On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts: Volume One, Classic Formulations
On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts: Volume Two, Modern and Contemporary Transformations
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These two volumes successfully realize a massive project: to propose and delineate a new field of discourse that provides a fresh approach to Western thought as a whole. In short, William Franke demonstrates the centrality of apophaticism, "what cannot be said," to the Western tradition, from Plato (and before) to Derrida (and beyond). In performing this task, Franke shows incredible breadth of knowledge, critical acumen and creative prowess throughout.

By bringing together carefully selected texts representative of the most important thinkers and movements in a wide variety of fields, Franke creates a "mosaic" of individual selections, that, when reflected upon, brings a much broader picture into focus. Franke performs this reflection in historical introductions at the beginning of each volume. Likewise, brief essays introduce each selection, placing them within an overarching pattern that is illuminating rather than constricting.

The first volume covers the first "cycles" of apophasis, as the Western tradition evolves, stretching from the commentary tradition of Plato's *Parmenides* to Eckhart and his progenitors. Along the first cycle, the early Greek enthusiasm of the capacity of human *logos* to articulate the ultimate principle of reality finds its end in the radical negative theologies of neo-Platonism, for which nothing whatsoever of the One can be known. This movement from confidence to despair recurs in analogous ways through the patristic and medieval periods. Here the equation of God and Being from Augustine to Aquinas has as its intimate counterpoint the powerful influence of the

radical negative theologies inspired by Pseudo-Denys. Finally, the grand Scholastic synthesis of the high Middle Ages becomes unsustainable vis-à-vis the apophatic mysticism of Marguerite Poret, Eckhart et al.,which strove beyond the synthesis to what it could not say. The readings of this volume thoroughly cover the major thinkers and movements found within this vast and varied history, illuminatingly drawing them together in relation to their common concern with the limits of language.

The second volume, stretching from Holderlin to Jean-Luc Marion, provides readings from sources as diverse as Schelling, Dickenson, Kafka, Wittgenstein, John Cage, and Maurice Blanchot. Interestingly, the introduction to this volume suggests that even the most radical concern with negation and silence today is in fact nothing new. Franke observes that these modern and contemporary apophatic currents, as radical as they truly are, are nevertheless thoroughly indebted to the "ancient theological matrices" out of which they indirectly (or not so indirectly) spring. Thus, in this second volume Franke deftly shows the continuity with ancient thought of the otherwise mind-boggling ever-multiplying fragmentation of discourses endemic to the modern and contemporary age. Yet in doing so he also provides an intelligible way to approach and comprehend these diverse modes of expression among themselves. In drawing all of these texts together under the horizon of a preoccupation with the apophatic, Franke convincingly demonstrates his deeper thesis that apophasis is basic to human speech and thought, and to human experience as well.

Taking the birds-eye view that these volumes enjoy, Franke proposes the existence of a *pathos* for the unsaid as the condition of possibility for speech. This dynamism at the heart of speech and experience unfolds according to a certain form and can thus be discerned as a "discourse." For Franke, the movement of the apophatic is discernible within entire traditions of thought, within particular authors, works, and even words themselves. The intellectual history of the West as a whole, through discernible historical patterns, shows signs of this apophatic dynamism, as it vacillates between the two poles of difference and unity, of Jerusalem and Athens, of metaphysics and anti-metaphysics. This means for Franke that the equation of God with Being of the classical Christian tradition and the classically platonic God beyond being are both equally concerned with the ineffable. That is, *both* traditions of emphasis, according to Franke, are ultimately reconcilable in the unsayable, that which concurrently lies at their dual origin and towards which they both equally gesture. Ultimately, then, apophasis as a discourse discloses the inherent limits of the critique of metaphysics: Apophasis is ultimately the coincidence of these opposites, and therefore both metaphysical and anti-metaphysical at once. The critique of metaphysics thus falls under its own critique; it also is a forgetfulness of its own origins in the unsayable, insofar as it locates this forgetfulness not in itself as much as it is also in the other.

A fascinating dimension of Franke's perspective is the central role he affords to experience in the generation of apophatic discourses. One sees this especially in his remarks on Eckhart in the first volume where he offers the most sustained reflection. For Franke, Eckhart, perhaps like no other thinker, made negative theology simultaneously more speculative *and* more lived, valorizing existential experience in a new way by saturating every dimension of life with awareness of the unspeakable origin. This "revolution of spirit" set the stage for later developments from Nicolas Cusanus, to Böhme, Idealism, Heidegger, and down to contemporary phenomenology. Eckhart's proto-existentialism as it were, reminds us of the suffering, or *pathos*, of an inconceivable transcendence that precedes all knowledge and action—as the many thinkers to be found in these volumes likewise demonstrate. Interesting also in this regard is the space Franke uniquely gives to Gregory Palamas and therefore to classical Eastern Orthodox theology. Franke rightly includes Palamas in the anthology for his concern with a radical experience, or transfiguring "vision," of the divine energies beyond all knowledge. This positive apophaticism of divine excess, the "light of Tabor," has many points of contact with the main luminaries highlighted in the anthology for whom also the apophatic is rooted in an experience of excess beyond negation. The juxtaposition of Palamas only sheds greater light on the Latin Christian tradition as well as contemporary 'secular' thinkers.

