Praising the Unsayable: An Apophatic Defense of Metaphysics on the Basis of the Neoplatonic *Parmenides* Commentaries

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Abstract: This essay represents a contribution to rewriting the history metaphysics in terms of what philosophy never said, nor could say. It works from the Neoplatonic commentary tradition on Plato's *Parmenides* as the matrix for a distinctively apophatic thinking that takes the truth of metaphysical doctrines as something other than anything that can be logically articulated. The hymn is taken to epitomize the kind of discourse that arises in the wake of apophatic negation and witnesses to what the Logos cannot say. The essay contends that metaphysics as a discourse of the unspeakable may prove more viable than any purely logical system could.

Ὕμνος εἰς Θεόν[1]

Ὦ πάντων ἐπέκεινα· τί γὰρ θέμις ἄλλο σε μέλπειν;
Πῶς λόγος ὑμνήσει σε; Σὺ γὰρ λόγῳ οὐδενὶ ρητός.
Μοῦνος ἐὼν ἄφραστος· ἐπεὶ τέχες ὅσσα λαλεῖται.
Πῶς νοός ἀθρήσε σε; Σὺ γὰρ νόῳ οὐδενὶ ληπτός.
Μοῦνος ἐὼν ἄγνωστος· ἐπεὶ τέχες ὅσσα νοεῖται.
Πάντα σε καὶ λαλέοντα, καὶ οὐ λαλέοντα λιγαίνει·
Πάντα σε καὶ νοέοντα καὶ οὐ νοέοντα γεραίρει.
Ξυνοὶ γάρ τε πόθοι, ξυναὶ δ' ὠδῖνες ἁπάντων
Ἀμφὶ σέ· σοὶ δὲ τὰ πάντα προσεύχεται· εἰς σὲ δὲ πάντα
Σύνθεμα σὸν νοέοντα λαλεῖ σιγώμενον ὕμνοι.
Σοὶ ἑνὶ πάντα μένει· σοὶ δ' ἀθρόα πάντα, καὶ θοάζει,

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Καὶ πάντων τέλος ἐσσί, καὶ εἷς, καὶ πάντα καὶ οὐδέν
Οὐχ ἕν ἐὼν, οὐ πάντα· Ἀνώνυμε, πῶς σε καλέσσω
Τὸν μόνον ἀκλήϊστον; ὑπερφανέας δὲ καλύπτρας
Τίς νόος οὐρανίδης εἰσδύσεται; Ἵλαος εἶης,
Ὦ πάντων ἐπέκεινα· τί γὰρ θέμις ἄλλο σε μέλπειν;

Hymn to the Transcendence of God[2]

O you, beyond all things! For how else is it fitting to sing you?
How can words hymn you? For you are expressed by no word.
You alone are unutterable, though all that is spoken is from you.
How can mind perceive you? For you are grasped by no mind.
You alone are unknowable, since all that is known is from you.
All that speaks and does not speak proclaims you.
All that thinks and does not think honors you.
For all desires and all travailings of all things
are directed towards you. All things pray to you, and to you
all who know your cipher sing a silent hymn.
In you alone all things abide, to you all together rush.
For you are the end of all, the one, the all, the nothing,
being not one, not all. Nameless, what shall I call you?
The only unnameable? What celestial spirit
could penetrate your more-than-light darknesses? Be gracious,
O you, beyond all things! For how else is it fitting to sing you?

I

Apophatic discourse, that is, language that negates and unsays itself, is ubiquitous. Particularly our contemporary culture has become saturated and more and more obsessed with it. "Apophasis," the Greek word for "negation," may be viewed as inherent in the phenomenon of discourse per se. In fact, a word *is not* what it names or signifies—indeed, to function significantly as word, it *cannot* simply be what it means—and this tacit negation, accordingly, may be found lurking covertly in every word that is uttered. There is increasingly a tendency today to recognize an implicit presence of the unuttered and even the unutterable as a necessary presupposition underlying every utterance. This secret, silent matrix of the unmanifest and inexpressible has, to an extent, eluded explicit theorization throughout the history of Western culture, for this culture has been, by and large, subjected to the domination of the Logos—the word which manifests and speaks beings. This Unspoken, Unmanifest secretly, almost imperceptibly, escapes the Logos, which tends consequently to deny and exclude it even as a possibility. Nevertheless, it i possible to discern currents of thought in every age that adhere to wordless abyss or recess of speech that logical discourse cannot reach Indeed, it is possible to identify a series of classic texts that constitut touchstones and watersheds for what, after all, forms a loosely coheren tradition of discourse in the apophatic vein—discourse that is more o less explicitly and deliberately about what cannot be said.

The first systematic developments of apophatic thought are founc within the ambit of Neoplatonic philosophy. Specifically, the doctrine of the so-called *via negativa* emerges as a way to render possible a discourse about transcendent realities, especially "the One," for which all positive expressions are found to be inadequate. It is possible to say only what the One is not, hence to talk about it only by negations. The seminal text for this whole universe of discourse and speculation is Plato's *Parmenides* and in particular its first two hypotheses, namely, "If the One is One . . . " and "If the One is . . . ." The problem is that if the One *is*, it cannot be one, for *being* adds something to it, and as a result it is no longer perfectly and simply one. If, conversely, the One is strictly One, then it cannot *be*, since, again, to be would add something to the One pure and simple. In fact, even just to say "One" is to go wrong, since this is already to make the One into two—itself and its name. By such reasoning, we are landed in a situation of utter unutterability.

This logical unsayability of the One is interpreted in an ontological sense and developed into a full-fledged metaphysics by Plotinus. Plotinus's metaphysical transmogrification of Plato's aporetic logic of the One becomes the search for a mystical experience of the One, that is, of oneness and of union with the supreme principle in silence. This unity can be achieved only by negating all finite determinations and stripping away (*aphairesis*) everything that is articulable and sayable. This line of Greek negative theology is pursued after Plotinus by the Neoplatonic school and reaches a certain culmination in Proclus. Proclus elaborates the negative way into a full-scale mystagogy of the One, turning it into an object of cultic worship. He seems to have practiced incantatory evocations of the One, using the formulas of Plato's *Parmenides* as if it were a divinely inspired text.

