

WILLIAM FRANKE

DANTE'S ADDRESS TO THE READER IN FACE OF
DERRIDA'S CRITIQUE OF ONTOLOGY

Aguzza qui, lettor, ben li occhi al vero,
ché'l velo è ora ben tanto sottile,
certo che'l trapassar dentro è leggero.

(*Purgatorio* vii. 19–21)

(Sharpen well, reader, here your eyes to the true,
for the veil is now so thin
that certainly passing through and within is easy.)

The explicit addresses to the reader in the *Divine Comedy* comprise an exiguous number of verses in relation to the poem's total mass and occur only sporadically within its unfolding program. Nevertheless, it is possible to read the whole poem as leveraged from them, as in its entirety a discourse of address, and to hear an implicit address to readers right from the reference to "our life" in the very first line of the work ("Nel mezzo del cammin di *nostra* vita"). In this sense, as a covert enframing for the poem, the addresses constitute a margin from which the meaning of the whole is called into question: they expressly make it a question for the reader by calling for reinterpretation at a deeper, allegorical level and even opening interpretation in the direction of the reader's own perspectives and existence. The addresses interrupt the continuity of the narrative and rupture its rhetoric of fiction by staging an encounter with an other, the reader, who is invoked from within the text, even though as standing "really" outside it. And yet, the reader as addressed by the text *is* not at all but only will have been through the response made possible by the address itself.

Thus, Dante's address to his reader is quintessentially a liminal zone, a between: between author and reader, between the poem and its meanings, between one reading of the poem and another in the endless iterations of its textual event, between poetic fiction and its social contexts, between dead letter and the voice it projects, between words and the Word – that is, the event of divinity into which seeds of vulgar literature may bloom in the reader's own life. The separate identities of author, reader, and poem itself are all thrown open to being re-originated in reciprocal relation to one another by this event of the address, which carves out a certain space of exteriority within the poem by exceeding its normally diegetic and mimetic discursive conventions. For the addresses suspend the narrative and reinscribe it,

together with the meta-narratological functions of author and reader, within some other kind of discourse, that which we are calling "address."

The addresser speaks with an authority itself become ambiguous, oscillating from the author, Dante, to the Author, God, in whose name alone, ultimately, a call to Christian conversion, such as is continuously at stake in reading this text,¹ can be authorized. Furthermore, while ostensibly a place for direct exertion of authorial control, the address marks the openness of the text to the play of interpretations: it opens the poem's meaning to being re-framed in an uncontrollable variety of heterogeneous contexts by an open set of potential readers. Although the tone and rhetoric of truth in these passages is sometimes particularly urgent and imperious, such insistent self-assurance reads, not implausibly, as a cover for moments of vulnerability and exposure of the possibility of the poem's lack of any single authorized meaning, once it has been delivered into the hands of its readers. Dante's centering the moment of revelation of meaning precisely on this juncture of open-ended mediation in effect decenters that meaning in relating it intrinsically to each reader and each repetition of the act of reading. Still, the appeal to the individual reader in the uniqueness of *this* act of reading is made paradoxically in the name of the common noun, "lettore," whereby even the opposition between singular and general loses its grip. The single individual reading now is addressed as any individual anywhere at any time who can read the poem and receive it as addressed to "them."

Such features and latencies of the address have become much more distinctly perceptible to us through the concepts and insights of Jacques Derrida, to whom my description in these paragraphs is obviously indebted. And yet "Derrida" refuses to be assimilated into any hermeneutic project such as the one that I attempted to work out in *Dante's Interpretive Journey*.² In this hermeneutic perspective, the address in Dante's poem is theorized as an origin of meaning and of world. But Derrida seems concerned to deny the very possibility of origin, certainly of any pure or absolute origin. Dante's address in the context of the hermeneutic tradition reads as a possible locus of revelation, even of the presence of divinity and of disclosure of truth and being. Is not all this exactly what Derrida is determined to deconstruct?

