I thank all the publishers concerned for permission to adapt and reprint. Throughout the book, where no English editions are cited, I have provided translations myself, juxtaposing them with the originals, although the originals, where judged unnecessary or cumbersome by current publishing standards, have sometimes been suppressed.
Part I

PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE
IN VITATORY
Varieties and Valences of Unsayability in Literature

Ce qui n’est pas ineffable n’a aucune importance.
(That which is not ineffable has no importance.)
—Paul Valéry, Mon Faust

Paul Valéry’s famous statement concerning the paramount, indeed the unique importance of the ineffable receives an unlikely and unwitting confirmation from the character of Bottom the Weaver in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

“I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream—past the wit of man to say what dream it was.—Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had,—But man is but a patched fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen; man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was.” (Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act IV, scene i)

As is typical of those who speak about what cannot be said, Bottom cannot keep it short. He stammers on. He says over and over again . . . what
he cannot say. Since he cannot really say what he feels compelled to try and say, he keeps on trying. In so doing, he reflects indirectly on what fascinates him by reflecting directly on his own incapacities and foolishness, as brought out by the experience of being checked in his attempt to express what he cannot. There is endlessly much to say about this experience of inadequacy vis-à-vis the unsayable and miraculous, and precisely this verbiage constitutes perhaps its only possible expression. Bottom speaks from the bottom end of what can also be the most elevated of all discursive modes—as Longinus appreciated and as can be illustrated by contrasting Bottom’s comic voice and its ludicrous malapropisms with Valéry’s rather superb, perhaps even supercilious, tone. Nevertheless, Bottom’s words are indicative of an important direction in the drift across the centuries of discourse on what cannot be said. This drifting is precisely what severe moralists, such as Augustine and Wittgenstein, have wished to put a stop to by enjoining silence. While in principle the Unsayable would seem to demand silence as the only appropriate response, in practice endless discourses are engendered by this ostensibly most forbidding and unapproachable of topics.

This predicament of prolix speechlessness is found over and over again in literature of all kinds, especially at its dramatic climaxes of revelatory disclosure or “epiphany.” Another especially poignant instance in familiar literature of how precisely the issue of the unsayable, the nameless, emerges eloquently as the secret key to all meaning and mystery is Ishmael’s consternation vis-à-vis the whiteness of the White Whale in *Moby Dick*. This color, or rather “visible absence of color,” speaks by its very unspeakability: it is “a dumb blankness, full of meaning,” says Ishmael, “and yet so mystical and well-nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught.”

The terror of the Unnameable expressed in these lines suggests another register, besides those of Bottom and Valéry, of the limitless range of tones resorted to by speakers face to face with what cannot be said. It is a register familiar also from Kurtz’s last words—the exclamation “The horror! The horror!”—as narrated by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad’s
novel is a further example of a fiction hovering obsessively around something unsayable as its generating source, something that the narrator despairs of being able to retell:

“It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. . . .”

He was silent for a while.

“. . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream, alone. . . .”

Although such experience is so unique as to be ineffable, it is nevertheless rather prevalent, presumably in life as well as in literature, as these brief examples already suffice to suggest. These samples indeed serve to adumbrate an unlimited field. It is, after all, hard to expressly exclude any discourse whatever, where the criterion for inclusion is nothing . . . that can be said. But then the question arises: What, if anything, do all these different discourses, which we can bring together as discourses on what cannot be said, share in common? Of course, the unsayable and indefinable, in every instance, can only be incomparable. And any answer that can be said is, by that very fact, not an answer.