This whole Neoplatonic outlook, with its ardent devotion to the One as ineffable and unique "principle" of all, is exquisitely and lyrically expressed in a hymn very possibly authored by Proclus himself—who produced metaphysical poetry and hymns on a daily, or rather nightly, basis most of his life, according to Marinus, his biographer and immediate successor as head of the Academy at Athens.[3] It appears as the

epigraph to this essay.[4] Regardless of whether Proclus actually penned it, the hymn admirably embodies his conception of and sentiment towards what it manages to avoid naming even "the One." In his *Commentarium in Parmenidem*, Proclus speaks precisely of "raising up to the One a single theological hymn by means of all these negations" (VII 1191).[5]

In his commentary on the first hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides*, Proclus concludes that the One is beyond all definition and description, and therewith exposes the utter inefficacy of the Logos to articulate the ultimate principle of reality. This conclusion sums up the destiny of Neoplatonic and ancient Greek thought generally. It was to be embraced programmatically by Damascius, Proclus's student and eventual successor as head of the Academy at Athens when it was definitively closed by Emperor Justinian in A.D. 529. Thus the era opened at the dawn of Greek philosophy by Parmenides' enthusiasm for the Logos as capable of articulating and revealing all things—expressed emblematically in the exhortation of fragment 7, "Judge by reason (λόγος)"—concludes in silence. This completes a first cycle of Western rational thought, which leads from the confident cultivation of the word to the ultimate apophasis of silence.[6]

Plotinus's—and consequently the Neoplatonists'—metaphysical interpretation of the *Parmenides* has been said to be a "complete misunderstanding."[7] Indeed, some such judgment has enjoyed widespread consensus among scholars of the dialogue. For example, W. C. K. Guthrie writes, "But that the dry antithetical arguments of the *Parmenides* about the One . . . should have been seen as an exposition of the sublimest truths of theology, is surely one of the oddest turns in the history of thought. Yet the Neoplatonists claimed to see in the One their own highest, ineffable and unknowable God, and as such it passed into medieval and later Christianity."[8] The Plotinian interpretation is probably best viewed as a "misprision" that opens Plato's text towards a new horizon of thought. In any case, Plotinus's reading of the dialogue spawned a tradition of commentaries on the hypotheses of the second part of the *Parmenides* that came to form a flourishing genre of philosophical thinking in its own right. Interpretation of the *Parmenides* became a channel for original speculation on the One and its ineffable transcendence in the Neoplatonic school throughout the entire course of its development.[9]

This speculation is of the greatest significance, for it not only effects a metaphysical transposition of the Platonic source text but also reframes metaphysics, exposing its ground, or rather groundlessness, in a way that is generally hidden by the drive of thought and language to

thematize and objectify, which means also to hypostatize and reify. What is really at stake in metaphysical discourse is something that eludes all modes of representation. Speculation concerning the ineffability of the One brings this out in exemplary fashion whenever such speculation expressly recognizes that it is about something that cannot be said. An apophatic reversal thereby takes place within metaphysics that turns it completely upside down and inside out. For all that metaphysics says in so many words is taken back and shows up as having been said for the sake of what it does not and cannot say. This rereading of metaphysical discourse as implicitly based on an ineffable principle that cannot come to explicit articulation and theorization, a principle that by its intrinsic nature cannot be made directly the object of argument and analysis, radically shifts our perspective for understanding the entire metaphysical tradition as it reaches from antiquity into medieval and even modern thought.

Recognizing the ineffability of a supreme principle that is beyond being, yet gives and sustains being, has in fact been key to the viability of metaphysical and monotheistic traditions of thought all through their history, with its many vicissitudes, in the West. Neglect of this apophatic element or aspect has led to taking statements at face value and, consequently, to merely superficial understanding of metaphysical teachings that infirms them, rendering them indefensible and eventually even unintelligible. Since metaphysical statements inevitably mean something different from what they are able to say, only recovering the apophatic sense, or rather nonsense or more-than-sense, behind these statements will enable us to see what made such traditions so compelling for so long.

An indirect indication that this has perhaps always been sensed to be the case might be found in the widespread belief in antiquity, especially among the Neoplatonists, that Plato had a secret doctrine that he imparted only orally. There are indeed many hints and allusions to this unwritten tradition in the dialogues themselves, as well as in Aristotle and in the Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic sources. This popular notion expresses an awareness that the publicly stateable propositions of metaphysics might systematically distort and lead away from the doctrines' true meaning. According to this view, which has recently been vigorously revived and taken as the fulcrum for reinterpreting the dialogues as pivoting on what they do not say, Plato's deepest thinking on the questions discussed in the dialogues would be far more subtle and elusive than any fixed verbal formulas and can only be surmised from the words he sportingly committed to text.[10] Of course, even if

there was oral communication directly in the presence of the master, it is irretrievably lost forever afterwards: its later significance is, to this extent, fundamentally to be missing. The emphasis thus falls upon what must be understood without being put into words, simply by "seeing." So much is indeed axiomatic to the very cast of Plato's thought, which thereby preserves a space for what cannot be adequately or definitively expressed in words. It is out of this mysterious space that Neoplatonism and its philosophy of the ineffable issues.

II

A new configuration, marrying the ancient Neoplatonic heritage of the negative way with biblical revelation and theology, takes what will become canonical shape for the whole of the Christian Middle Ages at about the turn of the fifth to the sixth century A.D., with the *Corpus Dionisiacum*. In these writings of the author known today as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the same logic of negating all predications is applied, just as in the Neoplatonic *via negativa*, but it is no longer simply the One that is unsayable as much as the Creator God of the Christian Scriptures, the Trinity. This new era for negative approaches to theology had been prepared for well in advance by Church fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407).[11]

All these Church fathers worked within the context of the encounter of biblical revelation with Greek religious and gnoseological culture. And even before the Christians, Philo Judaeus of Alexandria had already fused the teaching of the Jewish Scriptures with Middle Platonic philosophy and underscored their agreement on just this point of the unutterability and unnameability of the ultimate principle of either system. On such bases, the divine ineffability had been routinely acknowledged ever since the earliest stages of Christian theology. There is, moreover, a voluminous Christian Gnostic literature, beginning in the second century A.D., that likewise multiplies all manner of negative formulas in relation to an utterly (and unutterably) transcendent God. All these various forms of negative theology are shaped by Neoplatonic philosophy and Judeo-Christian Scriptures alike, and in all of them the limits of finite human intellect are experienced as leading up to revelation—but equally occultation—of the supreme deity as . . . what cannot be said.