Derrida's own meditation on the extraordinary ultra-ontological implications of the address is worked out with tantalizing suggestiveness in his reading of instances of address as they occur, with a certain thematic relief, in the writings of Maurice Blanchot. He suggests that intervals of otherness and moments of loss of meaning, as we see them played out in the address, are constitutive of any possible meaning the address may have or convey. Ultimately, he challenges

us to confront in their full radicality the ontological questions (and the very questionability of ontology itself) raised by the address and the possible impossibility of an address from God or Being, or from – and to – any being.

Derrida's most sustained and concentrated exploration of the address, and particularly of the instance of "Viens" ("Come") in Blanchot's "L'Arrêt de mort" and in other "récits," is entitled "Pas."³ This title is at least two-fold in meaning: "pas" as a particle of negation in French interacts with the word "pas," meaning "step," in order to inscribe the way that the step towards something is at the same time a distancing and an absencing, a "not." In particular, the approach of presence apparently invoked in "Viens" ("Come") holds presence perpetually at a distance. Quoting Blanchot, Derrida writes that this "pas" of approach is an approach which "does not render its presence nearer" ("*une approche qui 'ne rend pas sa présence plus proche,'*" p. 31). On the contrary, any step, any approach – and this means also the coming or presencing belonging to the essence of address – is conditioned in its very possibility by the withdrawing that operates in "not."

So construed, arriving is an event that does not really take place. It can only be virtual or even false, a "faux pas." For arriving necessarily posits a distance from its goal: it can "arrive" only so long as it has not yet arrived. It is intrinsically a border, the border of boarding. Just this sort of liminality is spoken aloud in the vocative "Come," described by Derrida as "this suspense of proximity – dis-tancing, the border of boarding" ("*Viens: dans ce suspense de proximité – é-loignement, le bord de l'abord,'*" p. 96). In bidding the step of a coming, "Come" articulates the step/not which always withdraws, even from itself: "This 'pas' ... will never be present to itself, with and by itself, near itself in some return to self: no/step of reappropriation" ("*Ce 'pas' ... ne sera jamais présent à lui-même, auprès de soi, proche de soi dans quelque retour à soi: pas de réappropriation,'*" p. 31).

Even as it brings forward the impossibility of arrival, so, conversely, the address highlights the problematic nature and perhaps ultimate impossibility of any attempt to approach otherness. The other is what must be totally free and uncircumscribed by the self and the same. Not the other of the self but an absolutely heterogeneous other is what Derrida demands. The problem is that every attempt to let otherness arrive annuls its character as otherness by superimposing a movement of appropriation. Every "approach" to otherness inadvertently and unwittingly compromises its status as other: "But can one, must one, ought one to board this other shore? Would it not immediately cease to be other?" ("*Mais peut-on, doit-on, faut-il aborder cette autre rive? Ne cesserait-elle pas aussitôt d'être l'autre?'*" – "Pas," p. 66.)

A particularly interesting feature of "Pas" is the way Derrida writes it as a dialogue with the voice of a listener/reader who is the one addressed by "Come" from the very first word. The voice of the partner in dialogue who is addressed expresses distress from its first intervention and complains that although it was addressed by "Come" it is really being ignored by the speaker/writer's meditation on the question of what happens when "Come" is called and on what *this* can possibly be called (p. 21). This suggests that the address, perhaps of necessity, always misses its mark from its very inception as address. But even if the address necessarily fails in the aim of addressing an other that it intends, still Derrida maintains that it is itself an event of otherness, an "other-event": "Come" is "the coming of this other-event called *come*" ("la venue de cet autre-événement appelé *viens*" – "Pas," p. 73). "Come," as the quintessential address, is somehow the name of an event that escapes the logic and rhetoric of return to the same that vitiates any attempt to reach an other as other.

Near the beginning of "Pas," Derrida explains that in the *récit* of Blanchot the word *Come*, ceasing to be a word, cannot be comprehended through any of the categories of language. "Come" is "an event that escapes all semantic and logico-grammatical analyses, or in other words the order of language, thus designating all which overflows it" ("un événement de langage qui échappe à toutes les analyses sémantiques ou logico-grammaticales, voire à l'ordre du langage, désignant ainsi tout ce qui le déborde ..." p. 72). In particular, "Come" cannot be said to be a modification of the verb "to come"; it must be said instead that *Come* has some unusual sort of priority or "advance" over *to come* ("l'avance insolite de *viens* sur *venir*," p. 25). *Come* cannot be reduced to grammatical functions but is rather in advance of them because it is not properly language, but rather the condition of its possibility.⁴

