

Franz Rosenzweig and the Emergence of a Postsecular Philosophy of the Unsayable

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

A particularly dense and destiny-laden nodal point in the midst of this history is Viennese culture at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, pivoting on figures such as Hofmannsthal, Wittgenstein, Musil, Rilke, Klimt, Kraus, and Schoenberg. The catastrophe of an entire historical epoch was here felt in all its extremity and was expressed with the utmost acuteness and oftentimes pathos too. Hofmannsthal’s “Letter

of Lord Chandos" (1901) witnesses emblematically to the collapse of cultural values that had guided Western civilization since classical antiquity. The failure of classical reason, the bankruptcy of bourgeois culture, the general demise of civilization were registered as radically invalidating and undermining the value of language. The great discourse which the West had entertained for millennia seemed suddenly to have become null and void, and even somewhat obscene. No longer able to carry on this conversation, many of the most sensitive and honest intellects of the time found themselves faced with an imperative of silence. Freud's discovery of the unconscious as what unsays language by "slips" is symptomatic of widespread emphasis specifically on the linguistic dimensions and derivation of the disaster. Kafka, too, from the Jewish quarter in Prague, is thoroughly imbued with this *Mitteleuropean* mood of doom that presided over the declining Hapsburg Empire. Although at different times and places, Walter Benjamin and Samuel Beckett are both responding to this experience of collapse, as are numerous leading beacons, Jewish and non-, across all arenas of art and culture: all are indelibly marked by the specific form of apophatic crisis that was given expression by these Viennese writers and artists.¹

Beckett is linked to precisely this ambience through his involvement with the linguistic skepticism of the Austrian philosopher of language Fritz Mauthner. As a young man Beckett read Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (1901) aloud by request to James Joyce, whose eyesight was failing him. In fact, the nominalist philosophy of language expressed with great stylistic vehemence in this work turns out to bear close affinities to representations of language in Beckett's texts.² Mauthner's views were generated, like Kafka's and Hofmannsthal's, in the context of the fall of Austro-Hungarian civilization – a metonymy for general European decline and the demise of the West – and the consequent cultural hollowing out resulting in mendacious verbal manipulation and rigid insistence on empty formalities in the attempt to stave off the inevitable collapse. Beckett's distrust of language and his determination, as a result, to write in an apophatic vein shapes, from this early period, his sense of his mission as a writer: "The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement, between the flowers that cannot coexist, at the antithetical (nothing so simple as antithetical) seasons of words, his experience shall be the menace, the miracle, the memory, of an unspeakable trajectory."³

This culture of crisis continued to evolve, surging into a new wave of apophatic expression with post-holocaust writers in Germany

and Austria, as well as a generation later among French thinkers of difference. It lives on also in various tendencies in postmodern culture – issuing in an evacuation of the real – across its many channels of expression. Contemporary America has emerged as a leading venue for a new apocalyptic apophaticism. American abstract art was once in the vanguard of this tendency, as are now the discourses of silence that are conspicuously burgeoning across humanities and social science disciplines in the American academy. Apophatic discourse is assuming the role, paradoxically, of a common language, a *koiné*, like Hellenistic Greek, for all types of expression of the post-modern, as well as for its unsuspected, only recently rediscovered precursors in tradition.

The proximate intellectual foundations for all these various forms of apophaticism over the last two centuries can be found in the rebellion against Hegel and his System staged by his Romantic contemporaries and post-Romantic opponents. This suggestion may, at first, appear paradoxical, since the history of German speculative mysticism, one of the most fertile seedbeds for apophatic thought from Meister Eckart and Nicholas Cusanus through Jakob Böhme and Silesius Angelus, is oftentimes taken to culminate in Hegel⁴. But precisely the apophatic emphasis of this tradition is erased by Hegel. Hegel's main premise is that everything that is real *can* be said. He eliminates anything that is supposed to lie definitively and irretrievably beyond the grasp of Logos. The whole line of apophatic speculation, stemming from Eckhart and ultimately Plotinus, based on being or existence as exceeding verbal, conceptual grasp, passes rather through the late Schelling. The discovery of existence as radically open, for lack of any rational or sayable ground, was further developed in original ways, under Schelling's direct influence, by Kierkegaard and then in currents reaching from Kierkegaard to Dada, Expressionism, and Existentialism, each in different ways assaulting the word by a reality gone mad beyond saying.⁵

