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A PHILOSOPHY OF THE UNSAYABLE:  
APOPHASIS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF  
TRUTH AND TOTALITY

“Rien n'est vrai que ce qu'on ne dit pas.”  
 (“Nothing is true except what one does not say.”)

– Créon in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*

What we most strongly and deeply think and believe, what we passionately love or ardently desire, inevitably escapes adequate articulation. It is always more, if not completely other, than what we are able to say. This common human experience of butting up against the limits of language is experienced paradigmatically in the disciplines of philosophy, theology and poetry. All these types of human endeavor lead inexorably to renunciations of language at critical stages in attempting to advance towards their goals. Nevertheless, at the same time, this very deficiency of speech, this incapacity of verbal expression, indeed of representation of any sort whatsoever, forms the starting-point for rich, articulate discourses in each discipline, discourses about what cannot be said. What these discourses reveal, I contend, is that we are in crucial ways always oriented in all that we *do* say by what we *cannot* say, so that indirectly, we are always talking “about” – or at least “from” or “out of” – what cannot be said. If this is true, then all discourse at some level collapses – or blossoms – into discourse “on what cannot be said.”

This contention is susceptible to a variety of interpretations that make it by turns either obvious or absurd, a matter of plain self-evidence or else perfect paradox. On the obvious side, what motivates never-ending human saying of things could only be something that never can be said. The very fact that we go on speaking indicates that something remains unsaid. And since there is no built-in limit to the continuation of our speaking, this something unsaid proves, in effect, to be unsayable, at least for as long as we still go on speaking. Precisely this predicament is exquisitely illustrated in the incessant, unendable monologues that babble on through Beckett's fictions. And the same problematic is dramatized in theatre pieces such as *Endgame*.

There is no built-in limit, except, naturally, death, to our saying of the things that can be said. And in this respect, death lays claim to being the name, or at least one name, for the unsayable. Yet to say this is to say, in one way, the unsayable, to give it a name, and thus to depotentiate it as, precisely, unsayable. A homologous, equally challenging, and in many regards compelling reduction takes place if we name the unsayable "God." Such namings may have some validity as interpretations, but they must not be allowed to be definitive and so to end the production of new namings and sayings, since it is precisely the unlimited, open-ended production of denominations and locutions that testifies to the genuine infinity – and perhaps divinity – of what cannot be said.

Death and God are unsayable and as such prevent language from being able to achieve closure. Language, as discourse, is open-ended and goes on infinitely, unable to bring to final presence in consciousness the impossible (non)experiences of death and God. If language in its saying and naming is basically a bringing to presence before consciousness, it is radically impossible to say death, since consciousness is itself annihilated in death. Likewise the unsayability of the Name of God, enshrined in religious traditions, for example, by the unpronounceable Tetragrammaton (JHWH), a name for the unnameable, stands for the impossibility of encompassing God's infinity within any finite structure of human consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

It is their operating as unsayable, as beyond the inevitably reductive meanings of their names, that characterizes both death and God as genuinely unsoundable, inarticulable, endlessly provocative mysteries. Whatever is said of "them" is said rather of some image or idol that betrays them in their status as unsayable. In apophatic discourses, all that is said may be said in some manner of death or of God or of both, but we should not pretend to know what these names mean – except to the extent of knowing that it is nothing that can be said. Specifically and uniquely, the experience of what cannot be said can take us nearest to the limits of being human, and thereby also to what may open up beyond these limits.