In fact, *Come* is what makes possible not only events of language but events quite generally. Derrida, or rather the leading voice of the dialogue in "Pas," asserts that *viens* produces or is the moment/place from which is produced every event, every coming or arrival: "Every coming produces its 'to come' only from a *come*" ["toute venue (d'événement, d'avènement, d'avenir, d'aller-venir, etc.) ne produit son 'venir' 'qu'à partir' d'un *viens*," p. 95]. The vocative "Come" does not fit into the normal grammatical declension of the word "to come" any more than coming fits into the static categories of the beings that are, but it nevertheless is that on the basis of which everything that "is" comes to "be." From Derrida's point of view, the being of things is in fact nothing but their "effect" of coming (to be). And

the vocative "Come" articulates just this effect and the difference it makes. Without this articulation of "Come" as the calling into being or presence, nothing can be said to be or happen. To this extent, the rhetorical moment of address precedes and conditions any ontological possibility.

This astonishing claim that "Come" is that from which anything whatever happens and alone can happen is repeated when Derrida returns to the motif of "Come" several years later, in *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie*, and states even more explicitly that, "The event of this 'Come' precedes and calls the event. It would be that from which there is any event, the coming, the to-come (l'à-venir) of the event that cannot be thought under the given category of event."⁵ Here Derrida develops the idea of "Come" as opening the space in which only ontological questions, questions about "what is," can arise: "This 'Come,' I do not know what *it is*, not because I yield to obscurantism, but because the question 'what is' belongs to a space (ontology, and from it the knowledge of grammar, linguistics, semantics, and so on) opened by a 'come' come from the other" (p. 65).

From the hermeneutic point of view that has previously been developed in connection with Dante's address to the reader, this might seem to encourage treating the address as a source or origin for meaning in the poem and in the world or rather the "scene" that it opens ("Viens', ouvrant la scène ..." – *D'un ton*, p. 92). Yet Derrida's analysis of the address insists, on the contrary, that in some sense it is a non-origin. He is keen to insist on the prior status of the address in every respect, prior even to time itself ("un viens, un déjà plus ancien que le temps" – "Pas," p. 73). But this priority constitutes no original fullness or oneness of a source; rather, it is itself constituted by lack and direction, by dependence and derivation from what is radically other than itself. Whatever the originating roles "come" may play, it is itself "come from the other" ("venu de l'autre" – *D'un ton*, p. 92).

"Come" comes from the otherness than which nothing is more originary, yet which is itself a non-origin, an otherness with regard even to itself. Derrida insists on the priority of the "Come" to anything it could possibly be derived from. More originary than any origin, the address "Come" could not come from God or Being or anything else that is, for it is prior to "is." And yet, "come from the other," it is itself derivative in the strongest sense. This was in fact hinted at by its first appearing within quotation marks in Blanchot's text, as Derrida's remarks in "Pas," in describing "[t]his citation or re-citation of *come*" as "that which renders it possible in its first event" ("Cette citation ou re-citation du *viens* ... celle qui le rend possible en son premier événement ..." p. 23). Looking back on "Pas" from *D'un ton apoca-*

lyptique, Derrida recounts that what first interested him most about "Come" was "the drama of its citationality," that is, "its repetitive structure and that which, even in a tone, must be able to be repeated, thus mimicked, indeed 'synthesized'" (p. 87).

In fact, the gesture of "Come" is itself a staged repetition, a theatrical effect. "Come" for Derrida is not only a speech act we inadequately call "address." It is also an "act." In the fictions of Blanchot, as well as in the Apocalypse of John and in other apocalyptically intoned discourses (which, incidentally, may in some sense include all discourse, giving itself out to be disclosure – finally – of what is), a certain tone is artificially taken on, perhaps not without taking others in. This difference in tone – although presumably secondary, a reaction and witness to the beginning and end itself awesomely unveiled – is itself the origin of apocalypse as Derrida reads it: "addresses without message and without destination, ... without any other eschatology than the tone of the 'Come,' its very difference.... 'Come' does not announce this or that apocalypse: already it resounds with a certain tone: it is in itself the apocalypse of apocalypse; *Come* is apocalyptic," p. 66 ("... sans autre eschatologie que le ton du 'Viens', sa différence même, une apocalypse au-delà du bien et du mal. 'Viens' n'annonce pas telle ou telle apocalypse: déjà il résonne d'un certain ton, il est en lui-même l'apocalypse de l'apocalypse, *Viens* est apocalyptique," p. 95).