This predominantly German strain of apophatic speculation that gathers in Schelling, together with Jewish thought in the Kabbalah tradition, flows into the work of Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin. Franz Kafka also unites the same elements and produces texts that are seminal for subsequent apophatic writing. However, it is Rosenzweig who most convincingly broaches a fully elaborated, original apophatic philosophy in a contemporary key attuned to language as the paradigm of all knowledge. Gathering together these philosophical and religious traditions, and coming out of the crisis of language

that shook European civilization in the years leading up to the Great War, with its epicenter in Vienna, Rosenzweig emerges as arguably the preeminent apophatic thinker of modern times. The main burden of this essay will be to offer a new exposition of his thought from this perspective.

It cannot be overlooked how extensively and incisively Jewish thinkers and writers and artists have contributed to apophatic tradition and culture throughout Western intellectual history. This can be verified with particular intensity through modern times to the present. The biblical interdiction on images acknowledges the transcendence of an unrepresentable God. This God, nevertheless, remains the root of a great genealogical tree of thought and expression that branches all the way into the 20th century. It is a vigorous growth that the Holocaust itself was not able to truncate so much as stimulate. Still, the imagery of cutting and rupture has deeply scored recent apophatic expression, especially that of Jewish provenance. Images of tearing and rending, as well as of shattering into fragments and destroying – for example, the vase of pure language breaking into the babel of historical languages envisioned by Benjamin, or the conceit of the broken vessels of Creation relayed by Jabès from the Lurian Kabbalah – give this literature and philosophical reflection its characteristic accent.

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

Celan's poems reflect on and resonate provocatively with both Jewish and Christian traditions of apophasis and negative theology. Especially characteristic is his insistence on images such as the "prayer-sharp knives of my silence" ("ihr / gebetscharfen Messer / meines / Schweigens," "... Rauscht der Brunnen") and "grass, written asunder" ("Grass, auseinander geschrieben," "Engführung") on the terrain of a concentration camp.⁶ Such images suggest a breaking open of meaning to what cannot be defined and so remains unlimited in meaning relating to the experience that is cryptically evoked as nameless and indescribable. The limits and failures of language are a

recurrent trope and theme. Language is brought into check as it issues from “the mouth stammered true” (“wahr- / gestammelten Mund,” “Hohles Lebensgehöft”) in poem after poem. Celan explores in linguistically amazing and original ways the modes of inexpressibility. The experiences the poetry alludes to, leaving them locked and indecipherable, are all at the extreme limits of possibility and cannot be represented. They are best reflected by linguistic annihilation.

For Jabès, every human word and letter bespeaks the absence of God. As part of the totality of language, a word evokes the plenitude of meaning that it is missing. For it is but a fragment of the infinite, which it cannot re-present. Voided of absolute presence, “The word is a world of emptiness” (“Le verbe est univers du vide”).⁷ It cannot represent what it has been broken off from, the infinite that is its hidden root (“l’infini est racine cachée,” *El*, p. 121). The human word in no way contains this original wholeness, yet it is a reminiscence: for in its very brokenness, it exceeds all determinations of sense and evokes an anteriority to sense. As wounded and bleeding, the word disperses significance that is in fact without limit because without definition that does not at the same time give way and *undefine* itself in the flood of infinite meanings in which it issues and to which it is exposed. Every finite, determinate sense is swamped in the infinite ocean of meanings that pour into it. The sense attributed to language is like a decoy that prevents or protects us from contemplating its gaping wounds (“... les béantes plaies d’un / leurre que le sens attribué à nos mots – et à / nos maux – empêche autrui, comme nous, de contempler ...,” *EL*, p. 99). When their sense shatters, as it does in Jabès’s texts, words are opened to an uncharted and unchartable region or dimension. An openness to the infinite is enacted beyond all boundaries of the senses of words. It is discovered in the abyss of the unsayable divine Name as the emptiness harboring in the core of every word. The Hebrew name for God, “EL,” happens to reverse the masculine definite article in French – “le” – designating substantive things in general, and this, in a certain manner, builds it implicitly into everything that is said in that language.

