

2

A Philosophy of the Unsayable

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In *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, William Franke is concerned to identify and investigate what he calls “modern apophatic culture” and “a perennial philosophy of the unsayable.”¹ The first of these comes into sharp focus with the writings not only of poets such as Paul Celan and Edmund Jabès but also of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Indeed, once one begins to look around, Franke believes, one sees this motif everywhere, in Kafka and Rilke, in Hölderlin and Dickinson, and we could extend the list on our own almost indefinitely and in a range of directions: Maurice Blanchot, André du Bouchet, Philippe Jaccottet, Tomas Tranströmer, and Charles Wright, in the field of literature, while, with regard to philosophers, one would want to include people as close to one another (and as far from one another as well) as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, and Robert Sokolowski.

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The second focus, the perennial philosophy, marks a massive, slow undertow of Western culture; that is, the intense yet sideways attention that we have paid to the ineffable at all times, from Plotinus to Eriugena, from Eckhart to Schelling, from T.S. Eliot to our own day. “We are in an age,” Franke tells us, “in which discourse becomes acutely conscious of its intrinsic limits and is dominated by what it cannot say.”² The point is, I take it, partly that many of our finest artists are concerned with the unsayable and partly that, because of their interest, we notice that motif throughout our history. It is less a repetition of a motif than a transformation of one. As Franke says, modern apophatic culture is rooted “in millenary discourses of mysticism and negative theology that can be traced back to the origins of the Western intellectual tradition.”³ We hear it when listening to Charles Simic testify to a “feeling granted everyone / Of living in two worlds / One of which is unsayable.” Also, we recognize it when painfully reflecting on the Shoah, but then we need perhaps to distinguish the unspeakable from the unsayable.

What is striking to a theologian when reading Franke is his calm assurance in speaking of a modern *philosophy* of the unsayable, especially when he does not have ancient φιλοσοφία primarily in mind. For apophatic theology is ineluctably tied to kataphatic theology, whether it is regarded as fundamental (it begins with the conviction that “God” names that which exceeds all categories or that which evades them by dint of being absolutely singular) or as consequent (it corrects anthropomorphic statements about the deity as they come in revelation and metaphysical statements that occur in reflections on revelation). Moreover, apophatic theology does not derive exclusively or even fundamentally from epistemic concerns; it is embedded in practices of contemplative and even meditative prayer, and is oriented to and thoroughly imbued with divine love. It is amorous before it is epistemic, part and parcel of prayer before it enters the seminar room or a poet’s study. To be sure, apophaticism draws from θεωρία, as considered by both Plato and Aristotle. Is contemplation something one does and that then drives one to action in the πόλις, or is it something that comes as a reward for hard work as a philosopher or as a statesman? There is a Platonic thread that runs through Christianity as well as an Aristotelian

thread, and of course in some schools of Neoplatonism, which variously seek to make Plato and Aristotle cohere, one finds the two knotted together. These threads, and the knot as well, are folded into Christian discourses, eastern and western, that are themselves grounded in Jewish conceptions of the ineffable holiness of the divine.

A *philosophy* of the unsayable, then, can come about when the unsayable has been lifted away from its theological contexts, especially from Judeo-Christian concepts of God and from the command to worship only this God. This philosophy is therefore sequestered from theology. Unless an apophatic theology cuts its figure against the ground of a kataphatic theology (or vice versa), it is useless as a guide for the believer or as a way of thinking for the theologian. A general apophaticism yields a God much like Kant's noumenon, and invites Fichte's response to it: since it does nothing, remove it at once! Thomas Aquinas, who certainly was driven by apophatic concerns, and who greatly prizes Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, nonetheless holds that there are affirmative predications one can and must make about God: that God is form, for example. Curiously, when the apophatic passes from theology to philosophy, as it does for William Franke, the distinction between figure and ground is eroded, even if it does not quite collapse. If apophaticism begins as so many "counter-discourses,"⁴ it soon marks discourse itself as it begins to fray at the limits of speech.

Even so, philosophical apophaticism has quite different modalities. We find one inaugural moment in Kant's first *Critique* (1781, 1787) when God is detached from theoretical discourse and repositioned in the realm of ethics. Here the unsayable is a bound beyond which we pass only at the risk of exceeding human cognitive powers: philosophy looks inward to the subject, and theology prefers to attend to the Kingdom rather than the Trinity. This is a triumph of transcendental thought—i.e., we seek conditions of possibility which cannot appear but which fascinate us endlessly. With Derrida these conditions no longer form a ground as they do for Kant and they concern the impossible as well as the possible: hence his endlessly inventive evocations of *la différance*. We find another founding moment in Burke on the sublime, and its extensions into German idealism (including Kant's third *Critique* (1790)), and, from there, into postmodern art. Here, the

unsayable is often to do with the transcendent and not the transcendental. For some, it functions as a nostalgic replacement for a deity in whom one can no longer believe, while for others it is the consequence of the presentation of aesthetic Ideas (Jena Romanticism and the aesthetics of the fragmentary) or an ethical imperative of moral height (Levinas).