This unsayability is, arguably, what "humanizes" persons and their understandings, grants them the possibility of relation to singular individuals having some kind of whole and unique meaning that cannot be articulated (since *individuum ineffabilis est*), to something beyond a field of calculable objects, the truly and uniquely human. At the same time, it is what de-humanizes us or makes us strangers to ourselves. No category or norm such as "humanity" can accurately express this being that con-

stantly reaches beyond even Being (the ambit within which understanding by categories is possible), and that by its nature essentially transcends and negates itself. Humans constantly define and create limits, but this activity itself is not limited, except perhaps by itself: and to *set* limits is not to *be* limited; it constitutes rather a way of placing oneself beyond them.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed anything finite and definable proves in the end insufficient to satisfy and motivate modern, Faustian humanity. For in the historical course of its development, the human spirit discovers itself to be without definable intrinsic limits. Whatever limits it recognizes always turn out, at least in their articulated, verbally defined form, to be limits that it has set and defined for *itself*. Whatever depths and riches of human spirit we can exhaustively state may be highly revealing, but they cannot account for nor motivate the infinite passion by which human beings – insofar as they are human, perhaps – can be motivated, even in this very activity of endless articulation and self-definition.

Human experience in its unfolding in language and desire – at their limits – opens into the undelimited and ungraspable. The specifically human element must in the end be recognized as something uncompletable and therefore ungraspable, the self-negating and self-transcending movement in which the undelimited human capacity for relationship opens the world of finite objects surrounding it into an infinite “beyond,” something radically other to itself, not excluding potentially even “divinity.” Such “humanity” is thus better designated as “transhumanizing” – adopting Dante’s *trasumanar* (*Paradiso* I, p. 70) – as uncontainable within any single, static category such as the human. The signpost of this “transition beyond” throughout Western cultural experience has most steadily been *apophasis*, the negation of speech: the only fitting description of such experience is as indescribable. Such a predicament can be most effectively illustrated by means of the various self-contradictory or self-unsaying linguistic manoeuvres and techniques that make up the repertoire of apophatic rhetoric, devices such as “oxymoron,” “paradox,” “ellipsis,” “contradiction,” “irony,” “anacolouthon,” and the like.

God transcends every finite consciousness and can never become present to consciousness, perhaps because “God” already *is* presence and consciousness in their absolute infinity, in a way that is immediately lost as soon as these and any other terms, including “divinity,” define and thereby delimit it. Of course, Hegel was able to rethink infinity, by dint of a dialectical reversal, so that it is humanly realized as a concrete, completed whole. He would leave no holy, untouchable realm for the

unsayable. He holds what is commonly called the ineffable to be nothing other than untruth: "What is called the inexpressible is nothing other than the untrue."<sup>3</sup> Or, in another programmatic formulation that comes to the same thing: "The real is the rational."<sup>4</sup> Yet Hegel's *writings* also show provocatively the limits of this position and another possibility, a possibility of infinite difference, of something that would remain forever inexpressible to Logos.<sup>5</sup>

The genius of Hegel, especially as distilled by Alexandre Kojève and passed on thereby to twentieth century French thought, was to think finitude in its absoluteness. Absolute truth thereby becomes realizable in the death of God. Totally realized in the finite, the infinite is actually an articulable whole, concrete and finite. The unsayable is banished: the real in its entirety is fully, rationally uttered. Although they also attempt to exorcise it, Benjamin and Wittgenstein are still, at certain stages, haunted by this idea. The world whose factual existence Wittgenstein calls "the mystical" ("das Mystische") he conceives of as a delimited whole ("begrenztes Ganze"). For the logical positivist in Wittgenstein there really is no expressing anything infinite and beyond language – not by apophatic modes of linguistic dysfunction, nor even by silence (which he enjoins, but not as if it indicated or expressed anything). Even for a certain, highly Hegelian Benjamin, it is only because world and word alike are fallen, that the infinite communicativity of language encounters a limit and comes up against what cannot be said, checked, for example, by the muteness of nature. Such outlooks are supported by the presumption that only what is determinate and defined can be concrete and real. They forget or ignore that the "concrete" and "real" that can be said are, after all, linguistic abstractions in comparison with what unsayably is there, concretely and really, before all linguistic delimitations.