The reinterpretation of the ineffable Neoplatonic One in terms of the transcendent God of monotheistic religion continued its ferment, acting as intellectual leaven throughout the Middle Ages. Although the three

monotheistic, Abrahamic religions present very different understandings of revelation, they each recognize a God who remains essentially inaccessible to thought and speech, even while revealing himself in and by his Creation. The creationist framework of these monotheisms, however, radically transforms the problematic of unsayability, since it concerns no longer an impassively remote One approached intellectually by abstraction, but a living, caring, engaged, personal Creator, who is present everywhere in existence, yet in an ungraspable, unsayable way that infinitely transcends every creature and every creaturely apprehension and expression. This channel of thought pullulated with fecund inventions in the Jewish Kabbalah, with its esoteric interpretations and elaborations of the Torah, as well as in the mystic effusions of Islamic tradition known as Sufism.

Both the Kabbalah and Sufism invent rich symbolic systems for interpreting the inner life of the Godhead that is in principle beyond all possible perception and representation. Only a mystical link can exist between the manifest world and this inner, secret "region" or divine "reality." Paradoxically, however, total transcendence turns out to be tantamount to total immanence. These discourses declare the unmanifest to be, in itself and as such, absolutely beyond any sort of manifestation in experience; but at the same time they interpret the whole manifest universe as mysteriously about, and as incessantly evincing and betraying, by *not* saying and *not* showing it, this inaccessible realm of pure Existence or higher Truth. The connection is no longer logical, and so it can be made only in silence rather than in speech. Therefore, typically, these discourses programmatically annul or retract themselves as discourse by talking in contradictions. God reveals himself, but what he reveals is *not* himself. He is revealed in everything everywhere, but nowhere *as* Himself.

Christian mystical theology and apophatic philosophy likewise developed the vision of a Creation directly dependent on a supreme God transcending all that can be known or said but nevertheless active and immanently present in all that is. On the strength of God's apparent self-definition in terms of his own being in Exodus 3:14—*Ego sum qui sum* ("I am who I am")—the Christian fathers identified God and Being. Already the Greek-speaking fathers of the first four centuries—albeit somewhat in tension with the Latin-speaking fathers from Tertullian to Jerome—had prepared the ground for Augustine's apprehension that God, as eternally immutable, is being itself: *ipsum esse*.[12]

The idea that God is one with Being and is Being itself becomes a reigning paradigm of philosophical thought across monotheistic faiths

in the Middle Ages, and this idea becomes inextricable from the ineffability of the divine essence as it is understood in these traditions. Here, again, a divergence arises with respect to most Neoplatonic sources, for which God, the One, was emphatically *not* Being and was transcendent precisely because "beyond Being" (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας), as Plato had written of the Good in the famous formulation of the *Republic* 509b. Indeed, this might be taken to be a major line of demarcation between the Neoplatonic and the Christian worldviews—except that it does not hold in the apophatic perspective, in which all such logical, conceptual dichotomies collapse. In a startlingly Christian-like formulation, Porphyry, contradicting his teacher Plotinus, identifies the One with the pure act of being (αὐτο τό ἐνεργειν καθαρόν) and with Being in its infinity (as expressed by the infinitive form: εἶναι).[13] The divide must rather be apprehended more subtly as a matter of sensibility and outlook and ultimately of modes of relationship. Inevitably, verbalization eventually renders the explicit differences between these historically differentiated traditions merely general and conceptual.

Whereas Plotinus's highest One, his "first hypostasis," based on the "first hypothesis" of the *Parmenides*, is absolutely relationless, the God of Abrahamic monotheistic religions is intimately in relation with all things, which he creates and providentially sustains in being. Relationality is essential to the Being of this God. This is most patent and pronounced in the Christian Trinity, internally constituted by relations among the divine persons in which it consists. On the Plotinian, Neoplatonic model, in contrast, relationality is relegated to lower ontological levels beneath the One—to Intellect and Mind (*Enneads* V. i. 8).[14] Even Porphyry's supreme God, the One that *is*, has no concern for any of the things that are, the beings that come after him. This is emphatically not the case for the Christian divinity, who is a God of love. He is wholly given over to relationality: his most intimate being consists in a relation between the Father and Son in Love, or the Holy Spirit. And even these internal relations of the Trinity can be articulated only in relation to the economies of creation and salvation, while in themselves they remain strictly unsayable and opaque.

This strict unsayability of God according to his essence, versus the prolix languages about him in relation to the created universe, was worked out near the beginning of the Christian Middle Ages by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in terms that have remained normative for negative theologies ever since. For Dionysius (or Denys), God is, in an absolute sense, above being and nameless and without analogy, so far as his essence is concerned. No name touches the unsayable God. There is

a lower ontological level of primordial beings—divine ideas or angels, named "Being in itself," "Life in itself," and so on—that are properly named and participated in by lower beings, but these and all other names are indifferently improper as names for God. Any such positive attributions are in Dionysius's view merely propadeutic to the rigorously negative way, in which God is admitted to be absolutely unknowable and utterly unutterable. Thus Dionysius accords priority to the negative way, which proceeds upward from lower beings to higher, negating more and more attributes at each step of the way, and ultimately negating being itself in the movement beyond being altogether into the darkness of the unknowable God. As he writes in the *Celestial Hierarchy*, chapter 2. 3, "the way of negation appears to be more suitable to the realm of the divine," since "positive affirmations are always unfitting to the hiddenness of the inexpressible" (141A).[15]

In the *Mystical Theology*, chapter 3, the specifically apophatic character of this negative way is made even more explicit: "The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short [συστέλλειν] of words but actually speechless [ἀθεγτος] and unknowing" (1033B–C). This means that the actual encounter with God, the end of theology, can transpire only in the silence beyond words. The failure of language is necessary to the success of precisely the theological purposes it serves: "But my argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable" (1033C).