Of course, in postmodernity the transcendental and the transcendent are often difficult to disentangle and have even morphed into different forms. Epistemic interest in the transcendental can become fascination with what Jean Wahl calls the *transdescendant*, while affirmations of the human as *transcendant* (to use Wahl's other coinage) can readily lead to contemplation of a deity who comes to mind in human encounters but who prefers to withdraw behind moral engagements.⁵ One momentarily contemplates that which is beyond being, but the contemplation quickly yields to action. In that style of thought, primarily associated with Levinas, we find Talmudic debate converging with the ethics of the critical philosophy. Nonetheless, we should resist any attempt to homogenize the *transcendant* and the *transdescendant*, if only because the unsayable never vacates an embedded context but merely changes from one context to another. The *transcendant* invariably evokes contemplation, so much so that Levinas must move quickly in *Totalité et infini* (1961) and summon all his *gravitas* in order to resist it: the face must never, for him, be simply visual least it yield its status as enigma for that of phenomenon. Yet the *transdescendant* edges us towards the phased counterpart of contemplation, namely fascination. The person kneeling before an icon contemplates Christ, while the writer who apprehends the approach of *le Dehors*, the philosopher who notes the play of *le supplément* or the teenager who, strolling through a mall, witnesses the transfiguration of world into image, is fascinated.

Contemplation and love are co-ordinate practices in the Christian tradition that comes to us from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, on the one hand, and from Augustine, on the other. Yet they can be nudged sideways at any time so that they become another couple, fascination and desire, which can easily be taken as a disenchanting version of the original twosome. The endless theological exegeses by St. John of the Cross of his own poems can be set against the relentless disturbing

narratives of the Marquis de Sade or *Le bavard* (1946) of Louis-René des Fôrets. *Tout dire*: such is the desire of the one who gazes upon the face of God and the one who simply speaks, whether to transgress socio-religious conventions or (as Novalis prompts us) to avoid the familiar in art. (Think today of John Ashbery, especially of a poem such as *Flow Chart* (1991) or, if you prefer, of A.R. Ammons's *Sphere* (1974).) Yet the impulse does not allow itself to be formalized in just the one way. For the mystic can "say everything" in a phrase (Eckhart's "I pray to God to rid me of God," for example), and the poet can do the same by folding long chains of epistemic concerns with ultimate limits and theological sequences of love into short lyrics (Celan's "Die Niemandrose," for instance).

So it is enticing, and not overly difficult, to find the unsayable everywhere these days. There is all the more reason, then, to seek to discern the different modes in which it impinges on us. (Recall Beckett's remark in *The Unnamable* (1953), "For it is all very fine to keep silence, but one has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps."⁶) Also, there is all the more reason to credit those authors who shy away from the unsayable, or who regard it as only part of what interests them, whether out of principle or because they are tone deaf to the different ways in which people, God, and the world can be silent. Consider Robert Sokolowski. God creates the world out of love, he stresses, as all Judeo-Christian thinkers agree. This means, as Sokolowski tells us, that the distinction between "same" and "other" abides in the world, and that God is other than anything we can situate within any economy of same and other. Yet because God is "other" in an absolutely singular manner, there can be no contrast between God and the world: the deity is with us, in sacraments and kisses, as well as utterly beyond us. God is unsayable and yet God is involved in the immanent, the ordinary, and the quotidian, in everything we say and do. And think too of Karl Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (1932–1967) and Eberhard Jüngel's *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (1982), along with, more recently, some writers in the emerging field of analytic theology: the unsayable is not what animates them. With regard to literature, let us also remember Francis Ponge's *Le Savon* (1967), James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1976–1980) and, in a quite different key, Alan Wearne's *The Nightmarkets* (1986)

and *The Lovemakers* (2001, 2004). Here we have poets who wish to “say everything” but not, I suspect, out of apophatic concerns, however displaced they may be.

Notes

1. William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), p. 2; p. 79.
2. Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, p. 1.
3. Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, p. 1.
4. Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, p. 1.
5. See Jean Wahl, *Existence humaine et transcendance* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1944), esp. pp. 34–38.
6. Samuel Beckett, *The Unnameable* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1958), p. 28.



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