That apocalyptic address (in fact the address of discourse as such, in its apparent determinateness and affected finality) and specifically "Come" should achieve its phenomenal effect through nothing but a difference in tone is an idea that is far from impertinent to the understanding of Dante's address to the reader in the *Divine Comedy*. Although Dante's addresses in the *Commedia* do not turn on 'Come' and its specific theatrics, certainly the tone of Dante's addresses is indispensable to the relationship they establish with the reader and to their whole way of working as invocations. For all the "ontological import" of its discursive structure and mode, which I have particularly emphasized in *Dante's Interpretive Journey*, it is hard to escape admitting that the address draws upon an effect of tone in assuming its decisive role in this text that calls its reader so imperiously to hearken.⁶

Moreover, as a phenomenon of tone, Dante's address to the reader clearly is citational through and through, constituted in its very essence by allusion to precedents. To be the tone that it is, to be recognized as prophetic, it must in some sense be already familiar from antecedent tradition, that particularly of the biblical prophets, and certainly also that of the classical poet-vates. In one sense, then, the address cannot be "original." The tone on which it relies

to initiate a break, making a decisive difference and calling to a new level of awareness and interpretive engagement with the text, is itself perceptible and readable only as having already occurred. Does this mean that the artifice of citation, rather than any more original inspiration, is all that is at stake in the address? Presumably, Derrida himself would wish to resist the reductive terms of such a binary opposition between artifice and inspiration.

It needs to be admitted that Dante's address is not itself a solid and self-sufficient ground of origination; nothing that is said or thought humanly could be. It is rather the locus in which and out of which the question of origin as such opens: the address calls upon the powers of origination at work in poetry and discourse, as well as in interpretation, all of which are given from what they cannot themselves account for, certainly not in terms of extra-poetic givens for the reader or interpreter. The opening towards a divine ground of origination celebrated in the poem and implicit in the call of its addresses does not, of course, make this ground directly present. But neither is the claim to speak from an experience of such presence simply annulled by the admission of tonal effect and citationality as constitutive of the address.

Dante undeniably gives himself a tone in the addresses. However, that does not necessarily make his authority false. As Kant allowed in his tract, *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen Vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie* (1796), which Derrida ventriloquizes in his own title, this exalted tone may still announce genuinely inspired interpretation of a higher truth or reason. That there can be no proof of presence, no evidence of an authentic experience of the divine, does not mean that any claim to experience of the presence of the divine is sham or that the tone of address that conveys a sense of such an experience is necessarily mendacious. It is true that such an experience can be signified only by what it is not, by signs and the constitutive non-presence of what they signify. There was in fact a very keen awareness of this predicament in the Middle Ages. And Dante himself consciously journeys directly into its midst, confronting the aporias for any possibility of significant expression in language, particularly for his indescribably exalted subject matter in the *Paradiso*. His insistent use of the ineffability topos marks this awareness and makes this predicament constitutive of, indeed key to, the very discourse in which he expounds his experience of Paradise.

For human beings, whose existence transpires in time, presence is always elusive and vanishing, in ways and for reasons analyzed in classic texts, for example, St. Augustine's meditations on time. But that does not mean, as it certainly did not for Augustine, that any claim of relation to presence is inauthentic (neither does it permit asserting unequivocally its authenticity, not

on philosophical grounds anyway). Proof or verification, admittedly, can never be given for experience of this order; this has been acknowledged *often* enough by theories of religious experience.⁷ Such experience can be signified only by means of what it is not, hence analogically. In fact, experience as such can be *signified* only by signs which presuppose the non-presence of what they signify. But this argument delineating the limits of every signifying system and process leaves open the question of the beyond of the system, a question which fascinates Derrida as much as Dante.