Emphasis in the last several decades, the post-Holocaust period, in and also beyond Jewish culture, has fallen especially on the brokenness and shattering of meaning as necessary to opening it up to the indefinable, the unsayable. The incidence of alterity interrupting the circuit of the self and the same has been the foundation for Levinas’s thinking of externality and infinity. In close conjunction with Levinas, Blanchot has worked out his thought of “dés-aster,” of the dis-order of the universe as rather a coming undone and falling apart. Closely

intertwined are also Bataille's and Derrida's dis-integrative, heterogeneous bias and outlook.

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

With Levinas as link, this is all in deep continuity with Rosenzweig. The key motif of Rosenzweig, and perhaps of Jewish thinking generally, is that of separation. Recognizing separateness is the first step towards any possible knowledge, or better unknowing, a step that both lames and empowers. However, Rosenzweig is also very instructive about how to take *discourses* concerning unassimilable difference: they unite in being surpassed by what lies beyond discourse. While emphasizing separateness and alienation, Rosenzweig also envisions unity in a "new" form as what cannot be said. There is more than can be said to unity, too. Indeed all through Western intellectual history Jewish thinkers have taken an important lead in exploring the Divine Name, in which all names unite, as the prime instance of what cannot be said, and this reflection, too, lies at the heart of Rosenzweig's thinking. The configuration of writers and thinkers of difference that has just been sketched is, to a considerable extent, working out the destiny of Jewish apophaticism in a radically secular cultural context today, and all are beholden to Rosenzweig in this. But Rosenzweig also anticipates another very different perspective that has recently begun to emerge, one that is increasingly being called "post-secular."⁸

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Innovative and rebellious as he was, Rosenzweig nonetheless extends traditional theological reflection on pure being, existence, viewed in a

creationist framework, as quintessentially what cannot be said. This line of reflection had developed from Neoplatonic speculations on the One as irreducibly beyond the reach of words. Although the One was placed originally "beyond Being," in the course of tradition this came to mean that it was beyond qualified being, that is, beyond being *this* or *that*, while the unsayable One as such could well be identified with absolute, pure being. This was already so in Porphyry among the Neoplatonists and became standard Christian doctrine with Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. It remained such through medieval Scholastic philosophy, which conceived God as Being itself, *ipsum esse*, and on into Renaissance Neoplatonism. However, Rosenzweig, with a sharply existentialist and even "empiricist" accent, interprets pure being in totally immanent terms as the actual and factual. In a letter in which he first spells out the blueprint or "original cell" of the "new thinking" he was then incubating, Rosenzweig defines the distinguishing mark of revelation, as against merely human knowledge, as "the relation of pure facticity."⁹ For the purely factual cannot be deduced by reason; it is simply there, to reason's utter astonishment. The world as Creation is such a revelation. The principle that brings it into being is not in sight of reason. The world, together with its unaccountable order, is revealed thereby as a miracle. But to know the world purely as a fact is to know nothing about it. For all that knowing and saying can tell, the world as pure fact is nothing. The fact *that* the world is tells us nothing about *what* anything is.

This factuality eluding knowledge is found not only, nor even primarily, in the created world. "God," too, is likewise factual. We know nothing of God ("von Gott wissen wir nichts"). But all the richness of factual existence, understood as in relation to what or whom we know nothing about, informs the maximally positive concept ("höchst positiver Begriff") of God's reality ("die wirklichkeit Gottes") towards which Rosenzweig works in the *Star of Redemption*.¹⁰ This is a concept not directly of God or his essence but of our relation to the God of whom we have no conception. It begins from the not-nothing of our ignorance of God. Even our ignorance of God, an ignorance that fundamentally characterizes and conditions human existence, is *not nothing*. It is a powerful determination of our existence towards that which we do not know, that of which we know nothing except that we do not and cannot know it. Everything in our existence is thereby directed towards and defined in terms of what cannot be known or said.

In this manner, the nothing of God ("das Nichts Gottes") from which we begin, God's nothingness to us, becomes the absolute

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

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

The nothing from which Rosenzweig begins is a nothing of knowledge and, in every case, of an individual existing in unknowing. But the negation of any determinate, knowable object already entails an affirmation of something greater than is – or ever could be – known or said. There is no object for this affirmation, and so logic cannot pick it up and deal with it. Yet the "grammatical method" expounded by Rosenzweig finds this affirmation within negation itself, just as it discerns a "Yes" silently accompanying every word that is said: to say

a word is, after all, to affirm what it says – even though this be but a determinate way of negating the Infinite that it does not and cannot say. According to its concept, a word is a delimitation, a negation, but as a pure act of positing, before conceptual determination, the word is infinitely positive.