Apophysis, by contrast, lets the infinite be undetermined and wholly other to every definition and construction of consciousness. We understand always only on the basis of what we do not understand. Knowing arises as a reflexive wave of illumination within a sea of unknowing. The alternative, Hegelian way is to make the concrete and articulated Idea the intrinsic ground for every reality and every idea, including that of the infinite. One starts with this articulated Idea and works outward towards its realization in Nature and History. But to a post-Hegelian sensibility ideas are not the origin of anything. We start thinking always belatedly. We have already, always already, been thrown into existence. We are oriented first and fundamentally to the unknown rather than to the known. What we cannot say because we never knew or grasped it under-

lies and bears upon the sense of everything we do and ever can say. This is the concrete and real (whatever such terms may concretely and really mean), though we cannot define it – in fact, on condition that we cannot define it.

One of the few things we tend to be able to agree upon today, after Nietzsche, Freud and Marx – *pace* Hegel – is that it is the nature of human consciousness not to exhaustively comprehend what motivates it. Consciousness is oriented by something that it cannot completely grasp. This may not actually be some *thing* at all but rather the very structure of open relatedness that characterizes and constitutes human existence. It is in this dimension that divinity and death are authentically encountered, if at all.

The human capacity, for instance, to sacrifice and renounce self and immediate, or even just determinate, satisfactions, in order to invest unconditional care and commitment in something or someone, surpasses the limits of anything finite and definable. Such behavior, not for any calculable gain nor for any realizable objective that could be exhaustively achieved, but because of an infinite or indefinite significance that it holds for the individual person involved – in one word, love – depends on the strangely, incomprehensibly human capacity to conceive something indefinable, something that cannot be said.

The intrinsic openness of thinking, including thought's very thinking of its own limits, has been thought through theologically in connection with Saint Anselm's famous ontological argument by Karl Barth in *Fides quaerens intellectum*. Not the concept of God as "that than which none greater can be thought" but the openness of thought to the infinity that is realized in actually thinking this, and so in negating every determinate thought as still allowing for something more unlimited and therefore greater, gives validity to the ontological argument as an actual manifestation of God's infinite being. There is here no logical deduction of God's existence from a necessary concept but simply the realization of infinite openness of mind, which is the being of God.<sup>6</sup> This is, at any rate, as much of God in his own essence as can be humanly known.

For consciousness to conceive of what it cannot define or say is for it to transcend itself in its very act of conceiving and saying. Such a significance, or ultra-significance, can be vouched for only by the effects it inspires in human beings, and it can be given a definite content not in itself and as such but only by human action and emotion, and perhaps devotion. This sort of non-object is what orients and evokes our most powerful passions. It has many different faces, both divine and human,

as well as demonic and uncanny. But all are only reminders of something beyond them that does not accept being defined in any finite terms. Something infinite about the miraculous capabilities of human beings to infinitely *care* projects infinity onto whatever is being loved – or loathed or feared or abhorred – so that it becomes (infinitely) indefinable.

Any discourse attempting to signify such an instance will quickly find itself checked at the limits of what can be said. And yet such passion can hardly be conceived without discourse, without being motivated by a capacity inherent in language to project an infinity beyond everything in the world of definite objects, infinity such as can never be encountered or even conceived except in a dimension of discourse. Discourse engenders the possibility of projecting this transcendence to a beyond that cannot be articulated. The self-reflexive (and thereby also self-negating) powers of language are crucial to this capability of discourse to project infinitely beyond itself. The reflexiveness characteristic of human self-consciousness, perhaps defining the threshold of the human *vis-à-vis* other forms of life, is what makes possible the operations of totalization and singularization. Both involve transcendence of the definable, of all conceptual definition and verbal determination by means of self-negation.

Death and God are totalizations and singularizations – of a whole individual life, or of the unique principle of all reality. In a sense, they exist only in discourse, but at the same time they raise the question of where or wherein discourse itself exists. They point up the fact that discourse, in its operations directed towards transcendence and infinity – accomplished in and by singularization and totalization – does not comprehend itself. Discourse is more than it can itself account for. “There was a myth before the myth began,” writes Wallace Stevens. “The clouds preceded us.” Something we cannot define in our discourse remains the unexpressed point and ungraspable motivation driving all we can say and do. Self-transcendence is not just an operation within language but the operation of language or *upon* language of ... what cannot be said. Self-reflexive and self-transcending operations of discourse embody language opening out beyond itself towards. ... This is the actual enactment of the infinite – beyond simply the saying of the word “infinity.” This enactment of infinity can be assigned no meaning – except the negation and attenuation of all assignable meanings. It is this opening up from within of language that witnesses to a sphere of totality and infinity that really cannot be described. Ruptures in language – Georges Bataille’s “*déchirement*” – are the realization within language of some life or movement that strives beyond it.