From near the other end of the arc of development of Christian medieval thought, Thomas Aquinas agrees with this in substance. According to Thomas, we can know God only indirectly from the lower things of which he is the Cause, and he is clearly recognized as a cause that transcends what it causes rather than standing in a continuous series with it. God can meaningfully be said to be Being only to the extent that he is the cause of being in the sensible things that we must experience in order to form a conception of being. The difference is that for Thomas, God's causality consists in his being participated in by beings, whereas all participation in the substance of the transcendent God seems to be excluded by Dionysius. The ontological gap between Creator and creature remains for Dionysius, apparently, without mediation or likeness of analogy. For Thomas, the preexistence of all things in God is grounds

for actual kinship with him. God has transcendence but not total alterity in relation to the things of Creation. Thus for Thomas certain divine names—those for intellectual perfections, like "one," "good," "true," and of course "being"—can and do name the being itself of God. There is a language, an analogical language, for talking about God. Dionysius, on the other hand, negates all possibility of such a language affording a scientific knowledge of God. Granted, God is source and supreme Cause of all that is, so a certain basis for kinship between God and creatures may exist even in Dionysius's universe. Nevertheless, it is beyond the pale of any possible knowledge.[16]

And yet, subjectively, analogy does play a role in Dionysius's affirmative theology—with which his negative theology is always inextricably intertwined. God is rightly praised "according the analogy of all the things of which he is the cause" (κατά τὴν πάντων ἀναλογίαν ὧν ἐστίν αἴτιος, *Divine Names* 872A). To this extent, Dionysius shares Proclus's vision of a positive use of the *via negativa*. He combines it with a way of analogy based on faith in language and its techniques taken to their limits, especially in prayer, in order to achieve a kind of indirect access to the Transcendent. This is bound up with a view of language as possessed of ontological density and intrinsic truth that can be traced back ultimately to Plato's *Cratylus*. Such is the basis for the positive, "kataphatic" theology that is actually inseparable from the negative, "apophatic" theology for which Pseudo-Dionysius has become known and with which his name has become inextricably associated by antonomasia. Some go so far as to say, "The Areopagite has, in the end, a profound confidence in the use of language which resembles that of Proclus. His assertion of the existence of divine names, and their implied ontic basis, suggests a strong degree of commitment to language. Linguistic manoeuvres, whether they involve negation or contradiction, are part and parcel of the route to the ultimate essence."[17]

In Dionysius's vision, the meaning of names derives ontologically from a transcendent source. Although language is never adequate to that source, it is derived from it and, in fact, causally connected to it, just as all being is causally dependent on Being. A relation of ontological dependence makes language not an adequate concept circumscribing its object with the sure revelatory capacity of the Logos, but rather a fragment or reflection. It can testify to what it does not comprehend yet nevertheless contacts uncomprehendingly in unknowing.[18] We enter here a dimension of experience that is no longer purely intellectual, or at least no longer purely an activity and a knowing, but is also a passivity and a suffering—*pathein* rather than *mathein*, "not only learning

but also experiencing the divine things" (οὐ μόνον μαθών ἀλλά καὶ παθὼν τὰ θεῖα, *Divine Names* 648B; see also *Epistle* 9). Dionysius thus describes a "theopathic state" in which one is in immediate contact with God.[19] And in expressing this, language does seem to have an analogical capacity for intimating God—albeit only in his operations upon us, not in his own essence or nature.

The key distinction made by Dionysius, as by Cappadocian fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa before him, between God in himself, or the divine essence, and his manifestation in the world by his *energeia* has remained the supporting arch of Orthodox theology ever since.[20] The question is how this radically transcendent God can be talked about at all. Granted, all things are gathered into transcendent unity in God, through whom and by whom and in whom alone they "preexist," and in this sense "all things are rightly ascribed to God" (*Divine Names* 980B). However, no qualities or characteristics can be attributed to God according to his essence. It is even the case that the words for things that are most unlike God ("worm," "mud") make the best names for him, since they cause less danger of idolatrous identification: "the sheer crassness of signs is a goad," forcing us to look above that which is literally and concretely named to its transcendent cause (*Celestial Hierarchy* 141B).

This is the fundamental paradox on which the Dionysian doctrine of the nameless God of many names pivots. God is absolutely unknowable in himself ("we cannot know God in his nature, since this is unknowable and beyond the reach of mind or of reason"), yet all that we do know about anything is in some way a knowledge of God, in as much as he is the source and sustainer of all things and their order: "But we know him from the arrangement of everything, because everything is, in a sense, projected out from him, and this order possesses certain images and semblances of his divine paradigms" (*Divine Names* 869D). Accordingly, "the being of all things is the divinity who is above being" (τὸ γάρ εἶναι πάντων ἐστίν ἡ ὑπὲρ τὸ εἶναι θεότης, *Celestial Hierarchy* 177D).

As becomes even more evident and programmatic in Dionysius's brilliant follower Eriugena, the ineffable God beyond Being is present as Being per se in everything that is. Although Being is made thereby neither knowable nor sayable, it is indistinct from all things' being as such—even while remaining absolutely distinct from any thing's being definably *this* or *that*. This, then, is being that is completely unqualified; it therefore can be neither known nor said. This unqualified, pure being as such is also indistinguishable from the absolutely transcendent principle, "the One." Thus in Dionysius's God the first two hypostases of the *Parmenides*

have been collapsed back together: the One-beyond-being (ὑπερούσιον ἕν) and the One-that-is (τὸ ὂν ἕν) have become indistinct—but now each has become equally indefinable and unsayable.

The purely transcendent One and the existing One are actually a unity in Dionysius—like the negative and affirmative methods of theology, which necessarily work together. The two, the One-beyond-Being and the One-that-is, are only different aspects—the dark side and the face, so to speak—of one and the same God. It is precisely the unthinkable, unsayable aspect of this unity that is made conspicuous by the blatant contradiction of a One that is at once beyond Being and is also pure Being itself (the same must be said of the doctrine of the Trinity: three, yet one). Dionysius's teaching points towards the unsayable not because God is simply One—this, too, is inadequate since "He transcends the unity which is in beings" (*Divine Names* 649C; cf. 977C–D). Indeed, all designations whatsoever are inadequate because any qualification belies God's absolute transcendence as infinite and therefore indefinable. Apophatic discourse about God cannot designate anything that positively is, but in negating every such designation it can nevertheless project an infinite transcendence of being and oneness, as well as of goodness, truth, and whatever other "perfections," as they are commonly known and said.

Projected to infinity, any of these "attributes" of God becomes inconceivable and therefore also unsayable. Apophatic theology, even in its contemporary revivals, for example, by Levinas, enfolds a philosophy of the infinite. This idea of the infinite is key to thinking past the aporias of the One and Being as thought according to the Logos in the *Parmenides* and to attaining the perspective of apophatic thought, where all definitions converge upon the infinite and indefinable. The idea of an infinity that cannot be conceptually comprehended is a fundamental principle of negative theology that can be traced back to Plotinus, who first ventures to base thought and being programmatically on a principle that is infinite. In this, too, Plotinus stands at the turning-point where logic turns into metaphysics and even mysticism.