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

In fact, Rosenzweig calls his method not a logic at all but rather a grammar, since it is based on the nature and dynamics of language, not on the laws of conceptual thinking. Logic requires determinate objects, A and B, x and y, before it can procede. By contrast, for language there are no givens entirely outside its scope: whatever it touches becomes, in some sense, language, and to this extent it conjures its elements out of nothing but itself. In language, the original presentation of the elementary terms is itself a linguistic production: a named object, as opposed to a logical object, already has a contour that is inextricably linguistic. Without its name, this element is ... nothing – nothing that can be said anyway. Now, it is precisely this original nothing, what language does not and cannot grasp, that constitutes the element which Rosenzweig’s new thinking discovers. He begins always with the original Nothing – *for knowledge and language* – of the elements God, World, Man. We know – and so can say –

nothing of them. This fact is the Archimedian point for everything Rosenzweig then goes on to say.

Since language does not have any object that is given to it in a wholly external manner, the way logic does, but rather always has a hand in fashioning its own object itself, it always remains also in touch with the nothing, no-thing, no-linguistically-determinate-thing, lurking below the surface of the things it dextrously handles with names. Precisely this Nothing is the "ground," or rather background, to which Rosenzweig constantly recalls attention in expounding the elements of his new *linguistic* thinking. Because language remains conversant with the nothing of its elements, a linguistic thinking is able to keep in view, peripherally at least, the Nothing underlying every revelation, every articulation of being and essence. From beyond all manner of verbal determinations, in which our experience consists, language can recall and call forth the unrepresentable, unsayable sea of Nothing on which it surfs and skims. Only this skipping and skidding of language demarcates temporally the eternal abyss of nothing – that is, nothing sayable – which is otherwise imperceptible, giving it positive inflections by delimitation and qualification.

Rosenzweig characterizes his thought as a "speaking thinking" ("das sprechende Denken"), as against "thinking thinking" ("das denkende Denken") of virtually all earlier philosophy. Whereas thinking-thinking knows its own thought before expressing it and must simply complete the outward expression of itself in speech, speaking-thinking does not know what it is going to say, for it is open to time and the other. It does not know where it is going, for it depends in its ownmost core and content on what the other will say. In this sense, speaking is time-bound; it is given its cue by the other and lives from the life of the other. Whereas thinking aspires to be timeless, to make its beginning and end coincide, speaking "does not know in advance where it will end up; it allows itself to be given its theme from the other. It lives fully from the life of the other ... while thinking is always alone."¹¹

The thinker knows his thought before he expresses it, and the time that this expression takes cannot add to the thought except in accidental and distracting ways. In conversation, by contrast, I do not know what the other will say, nor even what I will say, or whether I will say anything at all. In Rosenzweig's view, this openness to the Other in speaking is the origin of thought. Of course, this Other is what can never be expressed in language. But speaking nevertheless stays in touch with this Other that it cannot say – precisely *because* it cannot say it. The otherness that cannot be said is also the origin

of time, of division into distinct tenses that do not comprehend one another. Language transpires in time, present time, but it is open to other times, past and future, that are not sayable and that, as such, remain unsayably other. This unsayable otherness can be phantasized in story or myth, making an image of the irretrievable past, or again in ritual and hymn, which intimate an eternal future that likewise cannot per se be made present in language. The perennial past is commemorated especially in the traditions of paganism, while Judaism and Christianity reveal images of the eternal future that is by nature unsayable.¹²

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

In Judaism and Christianity, "the secret of God, the world, and man that is only experienceable, not expressible, along the way of life becomes expressible."¹³ Deeply considered, this revelation of life in religion is the invention of a language for the unsayable. Judeo-Christian religion emerges as a compelling interpretation of human ways of relating to the all-pervasive, all-important Unknown. It discloses life in its intrinsic openness and mystery. To know nothing of God is a way of being in relation to the whole of life and existence as infinite and unknowable, as ... what cannot be said. This unknowing is far more vital and potent than any positive knowing – in fact, all positive knowing is contained proleptically therein and can only be a working out and an articulating of a relation to some virtual wholeness that is as such unsayable, a relation to "God," "Man," or "World" as what we can know absolutely nothing about.