In recent, postmodern apophasis (seen already, for example, in the 17th century Kabbalah) the tendency has been to emphasize the breaking and shattering of all meanings as what opens language to intimations beyond its possibilities of saying. Where discourse ruptures, meaning spills out and spreads without bounds, and in this sense becomes infinite. The cutting and rending of language, so effectively imaged especially by post-Holocaust poets like Celan and Jabès, opens it to the unfathomable, unsayable dimensions of the external and infinite. Language is riven open to something radically other than itself and all that it can contain or say. When “das Gedicht” (“the poem”) is turned into “das Genicht” (“the noem” or “no-poem”), the word is broken to let out the nothingness in its midst, and this says something about poetry, language and everything that is: it insinuates their derivation from Nothing – that is, from nothing that can be said. The essential poem, like the essence of anything and everything, so far exceeds words and concepts (including the concept of essence) as to be nothing at all in their terms.

It has recently become more plain to see that this intellectual operation and movement of negation continues down the path of reflection broken open in Neoplatonic thought almost two millenia ago. The incommensurability with language of an Other, taken especially in an ethical sense, presents itself to Emmanuel Levinas, for example, explicitly as a version of the Neoplatonic problem of a One which cannot be said, as well as of the Good beyond Being in Plato himself. Radical, irreducible heterogeneity, emphasized by other authors writing in French, like Maurice Blanchot, shows up in relief against this traditional background which recognized the One as irreducibly other to all thinking and being and conceived it similarly in terms of the limits of language.

The fragmenting and shattering of language is actually an opening to an undefined and untameable realm. The inexhaustible mystery and unsoundable provocation of this Other to Thought and Being, to all that can be said, which figured as the One for the Neoplatonists, has inspired much recent apophatic thought, for example, in the style of Jacques Derrida. And still far too little appreciated, Franz Rosenzweig worked out for contemporary philosophy an apophatic grammar of Nothing as prior to the logic of Being: the latter applies only to the world of objects, rather than to the pre- and post- (or beyond-) world, the protocosmos and the hypercosmos, the indefinable, inarticulable zones from which the experienceable world devolves and towards which it evolves.

A major motivation for turning our attention towards what cannot be said is that only in this domain, if at all, is it possible for truth in its

(always only virtual) wholeness to be touched and brought into contact with life. Though truth, especially in its wholeness or totality, is forever beyond our comprehension, discourses on what cannot be said bear witness to how it bears upon us and thus to how we can live in relation to and in acknowledgement of this perhaps divine (im)possibility. Partial truth may not be truth at all; the truth is perhaps to be defined simply as the whole. It was so defined by Hegel: "The true is the whole" ("das Wahre ist das Ganze").<sup>7</sup> But to say the whole truth, or anything wholly true, is doubtless quite impossible for a finite human being. Nevertheless, precisely this impasse to articulation suggests that there is an indistinct conception of something inconceivably and unsayably "whole" and "indivisible," "simple" and "total," that preempts our always fragmentary and finite possibilities of stating. The source of all possibility of speech seems to be touched whole in precisely what proves inarticulable. A passion for and fascination with this unsayable results in discourses touching upon the true and even the total in a wide range of disciplines, preeminently in philosophy, religion, and literature. The true and total remain unsayable, yet in encountering what exceeds all limits of description or articulation, what cannot be said to be untrue or only partial either, we are, almost without knowing it and without being able adequately to say so, oriented towards the unimaginable, unsayable sources of our images and words, including those for "truth" and "totality."<sup>8</sup>