Precisely his fascination with the address shows most clearly that Derrida is concerned not with the system of signification for its own sake but with what lies beyond it, with what is unsignifiable, beyond being signified and even beyond "being" so far as it is signified – that is, with what he calls "the other." This he has also stated blatantly (which is rare for him) in correcting a widespread misapprehension of his critics in an interview with Richard Kearney: "I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' and the 'other of language.'"⁸ Indeed, Derrida goes so far as to suggest that language, far from eliminating everything outside itself, is nothing but irreducible reference. Hence, for example, his insistence on the "referential transcendence of language" ("la transcendance référentielle du langage") as belonging to its character as a trace, its effacing itself before what it names, even though this makes reference indeterminate except for the name ("sauf le nom").⁹ In *Sauf le nom*, he is willing to bet that this is the whole crux of negative theology:

Il n'y a que du bord dans le langage.... C'est-à-dire de la référence. Du fait qu'il n'y ait jamais que de la référence, une référence irréductible, on peut *aussi bien* conclure que le référent – tout sauf le nom – est ou n'est pas indispensable. Toute l'histoire de la théologie négative, je le parie, se joue dans ce bref et léger axiome (*Sauf le nom*, pp. 64–65).

(There is nothing but the border in language.... That is to say, reference. By the fact that there is never anything but reference, an irreducible reference, one could *just as well* conclude that the referent – all except for name – is or is not indispensable. The whole history of negative theology, I bet, is at play in this brief and slight axiom.)

In his critique of logocentrism, Derrida uses a kind of argument that can best be called "quasi-transcendental."¹⁰ It concerns the possibility of sense: he argues that this possibility is generated by absence, by a play of absence and presence, but not by pure presence alone, such as God is conceived to be. The argument is

not properly transcendental because it does not ground the possibility of sense; it rather *ungrounds* sense. It shows that any ground that may be presented is already within the system of referrals of sense and therefore not a free-standing ground, that is, not a ground at all but only a further relay or transfer of sense. This exactly is stated by the principle of "différence," which holds that "one element does not function or signify, neither confers nor receives, sense, except in referring to another element past or to come in an economy of traces" ("veut qu'un élément ne fonctionne et ne signifie, ne prene ou ne donne 'sens' qu'en renvoyant à un autre élément ou à venir, dans une économie des traces" – *Positions*, p. 40).

The attack of deconstruction on being or God really impugns these ineffables only in so far as they are supposed to function within a signifying system such as this argument presupposes.¹¹ But Being as the concern of thought is nothing that can be defined and signified: it can only be interpreted in existential relations. And God as encountered in religious experience is not, primarily and in his essence, sense or a signified. He can serve a function as *signatum*, but this is not God himself; it is only a way for seekers to relate, through processes of signification, to his ineffable being and properly unsignifiable self.¹² More than just a signified, God is an Other – though saying this is again a way of signifying him by his unsignifiability. God is the absolute other, though all we express about him, apart from revelation, can only be a poetry of our uncanny experience concerning God – precisely as in the *Divine Comedy*.

In order not to be misconstrued into a travesty in need of deconstruction, the language of being and presence must constantly be reinterpreted as a kind of poetry: its meaning is always other than what it is in any pre-established signifying system. It is questionable whether even a *language* of otherness does any better than the language of being. For the otherness is just what cannot be said by language, in as much as language makes whatever it says commensurate with itself. And yet, language still can be marvelously open to and pregnant with otherness. This has in fact often been the case with the language of being and presence in metaphysical and mystic, as well as poetic traditions, as is eminently exemplified by the *Divine Comedy*. This mystery of otherness is exactly what I am proposing we attempt to learn to read in Dante's language and the traditions that it reactivates.

Derrida's argument, then, can show that we do not know what the sense of the address is; we know only that it is necessarily other than all the sense we can make of it. But neither can we determine this beyond-sense in an anti-theistic or even an anti-ontological sense, unless the projects of theism and ontology are taken to have definite and secure sense, rather than as being

themselves a search and a journey, such as Dante undertakes both as poet and as protagonist of his own poem, on the way to a sense that is never had or grasped, since, as Derrida suggests, it must be given from the other. Exactly this could hardly be more clearly acknowledged than by Dante's expressly addressing his poem to the reader.