The existence of the universe exceeds any logic that can account for it. It is "metalogical." It is simply given as a miraculous fact – Creation. Likewise humanity is discovered as "metaethical," as having a unique self or character that is simply there in its singularity and that cannot be communicated in the common language. Such is the isolation of the tragic hero of Greek drama in his or her truly unspeakable, unthinkable individuality ("wahrhaft 'unaussprechliches'")

'unausdenkbarer' Individualität," *Stern*, p. 53). Rather than dissolve such irreducible individual existence, Rosenzweig admits it as revealed, undisclosable, and unspeakable reality. This is the factuality of existence which cannot be expressed. This positive factuality of existence has also a "metaphysical" dimension as the mystery enshrined in the unsayable Name of God.

For Rosenzweig, knowledge and its articulation in language, the whole intricate network of mutual relations and disclosure of things, is a veiling of the separate, unspeakable reality of each of his elements – God, World, Man – which are *not* as such, all one, *not* any All. In the relations of Creation, Revelation and Redemption, these elements are disclosed and articulated in relation to one another, but in themselves they remain pure enigma, each an ineffable mystery that no concept can grasp. We experience only the bridges between them; our experiences are such over-bridgings ("Brückenschläge"). Rosenzweig insists on the separation of his elements because only so can they remain fundamentally unknown fragments that do not fit into any pre-existing All, and as such they are inarticulable. In relation to one another, they become disclosed and articulable as part of an overarching system, a revelation, a language. In their separateness, they resist language. And this separateness is their truth, not the factitious constructions of language, in which everything communicates with everything else and all is one. There is, for Rosenzweig, a present of disclosure, a "revelation to Adam." Apart from religion and its revelations, language itself is a disclosure of life in the present. This is what Part II of the *Star* expounds. But its presentation between the ever-enduring night of paganism in Part I and the eternal future of Judeo-Christianity in Part III contextualizes it in such a way that these prior and posterior truths of origin and of eschatology are precisely what it does not and cannot say. The dumbness of the protocosmos (Part I) and the silent ritual intimating eternity of the hypercosmos (Part III) underlie and overlay every articulation in the present of the cosmos (Part II).

Being as it occurs in existence – and that means in language – is significant always of something other than what we actually see and experience. It is hemmed in and conditioned by a protocosmos or Pre-world ("Vorwelt") and a hypercosmos or Over-world ("Überwelt"). It is precisely the limit of language, the unsayableness at the limit of existence, that betokens these other, unsayable realms. To speak of a "realm" is, of course, improper, since the unsayable neither is nor *is not*, and "realm" seems to reify what cannot in itself be

concretely characterized. Yet this limit is experienced in everything in the linguistically reified world that we do experience, and it suggests a correspondence of this world to an other world which, however, never appears objectified as such. The only manifestation of this other world is in the pre-language of myth (paganism) and the post language of ritual (Judeo-Christian religion). It is out of these limits of experience that Rosenzweig interprets a Pre-world and Over-world in the opening and closing parts of his work.

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

Rosenzweig also develops a "negative cosmology" and "negative psychology" parallel to the negative theology that he actually disavows, or rather reverses, in order, to insist on the positive result he aims at, though this really is no different from negative theology all along as it can be rediscovered in traditions of discourse on what cannot be said. In either case, something inexpressible is exposed. Rosenzweig insists that unknowing and the limits of language are for him not the end of thought but only the beginning. Rosenzweig thus attempts to distance himself from traditional negative theology. He presents his "new thinking" ("das neue Denken") as the reversal of negative theology in that it aims not at denials but at the eminently positive. Still, the moves he makes are those performed in negative theology throughout the tradition, albeit only in some of its subtler, more paradoxical, and less commonly understood forms. Despite its name, negative theology, too, was about the absolutely positive, about the paradoxical coincidence of negative and positive when each is taken in its purity to the extreme.