Plotinus has been widely recognized as the first Greek to conceive of the One and Good as infinite (ἄπειρον), as divine infinity that is not merely vagueness and indeterminateness, vapid formlessness, or an abhorrent nothing. (We should not forget, however, that Plotinus is, in effect, reviving aspects of Anaximander's teaching on the *apeiron*, the non-limited, as the primal principle or original matter of all things.) According to Hilary Armstrong, "Plotinus is the first Greek philosopher to try to work out with any sort of precision the senses in which infinity

can be predicated of the Godhead, and to distinguish them from the evil infinity of formlessness and indefinite multiplicity."[21] For Plotinus, formlessness, being beyond form and therefore beyond all determination, is precisely what enables the One to be the transcendent ground of all that is. Plotinus's exegesis of *Parmenides* 142d–143a, where the One itself is said to be infinite (*apeiron*), envisages an infinite that cannot be conceptualized except negatively, where to speak negatively of the One means "to speak of it from the things that come after it."

John Heiser underlines the properly negative theological import of Plotinus's expressions, their "transcending negative sense," as he terms it: "This, I submit is a *negative*, not a positive sense of the infinite, it is 'knowing the One from the things that come after it,' by denying their limits."[22] Plotinus explains this speaking of ineffable infinity in terms of the things after it as a negative theological approach that provides no positive conception of infinity: "The expression 'beyond being' does not call it a 'this,' for it is not an affirmation, nor does it give it a name. It conveys nothing but the negation of such talk." There is thus no attempt to "encompass" the One in its infinity.[23] For Plotinus, this infinity cannot be conceived except negatively, that is, by thought's opening itself infinitely in self-negation. Infinity is experienced only in insatiable desire for what transcends comprehension.

Plotinus held that experience of the supreme principle must necessarily be a suffering, not a knowing in the sovereign sense of classical Greek intellectualism. In Plotinus, we see Greek thought discovering, from within, the intrinsic negativity of thought and language. The attempt to think the infinite, or rather to open thought to the infinite as what it cannot think, can thus be recognized as an inheritance of Neoplatonic philosophy. Neoplatonists, beginning with Plotinus, found the ultimate ground and goal of thinking and being in an infinite principle that could not as such be thought, or even be. This was audacious and revolutionary—an apophatic revolution. The transmission of this insight from Neoplatonism to Christianity was assured by the direct influence of Proclus on Dionysius. What the Neoplatonists did not generally conceive, however, and what *is* found in the Dionysian paradigm, is precisely Being as this infinite, incomprehensible principle. For the Neoplatonists, the infinite and unsayable principle is generally "beyond being."

Yet even this insight into the equivalence of the infinite and unsayable with Being and even, in some sense, with God was not fundamentally out of reach for Neoplatonism. In fact, immediately after Plotinus, Being is accorded the same sort of infinity as the One, not as being any*thing*, any *this*, but as indeterminate and unknowable. Plotinus's most outstanding

pupil, Porphyry, develops the idea that as infinite the One is also Being—infinite Being which cannot be defined or said. This conception of Being as infinite made it possible to revive the Aristotelian idea of the supreme divinity as the pure act of being (or equivalently pure act of intellect) within a negative theology. Aristotle had conceived of God as pure act and therefore also as finite in being: to be actual is to have perfectly definite form without any potency. But the Neoplatonists' idea of infinity as only negatively definable, and as not having in itself any positively knowable sense or essence, made it possible to conceive of an act that is infinite.

The idea of infinity was generally repugnant to classical Greek thinkers: for Aristotle, anything actual, including God, is necessarily finite. The revolution of Neoplatonic thinking that made it so congenial to monotheistic theologians is most clearly signalled by Plotinus's daring to think of the One, the supreme principle of reality, as infinite. Combined with Aristotle's thought of God as pure act, this leads eventually to thinking of God as pure being, the infinite act of being, "being itself"—*ipsum esse*, in Aquinas and Eckhart.[24] Being in its infinity is unsayable and indistinct from the ineffable One. This identity of the One itself and Being itself—beyond every qualified, concrete mode of being—was to be pursued all through later Christian Neoplatonism down to the Renaissance, signally by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and beyond. In *De ente et uno*, Pico aimed to unite in Being itself Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of God as the One beyond being and as the Supreme Being.[25]

The idea, first found in Porphyry's commentary on the *Parmenides*, that being itself, as an act rather than an object or concept, is what infinitely transcends all knowledge and saying has great importance in the history of negative theology. In terms of the *Parmenides* commentary tradition, this means that the second hypothesis—"if the One *is*"—acquires priority in indicating the limits of any conceptualization of divinity and, consequently, of everything else. Not only Porphyry, but Proclus, too, taking cues from his teacher Syrianus, begins to accord a certain primacy to the second hypothesis of the *Parmenides* concerning the One-that-is. The emphasis is no longer exclusively on the transcendence of the One-beyond-being, but is also on the immanence of the One-that-is—in fact, on the complete dialectical mediation of the two.[26] In both directions, immanence and transcendence, the One proves to be inconceivably infinite and to exceed saying.

Accordingly, not even the radical transcendence of the One and its incompatibility with Being is what finally distinguishes pagan Neoplatonic from revealed monotheistic thought. Indeed, this very polarity of transcendence and immanence collapses in an apophatic perspective that is common to both worldviews. The One transcends being not by being something definitely, definably other than Being. That would make the two—the One and Being—external to each other and therefore also comparable, side by side, each limiting the other, and therefore neither of them would be strictly infinite. Instead, the One transcends being by being infinite and therefore indistinct from being—that is, from Being without qualification, Being which cannot be said. Total transcendence and complete immanence are both ways of exceeding the boundaries of identity in terms of which things are defined and said. These different ways consist in total lack of relatedness, versus total relatedness—either of which equally exceeds saying. Saying cannot but divide in order to arti-culate, and so necessarily misses such inarticulably pure conditions as in-finite and in-definable being and oneness.

Neoplatonist negative theologies, Porphyry's excepted, generally negated Being as a positive determination that the One had to transcend. This is because they typically interpreted all being as *this* or *that* being, as determinate rather than as infinite and indefinable being. A genuine monotheism becomes thinkable only when being itself is conceived as essentially infinite and its supreme, unifying principle as transcendent to anything that is *some*thing.[27] Neoplatonic thinking opened the way for a strictly monotheistic conceptuality by thinking the infinite transcendence of the One, but it did not at the same time generally think the unity of this One with Being. It did not think Being as infinitely transcendent of everything that is *some*thing. While reaching the thought of the infinite, Neoplatonism was not doctrinally obliged or motivated to segregate this thought from anterior, pantheistic modes of thinking. It did not need to rigorously separate the oneness of being, or the One that it recognized as the supreme principle of being, from the diffuse presence of divinity in the multiplicity of beings. Indeed, in an apophatic perspective even these opposites coincide.