Despite the fact that the construction of such an anthology as this requires painful decisions about what to leave out, one nevertheless wishes that Franke would have spent more time on sacred texts. Given the centrality and evident fruitfulness of the Scriptures for the overwhelming majority of the thinkers included in the volumes, it is too bad that Franke allows room for only two slight, albeit incredibly important, passages from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Franke provides a terse, learned introduction that highlights their centrality to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim apophatic traditions that offsets this dearth. However, in contrast to most other selections, the biblical passages themselves are not adequately contextualized. It would seem, then, that Franke should have more adequately offered the reader a taste of the apophatic sensibilities fundamental to the ancient Near East, that is, to the complex but intelligible world within which these texts were first written, the ancient Hebrew and early Jewish-Christian traditions. Yet this would have required mastery of yet another vast field of scholarship, one of the few with which it *seems* Franke is not proficient. But one can hardly

blame Franke for this evasion of sacred texts; it is merely a symptom of a much broader problem endemic to our age. Even so, this problem is one which Franke himself offers important resources for overcoming, primarily through intrepidly acknowledging the experience of transcendence that defines apophatic discourse as well the theological dimensions intrinsic to even the most agnostic of contemporary theorists.

Franke also shows deep insight in his elucidation of the capacity of Marion's donatological phenomenology (the *dénouement* of the second volume) to overcome the seeming impasse of Derridean deconstruction. For Franke, Marion's phenomenology of the radically given, as it arises from the Eucharist, is a negative theology that outdoes Derrida at his own game simply by showing the "positive potential" of apophasis to surpass sheer vanity in the pure charity that is revelation. Thus Derrida's equation of difference and apophasis refuses the possibility of the beyond of difference in love. Marion shows that the silence of the Eucharistic gift is a deeper apophasis than the postmodern agnostic perpetual deferral of presence. Given this primacy of place afforded to Marion, it is strange that Franke is clearly critical of Marion's early reading of Aquinas, which was later retracted, reinterpreted and re-inscribed into the tradition by Marion himself in an important essay ("Saint Thomas et l'onto-théo-logie ") as well as in the forward to the English edition of *Dieu sans l'être*. In the first volume, Franke offers an alternative reading to Marion's (early) approach to Aquinas which, as he says, "avoids the conclusions" that Marion originally proposed in his election of Pseudo-Denys over-against Aquinas in *Dieu sans l'être*. Yet Franke makes no acknowledgment of Marion's repositioning of himself vis-à-vis Aquinas, which would seem to me to support even more fully *not only* Franke's own reading of the history of metaphysics, particularly the subtle yet avowed emphasis he gives to the fruitfulness and veracity of Christian theology and philosophy and especially his own presentation of Aquinas (building on David Burrell) as essentially an apophatic thinker, *but also* Franke's reading of Marion himself as offering an apophaticism beyond difference. Though this revision would not answer all the problems of Marion's interpretation of Aquinas, it would more fully demonstrate the continuity of Marion's work with his own tradition—and then, its important differences.

In this regard, one comes to suspect Franke of failing to reconcile himself to the structure or 'form' of apophatic positivity that evolved from the Christian patristic age. It seems, in other words, that Franke avoids coming to terms with the center of patristic apophatic thought. On the one hand, he rightly acknowledges the fact of a "purgation" of Greek metaphysical concepts in the early Christian period, but on the other hand, he fails to unfold clearly enough the process by which this happened, most importantly

through the early formulation of the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas and thus not merely via their basic creational monotheism. The particular mystical apophaticism of the Church Fathers is only most fully understood as concomitant with the affirmation of Christian dogma as the very source of this transformation of Greek thought. This unique link between apophaticism and dogmatic commitment is as true for Pseudo-Denys as it is for Augustine. The fact that some of the key formulators of the central Christian dogmas of the fourth and fifth centuries are presented in this text only affirms this perspective. There are, to my mind, two possibilities of Franke's divergence with the Christian metaphysical tradition and its apophaticism: He either languishes in an unformed apophatic excess akin to classic neo-Platonism or he remains, despite himself, essentially shaped by Protestant liberalism after Kant. Indeed, these two options are not too far apart from this perspective.

Despite these imperfections that I note here, Franke's work is nothing short of brilliant—his extended meditation on Franz Rosenzweig (among others), which I cannot but mention here, proves this virtually on its own. More generally, his unique vantage on the possibility of metaphysics after critique is worthy of serious attention. Thus, to be sure, I recommend these two volumes as essential reading for philosophers, theologians, literary scholars, intellectual historians, critical theorists—in short, anyone interested in an illuminating and vital perspective on just about any facet of Western arts and letters.

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