In just this spirit, Rosenzweig wishes to emphasize not the empty indeterminacy reached at the end of the process of removing all concepts but rather the positive existential plenitude that precedes all conceptual elaboration, however, it is clear to him that the before as well as the after are extrapolations from experience that is always already mediated by concepts. His point is that conceptual indeterminacy is

not the goal of this path of thinking but only a way of enabling the most concrete reality of God to be revealed. He does, then, understand *all* reality as revealing, in its very nothingness to us, an Infinite separate from us and known only as our nothing and in our unknowing. Everything that is *something* vanishes into nothingness, being ungrounded, but Rosenzweig understands this as the revelation of an infinite positivity that is immediately reversed and annulled by any effort to formulate and say it. The idea common to Rosenzweig and classic negative theology is to leave all concepts of God – their inevitable vacuousness – behind, in the interest of encountering the inconceivable and unutterable reality of God in our very existence and its constitutive *unknowing*.

Rosenzweig does not always make the unsayable quite as expressly central to his thinking as has been done here in this free reformulation of some crucial axes of his thought. The time for bringing this out has first arrived now with the ripeness of apophasis as a topic in the present critical climate. But Rosenzweig deliberately shows how revelation in language always breaks open the system of language to let something other and unmasterable – and to that extent inexpressible – show through. Whatever is actually revealed is always but language, and this means pure immanence, yet what is witnessed therein is radically other to and transcendent of language and revelation – it is the unsayable. Paradigmatically, this is the Divine Name that alone gives meaning to language. In itself, language is the void of negation, it is without reality. And the things it refers to are also without reality. Language gathers everything together in its nothingness. Only the divine Name, the unsayable of language, can ground and orient language in the miraculous, positive existence of all things. For it is also the divine Word at the root of the Creation of things.

As so often, a reversal brings out the deeper intent and potential of what it reverses. Negative theology claims no positive knowledge of God, but it does so in order to free the relation to God from all the pretences of finite concepts so as to allow the inconceivable reality or irreality of divinity to be fully experienced, or at least sensed, in unknowing. This is essentially what Rosenzweig's whole philosophy does. In positioning himself against a certain narrow formulation of negative theology, Rosenzweig is actually renovating the deeper insight of apophatic thinking in all ages. His thinking opens upon what cannot be said and makes that the basis for all that is in any way affirmed. All our knowing is without foundation. It is a knowing of the nothingness of our knowledge, but this itself opens to a revelation

of the positive relatedness of all things, of their forming an All, after all – albeit an All that cannot be said, one that can be grasped by neither thought nor word. The unity in which Man, World, and God together are All cannot be grasped: revelation can point towards this All by unaccountable givenness and coherencies, but this All per se is not revealable or sayable.

Paradoxically, Rosenzweig's work, like Hegel's, is awesomely systematic and comprehensive. He moves through a repertoire of world civilizations – China, India, pagan Greece, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism – evaluating their achievements in art and culture, as well as in social and political organization, in a manner that cannot but seem directly in competition with Hegel. Yet there is a crucial difference. Everything that history reveals is not the eternal truth but rather the revelation of the untruth of history. The eternally true and real are what history and discourse cannot make manifest. The only articulable, systematizable knowledge is knowledge of what is *not* man, *not* world, *not* God, for these elements are all in their own nature unknowable. To this extent, everything within the purview of language and revelation is but a reference to what is not, to a pre-world of inarticulable “elements” and an eschatological post-world of equally unspeakable futurity. Rosenzweig acknowledges his derivation of this schema from Schelling's “Die Weltalter” (“The Ages of the World”). The world of revelation, which is the world of language, is but a relation to this unsayable before and after. By foregrounding these regions beyond language, Rosenzweig shows how every determination in language is but a delimitation of something that exceeds language.

All sense in language is based on negation. Simple predication asserts “so, and *not* otherwise.” The positing of anything by language is never purely positive. It always negates something. In language, to be something is to negate Nothing. Language thereby projects a shadow world of inchoate origins as well as of inactual eschatology, and thus witnesses to a realm of what cannot be said as underlying or overlaying our human, linguistic, negative, failing, vanishing experience and existence. Religious revelation interprets this realm of the unsayable in every said by forms of prayer and ritual, so that we can relate to it and complete our own intrinsically incomplete relations through it. Whereas religious rite and hymn are apt to disclose the future of the Kingdom of God, art and myth are the language of the otherwise mute pagan past. Although art is not real communication (it is only make-believe), nevertheless it awakes the self in its hidden,

incommunicable depth. This transpires in silence, for art is a language of the unspeakable.