The power of Derrida's insight into the negativity constitutive of signification (inherited from Hegel *via* Blanchot, but also clearly grasped by Dante and medieval semiology) must not be interpreted simply as negating ontology. It can question ontology, but is not warranted in substituting for it a blanket negation of ontology, what amounts itself to an ontological assertion in negative. This would not be in keeping with the move beyond being and with the deconstructive method of reinscribing rather than only reversing oppositions.¹³ Neither would it, except perhaps in specific strategic contexts, lie in the direction of openness towards the call of the other, which Derrida's work on the address particularly shows to be the responsive and responsible orientation of his thinking.

As the call of the other, the address signals a decisive juncture for both Derrida's deconstructive project and for the onto-theological tradition represented by Dante's poem (a work which reminds us that onto-theology is itself a project, just as "deconstruction" is itself always already a tradition). On the question of the address, both approaches to otherness confess their inadequacy to fully comprehend and rather seek to test the power and the limits of their respective responses. To allow ourselves to become radically other in response to the otherness at the core of our being – most radically perhaps the otherness of God, who is the origin of any being that can be "my own" – is the challenge of Dante's tradition and the basis of his call to conversion.

Of course, otherness for Derrida also asserts its difference from all that he could find in Dante. Derrida's other is not the other of the self; it is an absolutely heterogeneous other. As is said specifically of language in "Pas": "Not *its* other but the other without it" ("Non pas *son* autre mais l'autre sans elle," p. 74). This is otherness without belonging and without return. Dante's journey through otherness, literally the other world, is a journey of return to self; in this, it follows the paradigmatic course of Western literature since the *Odyssey*.¹⁴ For Dante, the absolute other, God, is nevertheless still the origin (Creator) of the self's own being. However different it becomes, the self is nevertheless on a journey back or forward to its own origin.

The journey of return to self may seem to have become reductive in our postmodern age. But it need not appear so from a broad perspective over the

history of many ages, such as that envisaged by Dante. Some shape of return or circle of recognition may well be a necessary framework for any possible knowledge of – and more importantly respect for – otherness. Of course, this quintessentially theological structure (what warrants the age of the sign's being dubbed "essentially theological" throughout its whole extent by Derrida)¹⁵ entails that the venture out into otherness will lead to a return back to self and origin, however radically different they become in the process. But what, in effect, are the necessary conditions for encountering otherness responsively and responsibly? It is not clear, though Derrida seems often to imply, that this can be achieved only, or best, or at all by resisting and dismantling all structures of self-relatedness. For Derrida, every theological appropriation of the address brings it back to self-reference and inevitably the exclusion of otherness. But precisely structures of self-reference and relative self-enclosure can be the enabling conditions of relatedness to others so far as this is concretely possible for us. This, I maintain, is shown with great poetic power by the *Paradiso's* song of the self and the same as structuring and animating principles of a universe made in the divine image. This infinitely creative self-relatedness is directed towards self-transcendence, as in the outpouring of being in Creation. It is far different from the inevitable emptiness of self-referentiality and reflection as understood out of the essentially solipsistic experience of the modern, which is to say the Cartesian, subject. Recovery, or rather reinvention, of the theological vision of the Middle Ages affords an especially good opportunity for understanding this other possibility of otherness that does not exclude moments of self-reflexiveness.

It was previously suggested that because no presence can be concretely given within the conditions of knowledge and significance in language as we know them, the question of its possibility or impossibility always abides open. Answering the question of language, by showing the impossibility that it should ever harbor full and final presence of its object, is precisely what opens the question of the beyond of language. The religious imagination is perhaps best equipped to reach into this abyss. Dante's poem invites to a way of inhabiting that openness that goes against certain of our modern sensibilities, for example, a distaste for dogma, but which for that very reason may be all the more challenging as a standpoint from which to criticize our own presuppositions and the closures that they construct for us.