However, as infinite, the One cannot be distinct from Being, not when the One is thought concretely and no longer only in the intellectualized manner characteristic of the classical Greeks. The unity of the One with Being is entailed by its infinity, since if there were something else besides it, the One would not be infinite. It is crucial to realize that this One which is infinite is not *only* an idea. Infinity is taken to be reality, or ultra-reality, that precedes and encompasses every thought, including the thought of infinity itself. The infinity of the One, if it is the principle of reality, entails unity with Being and even the unity of Being.

Of course, this unity of being, which turns up as an infinite principle (the One) in all beings, is likewise apophatic. It cannot be scientifically understood or expressed, although it can be observed over and over in experience in ways that evade all rational account and grounding. The unity of being is based on a principle that withdraws from all attempts to know and express it.

The miracle of all things hanging together and cohering as somehow *one* world, a *uni*verse, must be observed ever again with wonder and be acknowledged to be incomprehensible: the reason and necessity for it cannot be demonstrated or even be properly expressed. This contingency of the togetherness and connection of all things, inexplicable to us and to any finite intelligence, is perennially rediscovered in philosophy. It becomes paramount, for example, in Enlightenment philosophy with David Hume. As with the One itself, all accounts and grounding for such unity fall into contradiction. The principle which is alleged to ground unity will never turn out to be identical with any principle that can be known and defined and said. Still, the unity of the One and Being is presupposed by every thought, since thought itself is inherently a synthesis. It is just that this unity that operates in every thought is graspable and expressible by no thought—it is itself the apophatic aporia par excellence. The unity of being cannot be proved or understood or even be adequately said, but we can nevertheless experience this very impossibility. In experiencing purely the connectedness of things and the unaccountability of this connectedness, we may experience what fails to be adequately conceptualized as the metaphysical unity of being.

The fundamentally negative status of our knowledge of all things and their ground—thus negative theology—was discovered by Neoplatonists in a predominantly intellectual register. This primordial negativity infiltrates into a broader spectrum of faculties and relational modes that are exercised in revealed, monotheistic, and especially biblical, historical religion, which becomes more reflective about the negative status of all its knowledge through this interactive contact with the ineffable God. A negatively theological monotheism was, in effect, already thought by the Neoplatonists. Their supreme principle is totally transcendent and also totally immanent, in the sense of being presupposed by all beings in their very being. This Neoplatonic God, however, is not active, not consciously and willingly engaged in relating to beings. That engagement could only be revealed, by history and through experience; it does not belong as such simply to the thought of the unity of being and its necessary transcendence of every finite being.

These are the essential pagan precedents that render philosophically conceivable a God who *is* essentially what cannot be said, that is, the God of monotheism. From these premises develop, especially in revealed traditions, ever more complex and historically differentiated experiences of the abyss of existence that philosophical thought first identified as a theme that could be reflectively contemplated. The One and Being are no longer incompatible and no longer intellectual forms or determinations at all. They are mutually interpenetrating aspects of an unsayable infinity beyond any determination as reality or even as divinity, if this is taken to be some essential, specific kind of being. The mutual exclusiveness of the One and Being inherited from the *Parmenides* falls away and, in effect, is dissolved in the course of the *Parmenides* commentary tradition. Both principles are redefined as inadequate determinations *not* of the Indeterminate but of a living, pro-active, always relating divinity that cannot be humanly or temporally or linguistically determined or comprehended. This . . . inexpressible "divinity" is not any object accessible to the approach of knowledge, but rather can be encountered only to the extent that it comes to meet us and disembarrasses us of all our antecedent conceptual structures and language.

This collapsing together of the Neoplatonic hypostases of the One and Being in monotheism opens the field of experience in time in the direction of an absolute which can become real as event and revelation in history. But still the supreme principle of all historical reality and experience—the One or Being in their indifferentiation—cannot be conceptually circumscribed or said without being immediately belied in its absoluteness. The consequence is that all that can be said and perceived and positively experienced turns out to be dependent on what cannot be known or said. "Reality" and "truth" as such are relinquished to the zone of the ineffable. Human knowledge and language are reassessed as fundamentally negative in nature due to their difference and distance from absolute reality, which is more positive than "positivity" or any other expression can signify. The supposedly stable, stateable structures of "this world" are undermined and have, in some sense, become a lie.

The view of apophasis here espoused makes it both metaphysical and anti-metaphysical at the same time—indeed, the coincidence of these opposites. The One must be discovered as radically beyond being but also as identical with being, once being, too, has been identified with (or rather dissolved into) infinity. The contemporary philosophical polemic that targets metaphysics, as if getting rid of this type of thinking would cure Western culture of its pluri-millenary sickness is itself another symptom of the tendency to reify and isolate elements by their objective

manifestations and to abstract from and forget their deeper roots that reach into the unsayable and unknowable. This oblivion comes from wishing to adhere to the surface of what can be said and be verbally persuasive and reassure us that we know the grounds of our knowing and doing—when actually these things lie submerged in unknowing that reaches into the fathomless.

III

We have now followed metaphysics, the knowledge and discourse of being, to its source in unknowing and unsaying vis-à-vis an infinite "reality" that can neither be qualified by language nor be known and that is, to this extent, ab-solute, absolved from speech and concept, and so from the grasp of the knowing subject. Thus we have admitted that metaphysical "truth" is unsayable, yet it must also have some form of expression, if it is going to register at all. As proponents of negative theology from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite to Denys Turner concordantly insist, every negative theology presupposes and is inextricably interwoven with a positive or kataphatic theology.[28] Dionysius writes of the inexpressible (ἀρρήτου) being woven together (σύμπεπλοκται) with the expressible (τὸ ρήτο). I wish to return to the hymn cited as the *exergue* to this essay in order to explore briefly how this poetic and prayerful form gives positive verbal expression—or perhaps we should say *witness*—to what cannot be expressed in terms of conceptual knowledge, or knowledge to which the Logos can be adequate. This final movement of the essay, then, deals with the positive theology that always doubles and indirectly lends voice to the otherwise inaudible negations of apophatic theology. This is crucial for understanding how apophatic thinking does not entail exactly an overcoming of metaphysics (as in Heidegger's "Überwindung der Metaphysik") but rather an ungrounding of its language, in order that it can work to evoke what cannot be said. On this interpretation, metaphysics turns out to be a poetic discourse and even a sort of religious witness to a reality transcending objective expression and articulation.