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

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

Rosenzweig's work thus juxtaposes the ontological approach to unsayability characteristic of the Greek tradition from Parmenides to Heidegger with another approach through language and the problematic of the divine Name that stems from Judeo-Christian tradition: alongside the unsayability of existence, the emptiness of language and the ineffability of the divine Name have testified to the apophatic at the center of all we say and express, unearthing perhaps yet more intractable grounds for inexpressibility. The divine Name is without content; it names nothing determinate or articulable. It is not

even considered to be pronounceable in Hebrew tradition. Language explored thus to its empty core testifies to ... what cannot be said.

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

Rosenzweig does not present his philosophy expressly as apophatic. Nevertheless, he effectively gives a philosophical rationale for the sorts of theosophies that have traditionally been overtly apophatic in purport and intent that he does expressly acknowledge as akin to and as crucial precedents for his own thought. Theosophy, to his astonishment and even, initially, repugnance, proves integral and necessary, alongside Theology and Philosophy, to his project. Theosophy is precisely the triangulation of *Theology* and *Philosophy*. The "rest," says Rosenzweig, is Philology or silence: "With theology and philosophy, thereby completing the trinity of the sciences – I am stunned and repulsed by this thought – theosophy keeps company. The rest is philo-logy, i.e., silence."¹⁴

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

Wittgenstein, like Rosenzweig, discovered the religious, together with the ethical and aesthetic, as the unsayable at the limit of language. However, he did not appropriate the positive content of religious revelation as indirectly articulating and expressing this Inexpressible, the way Rosenzweig does. On the contrary, it remained mute

for him. Hence his famous injunction: "About that of which we cannot speak we must remain silent." Although he realizes full well that what we cannot speak about is what inspires art, religion and ethics, he does not recognize these discourses as languages for the unsayable: it remains for him simply and strictly inexpressible. He is focused on the moment of collapse of logical sense (and so of language, for him) vis-a-vis the unsayable. He considers the value-discourses of ethics, art, and religion, as forms of nonsense rather than of language. He recognizes something miraculous about them, but he does not, like Rosenzweig, follow up the various "theosophical" attempts to lend language beyond rational discourse to this unsayability. The way of exploring this *terra incognita* is not available to philosophy. One needs other means and methods, those of art, ethics, and religion.

Heidegger, like Wittgenstein, and also contemporaneously with Rosenzweig, undertook a rethinking of philosophy in linguistic terms – and he, too, discovered the apophatic dimension of language lurking in its unsayable heart. Still Rosenzweig's realization of the "linguistic turn" has a special twist to it in that the biblical tradition, out of which he thinks, was based all along on revelation by the Word rather than on the purely intellectual contemplation of being or on the pure empirical intuition of sense-perception. Whereas the Greek tradition, especially as Heidegger rediscovered it, was a thinking of being, Rosenzweig's Judeo-Christian tradition was in its deepest sources and inspiration already a thinking of the word. Here the unsayable at the origin of all possibility of saying was not fundamentally Being or the transcendent One but the Word in its transcendent instance, paradigmatically the unnameable Divine Name. This provides different motives for unsayability, even though the ineffability of the Name and that of Being or the One are tightly intertwined from early on in Western tradition.

Being has its unsayable origin, Being itself, as Heidegger demonstrates, but there is also an unsayable instance within language. The revelation of the word itself reveals something unsayable, an unsayable that is a stranger to being and that is perhaps much more radically unsayable or, more properly, unnameable. This is to forsake Athens for an orientation to Jerusalem claimed as cultural source-spring of a true and eternal tradition. It means beginning from responsibility to the Other in the word of address rather than listening for intimations of the disclosure of Being like a pagan. The relevant watchwords, no longer categories, are not those of perceiving or conceiving things, but rather of relating to others and to the absolutely Other. Such is

the interruption interjected by Hebraism into the philosophical tradition of the West as a perennial challenge, particularly since Christianity broke onto the Hellenistic scene, bearing the biblical prophets' proclamation of a transcendent, divine Word. This specifically Hebraic inspiration was reasserted powerfully by Maimonides in the Middle Ages, as it still is vigorously in various forms of poetry and theory today. This is a distinct approach, distinct from apophysis vis-a-vis pure Being, to what, however, may turn out to be indiscernibly inexpressible in any language whatever.