Indeed the overwhelming fascination of the Nothing throughout apophatic tradition flows from the sense that it is somehow pregnant with the significance of everything, yet in a way that cannot be directly or adequately comprehended or signified. The empty void, the silence before speech, is suspected of being incomparably the most significant phase in the whole process of expression – though saying this, in whatever way, risks belying it. A meaning (or quasi-meaning) is suspected to be somehow present in an inkling that is gathered or intimated before articulation begins and that ever after will be irrevocably lost. Indeed meaning can be whole only before being articulated. To be broken into component parts, articulated into members, is at the same time to be dis-articulated. Yet the wholeness before speech is not the wholeness of a complete ensemble of parts. This latter wholeness is delimited in terms of the parts that make it up. The wholeness of what is not yet articulated is an undefined wholeness. It cannot be defined as more real than unreal, more true than illusory, more as being than as non-being. It is not Hegel's finite infinity of the completed whole but is defined rather by its incompleteness. It is infinite and undelineated. Hegel snubbed this as the "bad



infinite," but modern thinkers of the fragment, beginning with the late Schelling and Kierkegaard, to Rosenzweig and Benjamin, and then those thinking in (and out of) the breaking and bursting asunder of the word – Bataille, Blanchot, Celan, Jabès – have attempted to think exactly this open-ended infinite that is unthinkable and thereby delimits thought.

Especially interesting and significant is the way apophatic thought develops historically in tandem with more metaphysical doctrines, qualifying and re-deploying their articulations in a different and non-dogmatic register. The truth of the metaphysical visions is revealed as something other than anything that they themselves had actually stated or even could directly say, let alone expound. Insight that formerly was coded into the vocabularies of metaphysical and transcendental philosophies or theosophies retreated into the refuge of the ineffable and silence. Their point lay not so much in anything actually proved or presented by their rhetorics of unity and wholeness. The Truth in these discourses was typically invested rather in something more indirectly witnessed to in their silences. Indeed they often let on, and sometimes even explicitly insisted, that their ineffable meaning was experienced and signified only in silence – which, however, signified all.

It may become possible to understand and, in a sense, recuperate the intelligibility and even the "truth" of some of these ancient forms of wisdom once we recover the necessary ground, or rather back-ground, of all knowing in some form of unknowing, such as apophatic discourses are bent on evoking and adumbrating. After all, metaphysics is not at all just a system of propositions, certainly not when the negative theological currents that have most always, at least implicitly, accompanied it are understood as determining its ultimate purport. In the broader spiritual tradition, metaphysics has not been understood strictly in terms of explicit formulas but generally rather with some sense of its deeper, subtler and largely silent significance. That is why it has lived such a long, varied, and in fact still vigorous life. Perhaps only in philosophy, in fact, mostly just in academic philosophy, has metaphysics been interpreted narrowly as a deductive system, and without regard for its allusive and largely poetical power of vision and suggestion of a beyond of all *logos* in which something more naked and dumb, like *physis*, is revealed.

When we allow for what cannot be said as present silently at the center of all discourse, the gap between competing languages claiming the name of philosophy drastically narrows. Virtually all have indeed in different ways recognized what cannot be said as at least defining their borders. The conflict of widely diverging statements and stances attenuates when

consideration is given to what they were not saying and were not even able to say. An intention beyond what they were saying toward what they were not able to say, or at any rate a possibility of understanding them in such a direction, is inscribed within them, if we learn how to read it. The devotees of such wisdom always had their own ways of reading the words – quite beyond what they were able to say in purely exoteric language to the detached, critical, philosophical mind.

To bring about a reconnection of metaphysics and theosophy with critical philosophy we must bring about a reactualization of the unsaid and unsayable in all these different traditions and foster a rereading sensitive to this silent dimension of discourse. Such a rereading moves against the whole thrust of philosophy since Kant to make this border impermeable, to definitively separate pre-scientific from critical philosophy. Yet what cannot be said, if allowed to emerge from eclipse, illuminates the very aspirations to fullness of truth that have driven even this scientifically inclined, science-emulating sort of philosophy, together with philosophical inquiries of the most disparate, often unanalytical types.