Understood apophatically, metaphysics consists in unknowing and unsaying, and for the Neoplatonists working in the *Parmenides* commentary tradition this negation of language registers discernibly by being expressed especially in the form of the hymn, which is thus valorized as an indispensable vehicle for metaphysics. In fact, the *Parmenides* itself was taken by these commentators to be essentially a hymn. We have already noted that Proclus calls the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*

"a theological hymn by way of negations to the One" (ὕμνον διά τῶν ἀποφάσεων θεολογικὸν εἰς τὸ ἕν, *In Parmeniden* VII. 1191. 34f). Again in *Theologia Platonica* III. 23, p. 83, 22ff., Proclus writes of the One of the first hypothesis, the First in which there can be no participation, as "being hymned" (ὕμνηται). The second hypothesis, too, is interpreted by Proclus in *Theol. Plat.* I. 7, p. 31, 25–27 as a "theogony," that is, a hymn celebrating the generation of the gods.[29]

Plato's own dialogues define themselves at key junctures in terms of the hymn. *Timaeus* 21a1ff. introduces the tale of Atlantis told by Critias as a panegyric in praise of Athena as if it were a hymn (οἱόνπερ ὕμνοῦντας ἐγκωμιάζειν) offered on the occasion of the panathenaean festival in which the dialogue is set. *Phaedrus* 265 c1 calls Socrates's recantation in the second part of the dialogue a "mythical hymn" (μυθικόν τινα ὕμνον). *Phaedo* 61a3ff. classifies philosophy among the musical arts, indeed, as the greatest of them. Proclus infers from this that human philosophy consists basically in the imitation of the hymns of Apollo:

> By means of this art [namely, philosophy] the soul is able to honour all things human and to sing hymns to the gods in a perfect way, while imitating the Leader of the Muses himself, who hymns his Father with noeric songs and keeps the cosmos together with indissoluble fetters while moving everything together, as Socrates says in the *Cratylus*. (*Rem publicam commentarii*, I 57, 11–16)[30]

Thus Proclus is following Plato in describing philosophical discourse as hymnic in nature, and it is not implausible to extend this to metaphysical discourse generally, in its highest and deepest reaches. The most inspired discourses of the *Phaedrus* and of the other dialogues on love especially have an easily recognizable hymnic cadence and character. In Proclus's understanding, Platonic metaphysics is quite generally to be understood as a matter of composing hymns to the gods. R. M. van den Berg develops in detail the thesis that philosophy and particularly its metaphysical discussions were understood by Neoplatonists, especially in the Athenian Academy, as a matter of singing hymns to the gods and thereby assimilating oneself to divinity. Through careful philological examination of Proclus's hymns, as well as of his use of the word "hymn" in his Platonic commentaries, Van den Berg comes to the conclusion that, "The distribution of ὑμνέω and related forms in Proclus's *oeuvre* squares with the suggestion that for him metaphysical discussions are as it were hymns to the gods. Such verbs are virtually absent from works that do not primarily deal with metaphysics"(Van den Berg, p. 27).

It must be admitted that the word ὑμνήσει as it occurs, for example, in the second verse of the "Hymn to the Transcendent God," the "Υμνος

εἰς Θεόν, cited at the head of this article, is not commonly taken to indicate properly the singing of hymns (ὑμνῳδία). The word "hymn," particularly in its verbal employments—ὑμνεῖν and a variety of derivative forms such as ἀνυμνεῖν—has a wide range of meanings such as "say," "mention," "maintain," and is not typically considered by scholars to retain the root sense of "hymn" as to sing songs (ὑμνῳδεῖν) in praise of divinity. Against this view, Van den Berg argues: "To my mind, however, ὑμνεῖν never entirely loses a special sense of celebration, as can be learnt from an analysis of its occurrences. My claim is that the members of the Athenian Academy used it on purpose, because they were convinced that by doing philosophy, or rather metaphysics, they were as it were singing hymns to the gods" (p. 26). Even without subscribing to the contention that the word never lost its root meaning, it is altogether plausible that the etymological meaning would have become, in some measure, conscious again with the philosophers' characteristically probing and highly reflective employment of language. For example, when Plato uses ἐξύμνησειν in the sense of "extoll" in *In Euclid* 211, 27, it is difficult to imagine that this meaning would not resonate with the sense of hymns of praise, the word for which is contained transparently as a component within this locution, and similarly for other compounds incorporating the word "hymn."

It appears, then, that for Proclus and for the Athenian school of Neoplatonism generally, philosophizing at a certain level becomes identical with the making and performing of hymns. Plato's dialogues, especially the *Parmenides* and the *Timaeus*, as we have seen, interpreted themselves explicitly as hymns. To this extent, metaphysics can be understood as hymnic in essence from the Neoplatonic philosophers and even from the Platonic sources themselves. The dialogues' hints are developed by the Neoplatonists into a far-reaching metaphysical program for lending speech to what, at the summit of contemplation, remains in itself inexpressible.

The hymn is best taken as simply a prayer praising the gods, whether or not the text is sung. In this broad sense, the hymn as a genre continues to be recognized as an indispensable frame for metaphysics throughout the metaphysical tradition, particularly in its apophatic or negative-theological strands. Anselm's so-called ontological argument in the *Proslogion* is among the most philosophically significant, and probably the most historically influential, of metaphysical meditations in the midst of the Middle Ages, and all its syllogisms are in a certain sense couched in the language of hymn and prayer that enframes the entire meditation and so does not remain merely external to the argument. The *Proslogion*

begins with a prayer of desire to behold the Face of the Lord ("Quaer vultum tuum; vultum tuum, Domine, requiro"), echoing the Psalm for example, Psalm 42: 1–4: "As the hart longs for the water course, s my soul longs for thee, O God. . . . When shall I come and behold th face of God?" Anselm's discourse similarly ends on a doxological no of blessing the Trinitarian God: " . . . donec intrem in gaudium domi mei, qui est triunus et unus Deus benedictus in saecula. Amen."[31] Th liturgical enframing is less pronounced, of course, in the Scholasti summas, but even Thomas Aquinas's *oeuvre* has to be contextualize by the genre of the hymn, particularly the four hymns he authored fo the Corpus Christi liturgy, notably the *Pange Lingua*.