Rosenzweig's work was to be continued by Levinas. The language of Levinas's philosophy is apparently very different, for he does not adopt the systematic terms and structures of his predecessor. Yet he was himself acutely aware of his extreme closeness and unsayably great indebtedness to Rosenzweig.¹⁵ The claim of a distinctively Hebraic thinking that is fundamentally a thinking of language rather than of being indissolubly unites them in a radical critique of all philosophy governed by Logos. In this perspective, Levinas's philosophy in its entirety reads as a highly original development of the seminal insights of Rosenzweig. In particular, he was to succeed Rosenzweig in the endeavor to bring the special resources of Jewish tradition of revelation in the Word, but also of an unrepresentable God, to bear on the general philosophical problems travailing his time as they revolved around the unsayable *Infini* encountered in the face of the Other.

Notes

1. See Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973). The story of this epoch is told suggestively by Franco Bella in *Il silenzio e le parole: Il pensiero nel tempo della crisi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988 [1981]) as it revolves around the now largely forgotten Otto Weininger and his *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903), which was followed by the definitive silence of its author's suicide at 23 years old.
2. Linda Ben-Zvi, "Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language," *PMLA* 95 (March 1980): 183–200. Beckett thus serves as a bridge to the post-war Parisian culture of shock at the unspeakable in the wake of Nazi atrocities as detailed, for example, by May Daniels, *The French Drama of the Unspoken* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1953).
3. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier in (eds.), *A Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992). This first novel of Beckett was written in 1932, when the author was 26 years old, though it was published only 60 years later.

4. See, for example, F.-W. Wentzlauff-Eggebert, *Deutsche Mystik zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit: Einheit und Wandlung ihrer Erscheinungsformen*, (3rd ed.) (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969) and Marco Vannini, *Il volto del Dio nascosto: L'esperienza mistica dall'Iliade a Simon Weil* (Milan: Mondadori, 1999). The argument for viewing Hegel as a negative theologian is also made by R. Williamson, "The Mystery of God in Hegel's Philosophy," in D.W. Dockrill and R. Mortley, and S.J. Quentin Lauer, (eds.), *The via negativa* (Prudentia, Supplementary Number, 1981), "Hegel's Negative Theology," *Journal of Dharma: The International Quarterly of World Religions* 6 (1981): 46–58.
5. An emblematic figure here is Hugo Ball. See Bernd Wacker, (ed.), *Dionysius DADA Areopagita: Hugo Ball und die Kritik der Moderne* (Munich-Vienna: Schöningh, 1996).
6. Celan's poetry is quoted from *The Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1995).
7. I quote and translate from *El, ou le Dernier Livre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 93.
8. Cf. Phillip Blond, (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1998). Probing in this direction of thought, now becoming something of a movement, include William Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* (New York: Oxford, 1999).
9. ... die Offenbarung ist eben das Verhältnis der 'reinen Tatsächlichkeit' schon selbst." "Urzelle" Des *Stern der Erlösung*, Brief an Rudolf Ehrenberg, November 18, 1917, in *Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk. Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken, Gesammelte Schriften III* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1984), vol. 3, p. 136.
10. Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988 [1921]).
11. "Das Neue Denken, Einige nachträgliche Bemerkungen zum 'Stern der Erlösung,'" in *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 151: "weiß nicht im voraus, wo es herauskommen wird; es läßt sich seine Stichworte vom andern geben. Es lebt überhaupt vom Leben des andern ... während Denken immer einsam ist." A translation can be found in *Franz Rosenzweig's "The New Thinking"*, trans. and ed. Alan Udoff and Barbara E. Galli (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998).
12. Such an interpretation is carefully worked out by Stéphane Mosès, *Système et révélation: La philosophie de Franz Rosenzweig* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).
13. "in ihrem Gott, ihrer Welt, ihrem Menschen wird das auf der Bahn des Lebens nur erfahrbare, nicht aussprechbare Geheimnis Gottes, der Welt, des Menschen aussprechbar..." ("Das Neue Denken," p. 155).
14. "Urzelle," pp. 137–38 "Zu Theologie und Philosophie gesellt sich, so das Dreieck der Wissenschaften abschließend – ich bin selber noch erstaunt und widerwillig gegen diesen Gedanken – die Theosophie. Der Rest ist Philologie, d. h. Schweißen."
15. In the preface to the French edition of *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence*, Levinas avows that his debt to Rosenzweig is too pervasive to be specified, though he does manage to say more about it in his preface to Stéphane Mosès's study of Rosenzweig.