With the defeat in the post-Hegelian era of all attempts to claim whole and complete knowledge or even to conceive of things as a whole, we arrive at a prevailing skepticism that often sneers at such notions as oneness, unity, and, of course, truth and totality. To rational scrutiny such ideas prove untenable, for reason's tools can only divide and conquer – or else liquidate by the acid of analysis. But an alternative to the rational, enlightenment thinking that has accompanied and guided Western culture in its unfolding since the Greeks is presented in a range of religious traditions, from mythologies to monotheisms, that furnish a variety of vocabularies for what cannot be said. Rather than basing knowledge all on the *Logos*, these approaches, in different ways, are based on openness to and trust in (or at least abandon to) what is not logical, not sayable. At their limit, they open themselves in silence to what is beyond word and representation, to the ineffable.

Discourses on what cannot be said have in common a structure of opening out beyond all definable, systemic parameters and so of being open to infinity. Meaning and significance accrue to human discourse from motives and passions that cannot be rationally delimited in adequate and exhaustive terms, and this dimension of discourse remains unsayable. Curiously, this structural inability of human discourse to achieve closure in itself makes it homologous to and even indistinguishable from certain metaphysical discourses such as have been taken to epitomize closed systems. The analogies become evident when these metaphysical and

mythical discourses are read as symbolic languages for what cannot be said.

If we interpret mythic hypostatizations or reifications as condensing potentially open-ended, on-going narratives that testify to what cannot be said, what can never be adequately or exhaustively stated, then claims about ultimate grounds are claims about the openness and infinity that drive these discourses rather than about objects or essences that are arbitrarily posited as guarantors of fixed and stable significance. We can only attempt to think (or to renounce thinking) the openness of experience and life as they occur in terms of what cannot be said, of experience of failed (or at least unfinished) attempts to articulate, and of impasses to expression.

Poetic literature explores language to its limits in order to render audible and articulate intimations of what lies beyond language. Historically, philosophical reflection, too, both in the course of ancient philosophy and again in the course of modern thought, has attempted to recuperate this expanded field of experience beyond rational comprehension, seeking for more flexible ways to use reason so as to allow for what exceeds it, and seeking also to redefine reason in relation to this other-than-reason in a way that would somehow integrate it with rational knowledge.

Indeed a powerful impulse in just this direction was given precisely by Hegel, or at least arose in his wake. Hegel, and in particular his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, was fundamental to various generations of French intellectuals, including several who figure here as apophatic thinkers.<sup>9</sup> In this milieu, Hegel came to be read as the precursor of the discovery of the irrational and the unconscious.

Hegel inaugurates the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it with an enlarged reason, which remains the task of our century. He is the inventor of that Reason more comprehensive than understanding, which, capable of respecting the variety and the singularity of psyches, civilizations, and methods of thought, together with the contingency of history, nevertheless does not renounce dominating them in order to conduct them to their proper truth. However, it turns out that the successors of Hegel have insisted not on what they owed to Hegel so much as on what they refused in his heritage.<sup>10</sup>

Hegel opens reason to the irrational but then absorbs the irrational back into reason, the Logos, and so back into the range of things that can be said.

Connected with this, another capital idea that passes through Kojève and Merleau-Ponty is that of Hegel's "existentialism" and of death and

finitude as the condition of all knowledge, even of absolute knowledge – which again closes the circle of consciousness on itself rather than opening it to what is beyond its grasp and beyond being and language. Only a finite being can reach absolute knowledge – a consciousness in which consciousness and self-consciousness are one and the same. Only because of death can the in-itself and the for-consciousness fully coincide. Death is necessary to totality. Death, or a prolonged sojourn in its face, is the magical force transposing the infinitely negative into determinate being. This idea is at the very center of French Hegelianism ever since Kojève's reflections on Hegel.<sup>11</sup> But precisely these interpretations will actually break the circle of Being-Logos open to what always evades reason and speech in the reverberating shock waves after Hegel: in a reversal of the collapse of the infinite into the finite, everything finite and stateable breaks apart and opens into something infinite and indefinable.

