity or in the enigma of the transcendent, where the out-of-breath spirit retains an echo that becomes remote.” Thus, this unsayable Saying (“le Dire indicible”) is


17. “Le Dire indicible se prête au Dit, à l’indiscretion ancillaire du langage abusif qui divulgue ou profane l’indicible, mais se laisse réduire, sans effacer l’indicible dans l’ambiguïté ou dans l’énigme du transcendant où l’esprit essoufflé retient un écho qui s’éloigne” (ibid., p. 76).
signaled only in the indiscretion and abuse of language, and only in disappear-
ing like a fading echo. Description becomes necessarily tenuous, but clearly
there is some trace in language of something not yet altogether effaced. It is
figured as an unsayable Saying, which is betrayed by what is said.

The ineffable transcendence discovered in the ethical relation to the
Other cannot be comprehended and articulated, but rather dis-articulates me
from my origin as self-conscious subject and freely choosing agent. It is an
“an-archic” (“pre-originary”) openness of the self to the Other. This disar-
ticulation or unsaying is the indiscretion of the Said that betrays the Saying
that is within it. This deformation of language is essentially apophasis, or at
least its effect. In fact, in a vocabulary of precisely apophatic resonance, Le-
vinas calls it “a saying that must also unsay itself” (“un dire qui doit aussi se
dédire,” Autrement qu’être, p. 19).

Levinas stresses that testimony or witness forms a positive counterpart to
the negation of representability that characterizes the transcendent as such.
His various terms for absolute ethical responsibility (for instance, proximity,
substitution) on the part of a subject, who in this regard bears witness to an
alterity that cannot be directly perceived, supply a positivity in the place left
empty by the denial of representation in purely negative theology. He writes of
“negation of the present and of representation which finds in the ‘positivity’ of
proximity, responsibility, and substitution a difference with respect to the
propositions of negative theology.”18 Levinas here evokes a stereotyped cari-
cature based on what the label “negative theology” prima facie suggests. But
as concretely developed by any of its eminent practitioners, negative theol-
ogy has always been accompanied by some positive form of witness, such as
Levinas himself also outlines. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite intertwines
negative with affirmative theology and braids them into a mystical theology
that suspends and surpasses the negative-positive polarity in the experience of
a “luminous darkness.” Generally, prayer, poetry, and even sacramental rites
step in as witness where affirmations by predicative propositions prove im-
possible. Elaborating on the “hyper” or “plus quam,” more-than-positive
propositions of Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scott Eriugena’s negative theology
actually consists in “hyper-phatic” super-affirmations. Something similar
can be shown for proponents of negative theology all through apophatic his-
tory down to Jean-Luc Marion. And while both Levinas and Rosenzweig make
a show of rejecting the tradition of negative theology, both depend on it (or

18. “Négation du présent et de la représentation qui trouve dans la ‘positivité’ de la
proximité, de la responsabilité et de la substitution une différence par rapport aux
propositions de la théologie négative” (ibid., p. 237).
unwittingly imitate it) to articulate a reversal that is not dialectical but quintessentially apophatic—not a negation of something definite that is posited, but an evocation of what is not and cannot be posited as such or in words.19

In reality, Levinas’s discourse of the ethical is deeply indebted to the apophatic tradition. This is evident even from his own descriptions of its antecedents:

In Greek philosophy one can already discern traces of the ethical breaking through the ontological, for example, in Plato’s idea of the ‘good existing beyond being’ (*agathon epekeina tes ousias*). . . . And similarly, supra-ontological notions are to be found in the Pseudo-Dionysian doctrine of the *via eminentiae*, with its surplus of the divine over being, or in the Augustinian distinction in the *Confessions* between the truth that challenges (*veritas redarguens*) and the ontological truth that shines (*veritas lucens*), and so on.20

The genealogy alluded to here is clearly inscribed into key junctures in Levinas’s *oeuvre*. The programmatic statement in the preface to *De l’existence à l’existant* presents the relation to the Other as a movement toward the Good and cites the Platonic topos of the Good beyond Being as the guiding light, or *Leitmotiv*, of his researches: “The Platonic formula placing the Good beyond being is the most general and the most empty indication that guides them.”21 This motif recurs in all of Levinas’s major subsequent writings.22 In his essay “La trace de l’autre” Levinas adds Plotinus to the list of his predecessors, quoting Plotinus to the effect that Being is the trace of the One.23 In this essay Levinas also makes reference to the One of the first hypothesis of Plato’s *Par-

19. Kevin Hart, in *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chapter 6, brings out the broader sense of “negative theology” that exempts it from the critique of metaphysics, contrary to the assumptions underlying Levinas’s statements against negative theology.