Derrida compels us to face the possible impossibility of God's becoming present in the word of an address to readers or hearers. But this is only a *possible* impossibility, because to show that the structure of signification does

not allow of such a possibility does not preclude the suspension of that structure and apparatus in the miraculous granting of sense beyond our ordinary senses. Just some such miracle seems to be intended by the description of the events of the Pentecost in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Dante's address in the vulgar tongue, "translating" the eternal Word, is likewise to be heard from within this tradition. Derrida encounters this possibility of the "more than impossible" particularly in the tradition of so-called negative theology, most pointedly in Silesius Angélus' writing that the more-than-the-most-impossible is, after all possible ("Das Überunmöglichste ist möglich"). In this respect, the experience of negative theologism closely corresponds to, and is even difficult to distinguish from, that of "deconstruction" ("Cette pensée paraît étrangement familière à l'expérience de ce qu'on appelle 'déconstruction'").¹⁶

Derrida's transcendental or quasi-transcendental arguments concern possible conditions of our knowledge, or rather the possibilities of signification as we know it; they do not directly delimit the possibilities beyond all possibilities that to us are conceivable and signifiable of a divine being or event (nor are they necessarily intended to do so, however often this may be assumed). Derrida's analyses can call into question whether "divine being" and "event of transcendence" mean anything. And indeed this should and must remain questionable: the lack of determinate meanings for such terms belongs to their status as beyond sense, or as open possibilities of sense. Dante insists upon this constitutive questionability of theological language particularly in the *Paradiso* through the topos of ineffability. This constitutes a conspicuous sign of the way poetry like Dante's can embody a negative theology that sustains the dialogue with Derrida's critique of logocentrism. And to this extent, discourses of ontology and hermeneutics, understood especially in terms of the phenomenon of address, are not informed by Derrida's arguments, but rather opened to some of their most provocative possibilities.

Vanderbelt University

NOTES

¹ See, for example, John Freccero's essays collected in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

² William Franke, *Dante's Interpretive Journey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³ "Pas." first published in *Gramma* (Cahiers 3/4, Lire Blanchot, 1) in 1975, is available in Jacques Derrida, *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), pp. 19–116, from which all quotations are taken. Translations throughout the essay are my own, except where an edition in English is cited.

⁴ In "Survivre," Derrida uses the Scholastic terminology of the transcendentals to describe the uncategorizable status of *viens*: "L'effet *viens* du 'prénom' transcende toutes ces catégories [d'une analyse des actes locutoires] (on dira en ce sens que c'est strictement un 'transcendental': *qui transcendit omne genus*)" (*Parages*, p. 171).

⁵ Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1982), p. 91, trans. by J. Leavey, Jr. as "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy" in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. H. Coward and T. Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 64.

⁶ This was emphasized by Auerbach in his famous analysis, and in fact the issue of how to define Dante's tone in the addresses became apparently the chief bone of contention with Spitzer's challenge. See Eric Auerbach, "Dante's Addresses to the Reader," *Romance Philology* VII (1953-54), and Leo Spitzer, "The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*," *Italica* XXXII No. 3 (1955).

⁷ Provocative remarks by Wittgenstein on this head stand out in an immense choice of literature. See *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

⁸ "Deconstruction and the Other" in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 123.

⁹ Derrida, *Sauf le nom* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), p. 82.

¹⁰ It is so denominated by Rodolphe Gasché in *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

¹¹ Derrida's more recent writings on religious matters prove to be anything but dismissive of what is envisaged by the vocabularies he has often aggressively critiqued. See especially *Donner la mort* (Paris: Transition, 1992) and "Foi et savoir," in *La Religion* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), with its reference to "l'appel à la foi qui habite tout acte de langage et toute adresse à l'autre" (p. 28).

¹² Representing this very ancient and authoritative position in the tradition of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Thomas Aquinas accepts and in fact demonstrates God's undefinability: "non habet genus, neque differentias; neque est definitio ipsius" (*Summa Theologica* I, Questio 3, Art. 5: *Utrum Deus sit in genere aliquo*). Or again in Questio I, Art. 7: "In Deo quid est, dicere impossibile est."

¹³ See Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, pp. 171–76.

¹⁴ Cf. Franco Ferrucci, *L'assedio e il ritorno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1974).

¹⁵ Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967): "L'époque du signe est essentiellement théologique" (p. 25).

¹⁶ Derrida, *Sauf le nom*, p. 31. Related issues are discussed in "Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations," in *Psyche: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).