Although opening perspectives into the other of reason, Hegel himself attempted relentlessly to reduce all that is real to the rational, to bring anything and everything to articulation by the Logos, refusing to recognize any absolute, irreconcilable alterity. So his main historiographical significance falls on the opposite side of the divide between the reign where Logos is law and the an-archic realm of apophasis. However, this distinction actually blurs in Hegel: he is not included in this apophatic canon, despite the enormous influence he has had on it, because of his profile as a systematic thinker rather than a thinker of the break-through, the *Durchbruch*, through which what cannot be said asserts itself. Of course, a system is first necessary in order that it be broken through, and so it is hard to imagine contemporary apophaticism without Hegel. Especially the renaissance of recent French apophatic thought would hardly be conceivable without him. Nevertheless, the main thrust of Hegel's effort went into building the System.

Twentieth-century, especially French reactions to Hegel, in their discovery and exaltation of the supralogical and apophatic, had been anticipated a century earlier. Kierkegaard, in an early wave of reaction against Hegel, taking cues from the late Schelling, wished to think passion and paradox in ways inaccessible to reason and Logos. In "The Absolute Paradox," he writes, "However, one should not think slightingly of the paradoxical; for the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity. ... The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think. This passion is at bottom present in all thinking. ..."<sup>12</sup> Not even the *via negationis* will serve reason to draw

near to this other-than-reason, according to Kierkegaard (p. 55). No codified "way," of course, could. Nevertheless, it is telling that Kierkegaard registers precisely this proximity even in denying it – in a move that nevertheless imitates the negative way as a negation of method rather than a method.

The break with Hegel and with absolute knowledge, the focus on what remains necessarily outside all systems and even outside conscious, verbally articulable experience, what denies itself to speech, opens a vast new field of inquiry. It is essentially the field in which apophatic thinking has flourished time and again in the past in the wake of the perennial crises of Logos. The same questions as were worked through the whole antecedent apophatic tradition arise again. Yet how is this "realm" to be conceived? For if we know anything about it, it is precisely that it is not conceivable at all. Can it then be experienced? Can there be some kind of a journey to the other side of knowledge and into Unknowing? Is such experience then an experience of language, that is, of the limits of language, or is it altogether beyond and apart from language?

Such questions are raised by new and old approaches to what cannot be said, which can be extremely different and even contradictory. What cannot be said is imaged both as quintessentially invisible (Bible, Gregory of Nyssa, Levinas) and also as what by its nature must "show itself" (Wittgenstein). But even more deeply puzzling than the question of whether what cannot be said must in some sense be seen is the issue of its relation to language. Is the unsayable beyond language altogether, as mystics often fervently maintain? Does this make it simply non-linguistic? Or is it the other of language and therefore inextricable from language (Derrida)? Or is it without relation to language (Blanchot)? Or is it language itself – in different ways an implication in positions of Heidegger and Hamacher? Paradoxically, what cannot be said can *only* be said (de Certeau): for all we can tell, it is nothing but this verbal negation itself.

Many such absolute *aporiae* are generated by what transcends language, by what cannot be said. Is this transcendent-of-language nothing or is it everything? Is it total incomparability and absolute singularity, or complete connectedness of everything with everything else, indeed the deep indistinguishability or oneness of everything, that brings about the condition of being unsayable? Total transcendence and pure immanence come to coincide in what cannot be said. Eckhart teaches that nothing can be compared to God because nothing is distinct from him. Absolute distance and no distance at all alike prevent any sort of articulation. Total mediation becomes indistinguishable from sheer immediacy in lan-

guage, as Benjamin, for example, maintains. It proves impossible to decide these antinomies in favor of one alternative or the other. The apophatic is the locus par excellence of complete contradiction and paradox, of *coincidentia oppositorum*, in the language to which Cusanus gave currency. Might we envisage an asymptotic point of “indiscretion” at which such alternatives collapse together and cannot be discerned or severed from one another?