To get around this difficulty, we can begin by asking: What are the narrative structures and strategies that enable this type of discourse about what is in principle intractable to narration and discourse? Bruce Kawain develops an interesting theory about how “secondary first-person” narrators—in telling about someone else’s experience of the absolute—provide more intellectual and verbal energy, less purely physical and heroic force, that serves to follow and record the paths of the primary protagonists into the ineffable core of experience of essential mystery, the “heart of darkness.” Marlow serves precisely this function for Kurtz. And Marlow’s narration is itself framed by that of the narrator of Heart of Darkness, so that from Kurtz (whose name pronounced in German means,
not just incidentally, “short”—*kurz*), to Marlow, to the narrator of the story, there is a scale of increasing verbal skill or readiness to speak correlated with decreasing intensity of attunement to the inexpressible or transcendent power of the unsayable. As Kawain cogently explains, “If this were not so, and if it were possible to communicate the heart of darkness itself, directly, in words, then both Marlow and the narrator would be as shaken as Kurtz. Indeed, each successive relation dilutes the primary experience. In this way the unrelatable material is reduced to relatable terms.” Something similar can be said again for the nearly negligible narrator “Sam,” who transcribes the incredible monologue of Watt in Samuel Beckett’s novel *Watt*. Or again, “Carlos,” the narrator of Carlos Castaneda’s initiatory novels, performs a similar function with respect to “don Juan,” the mysterious Yaqui Indian sorcerer.³

Thanks, then, to these diluting devices, that which ultimately defeats all efforts of articulation remains nevertheless the object-elect, the darling, of copious discourses. In Marlow’s narration, it is the privacy of the individual’s own experience or unique “life-sensation” that turns out to be incomunicable. This constitutes, in effect, a Neo-Romantic interpretation of the mystery that apophatic, literally “negative,” discourse intimates and yet leaves undefined. What this private, individual core of experience might be cannot be said, and such a private meaning is perhaps not even a coherent concept (as Wittgenstein argues in *Philosophical Investigations* I, 243–314). So we are left with only the self-denying, self-subverting linguistic form for . . . what cannot be said. And then all verbal interpretations are only guesses—“conjectures,” in the vocabulary that Nicholas Cusanus (1401–1464) developed for apophatic or self-unsaying discourse. Such a postulation of the self as a secret, inexpressible core of mystery is questioned and yields to a variety of other interpretations of the sources of unsayability in modern authors such as Virginia Woolf.⁴ Louis-René Des Forêts’s *bavard* sustains his compulsive talking precisely on the basis of having nothing to say.⁵ Another paradoxically telling example can be found in Henry James’s later fictions, which witness to the author’s increasing doubts about and distancing of himself from language.⁶

In James, the space of the unspeakable oftentimes may be interpreted interchangeably in terms of metaphysical sublimities, sexual secrets, or social banalities. Such a layered interpretation of the Inexpressible is elabo-
rated by James in his novel *The Sacred Fount* (1901). Here it may be some special insight, a “nameless idea,” or the narrator’s theory about his companions, that remains beyond the threshold of speech and communication in a realm that is “unspoken and untouched, unspeakable and untouchable.” Or it may be quite common experiences that are transfigured by the rhetoric of unsayability, which permeates the novel, so as to take on mysterious, quasi-mystical connotations. This may happen, for instance, in the collective experience of a piano recital:

> The whole scene was as composed as if there were scarce one of us but had a secret thirst for the infinite to be quenched. And it was the infinite that, for the hour the distinguished foreigner poured out to us, causing it to roll in wonderful waves of sound, almost of colour, over our receptive attitudes and faces. Each of us, I think, now wore the expression—or confessed at least to the suggestion—of some indescribable thought; which might well, it was true, have been nothing more unmentionable than the simple sense of how the posture of deference to this noble art has always a certain personal grace to contribute. (*Sacred Fount*, p. 166)

James titillates us with the possibility that this extraordinary transport, which cannot be described, may be about nothing extraordinary after all, since, in any case, there is no telling what it is that subjectively excites such rapture in correspondence with the infinite, inexpressible desire of each listener. Nevertheless, in all these cases—in the sacred fount as also in the white whale and the heart of darkness—something mythic and transcendent is hinted at precisely by a declared shortcoming of language, something which, however, provokes a scarcely containable abundance of discourse. It is difficult, even impossible, to contain discourse when we do not and indeed cannot know or say what it is about.

The case study from James collapses the distance between ordinary experience and extreme experiences at the outer limits, where no language can suffice. Indeed, the most provocative hypothesis concerning this apophatic dimension of the unsayable is that it is necessarily present everywhere in language. The extreme or liminal experiences, in that case, would only make more starkly evident something that is perhaps always