The unsayable must be expressed in contradictory forms because it can have no proper identity of its own but exerts absolute, decisive influence in all directions on everything else. If it had any kind of identity, what cannot be said would be, to that extent, sayable. Nor is it permissible to conceive of “what cannot be said” as a certain something shared in common by all these discourses, giving them the unity of reference *ad unum*. There is no “what” to which discourses of the ineffable refer. Therefore the affinity that is sensed among these discourses cannot be reduced to any definition, for that would be to say what these discourses do not and cannot say. What holds these different languages together is rather that each in its own different way discovers at its limit something that it cannot articulate – and discovers this unsayable as decisive for its own discourse all throughout. But this something is in every case unique and incomparable – unsayable.

It is paradoxically the incomparability of these experiences which invites – and alone allows for – comparison. This phrase “what cannot be said” enables us to unite under one cover a vast range of texts tethered to vastly different experiences embedded in widely disparate spheres of culture and history. We are compelled to compare these experiences precisely in point of their incomparability. In fact, from behind this impediment to speech and this interdiction of all articulation emerges a totally inexhaustible realm, an infinite field open to virtual experience. Intrinsicly recalcitrant to any form of expression, the “experience” expressed in apophatic discourse is always totally different and completely without comparison.

Thus focusing on the apophatic moment, on what cannot be said, does not prejudice content in any way. It valorizes the contemplation of the (contentless) whole prior to articulation and comprehension. The blind relating to and opening of oneself toward ... what cannot be said is the most potent, though also the most empty and elusive, moment in any experience. Prior to any articulation of content there is an affirmative belief in something that is (as yet) no-thing but nevertheless proleptically orients all possible knowing and eventual speaking. This as yet unbroken,

unarticulated whole-nothing is, in its silence, more potent than any supervening articulation that breaks that silence. Though this potency is actually Nothing, no thing, it absorbs and totalizes attention and orients us wholly to itself, and this is what makes a difference where otherwise nothing can be said. It makes all the difference "to us" – before any difference can actually be made in it as such, in any objective and stateable terms. It is something that makes a difference because it is believed all-important, even without actually manifesting any differences in which its importance would consist. To this extent, it has a structure like that of faith. Although the moment before speech and articulation is objectless and completely indescribable, it dictates the concrete determinate orientations of those who have trained their attention towards what cannot be said, having been pointed in that direction by the limits and the unsayable "beyond" of some particular form of experience.<sup>13</sup>

There is, then, some measure of belief in these approaches to apophasis. This is undoubtedly why it has been mixed up with all manner of metaphysics and mysticism, as well as with all sorts of theosophies and transcendental philosophies, in the course of the history of philosophy and culture. This naturally provokes skeptical reactions. The vacuousness of any determinate formulation need not necessarily be taken as revealing some plenitude of unqualified infinity. Not surprisingly, then, atheistic apophasis has often been ascribed to key writers from Pseudo-Dionysius to Meister Eckhart. Yet this position all too easily falls into making rather too confident claims, if the denials are believed without being also disbelieved. If denial becomes determinate, it then disbelieves *something* and has become just a form of belief in a finite, articulated discourse: it believes in what it says rather than in what it cannot say, and that changes everything. Language becomes the instrument of delivering definite doctrine, a dogmatic denial, rather than being a medium open to mystery and the constant escape of the indefinable. In this case it becomes easy, too easy, to reject a putatively open mystery like "what cannot be said" as mere mystification.<sup>14</sup>

In opposition to the inexhaustible fascination with the mystery of language in the apophatic tradition, there is indeed a more skeptical attitude towards the emptiness and inaptitude of language that devolves from the sophists. Gorgias's contentions that nothing exists and that even if something did exist it would be incomprehensible lead up to the inference that, "If anything is comprehensible, it is incommunicable ... that with which we communicate is speech, and speech is not the same thing as the things that exist, the perceptibles; so that we communicate