There is, obviously, a tension, if not an outright contradiction between apophasis and the verbal hymn. The one requires words whereas the other requires foresaking and renouncing them. But fo the Athenian Neoplatonists the highest hymn is in fact wordless, a pur contemplation and silent assimilation of the self to the One. It will take a Christian mentality to fully valorize the incarnation of philosophical wisdom in the language of the hymn. According to Van den Berg, "both Porphyry and Proclus stress that we should not celebrate (the highest) God by means of verbal hymns. To them, the idea that an absolutely transcendent God could be worshipped by sounds (i.e., in a material way) is nothing less than utter blasphemy. Our hymn can only consist in becoming like god. For Synesius, on the contrary, not only silent, noeric, hymns but also verbal ones are appropriate forms of worship, as his hymns testify" (p. 32).

In Christian authors, like Synesius of Cyrene, who became bishop of Ptolemais in 410 A.D., the kataphatic counterpart to apophatic negation can take on verbal and material form, as it does in the hymn. The Christian revaluation of the material Creation as a gift of God is thus key in order to make physical sounds sung in hymns worthy means of worship of a God surpassing all material vehicles. Hymns were, of course, for Proclus a theurgical practice, a kind of spiritual technology, for turning us back towards our first cause via the intermediate causes that could be symbolized. For pagan Neoplatonists, the hymn, as a practice by means of symbols representing even material elements by linguistic forms, used in order to approach and unify with God, constitutes the kataphatic theology that must necessarily accompany apophatic theology. Nevertheless, the ultimate hymn does not consist in words but in transformation of oneself into likeness to God. The lower gods according to Porphyry can be honored by hymns consisting in words (τὴν ἐκ τοῦ λόγου ὕμνῳδίαν), but Proclus makes clear in

Chaldean Philosophy, Fragment 2, that hymns to the Father (ὕμνος τοῦ Πατρός) can consist neither in words nor in rites, but only in becoming like him (τήν εἰς αὐτόν ἐζομοίωσιν). But since it is not possible to approach the supreme divinity directly, we must fall back nevertheless on hymns to other gods as expedients. As Van den Berg explains: "Moreover, Proclus holds that reverting directly upon the highest God is of no use for the soul that tries to ascend. The soul should initially revert upon its proximate cause, not on its ultimate cause. Hence his hymns are directed to pagan deities that rank low in his hierarchy of the divine. It is precisely because of their low ontological status that they can be invoked by means of verbal hymns" (p. 32).

This makes for a stark contrast with Synesius and with Christian uses of prayer, and consequently hymns, as means of direct approach to the supreme and only God. Whereas "Proclus' hymns are theurgical instruments," in the sense that Proclus "believes that the incorporation of (a small range of) inspired poems in his poetry will attract the gods he is addressing," "Synesius just seeks to honour God by composing hymns that are as beautiful as possible" (Van den Berg, p. 33). Van den Berg thus distinguishes Synesius's from Proclus's philosophy on the grounds that, "Synesius assigns to the Christian gospel the crucial role in the process of salvation that the later Neoplatonists accorded to theurgy. Proclus, on the contrary, follows Iamblichus in his valuation of theurgy as *the* way to salvation" (p. 32).

In light of this, it seems unlikely that the "Hymn to the Transcendence of God" would have been composed by Proclus or by any pagan Neoplatonist. From this point of view, the attribution to the Christian father Gregory of Nazianzius noted at the outset of this essay is not so wildly aberrant. Pseudo-Dionysius has also been plausibly suspected as author. In any event, the hymn bears the marks not of a theurgical exercise but of a pure offering of praise to the highest divinity, indeed to the only and absolutely ineffable God ("you alone are unutterable . . . you alone are unknowable . . . the only unnameable"). It thus bears most in common with the hymns of Synesius of Cyrene,who became a Catholic bishop for the last four years of his life. He never gave up the Porphyrian Neoplatonism that he had learned and adhered to in Alexandria, but he maintained a hybrid philosophy with Christian and Neoplatonic elements, much as did Pseudo-Dionysius.[32] I know of no reason why the "Hymn to the Divine Transcendence" might not be the lost work of this author, even though it is not included in the collection of his hymns.[33] It may have been preserved in some separate document from his death in 413 A.D. down to the time when it was attached to

Gregory Nazianzius's corpus of writings. This hypothesis, in any case, is consistent with the way apophatic metaphysics develop new possibilities of expression in relation to inexpressible divinity within the perspective of Christian and Creationist monotheism. And yet the (Neo)Platonic problematic of a necessary transcendence of language in the approach to this highest instance remains indispensable to the intelligibility of such a metaphysics.

In our own day again, it is within the cadre of Christian theology, and particularly of the current identifying itself as Radical Orthodoxy, that the hymn as a model for philosophical language generally has come back into the forefront. The philosophical stakes of hymnic language such as it is found in Neoplatonic and originally Platonic sources have been brought to focus in provocative ways by Catherine Pickstock in *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. Pickstock takes "doxology," or liturgical praise, of which the hymn might be considered to be the primary instantiation, to be the foundation for language, to the extent that language is genuinely meaningful. Her overarching thesis is that "language exists primarily, and in the end only has meaning as, the praise of the divine." This entails as a correlate that "liturgical language is the only language that really makes sense." As she writes in the opening statement of her argument,

> [t]his essay completes and surpasses philosophy in the direction, not of nihilism, but of doxology. It shows how philosophy itself, in its Platonic guise, did not assume, as has been thought, a primacy of metaphysical presence, but rather, a primacy of liturgical theory and practice. This same primacy, it claims, was developed, and more consistently realized, in medieval Christendom.[34]

By bringing the fundamentally doxological character of language in Neoplatonic and Platonic sources into confrontation with contemporary, especially post-structuralist theories of language, particularly those of Derrida and Foucault, Pickstock, in effect, proposes a rewriting of the history of philosophy from the standpoint of the liturgical, doxological word that she claims is the fundamental condition of possibility of the meaningfulness of all human language. Whether my emphasis on apophasis would, in her view, belong to contemporary nihilism, or would perhaps expose her own argument to underpinnings in indeterminacy that she would wish to resist acknowledging, are issues that can only be broached as a result of the reflections I have pursued and that turn out to parallel those issuing from the matrices of the so-called Radical Orthodoxy. There would presumably be serious tensions between the positive affirmations of theological orthodoxy and the negations of

apophatic philosophy that Pickstock and I respectively see as underlying the meaning given expression in liturgical hymns, and in fact the meaningfulness of language generally.

However, Pickstock, too, is centrally interested in the way that liturgical language (like the hymn, which I am taking to be its epitome) is actually an unsaying of language, at least of language as it is known within rationalist, secular epistemological frameworks. She writes in particular of the way the mediaeval Latin Rite must be revived in order "to overthrow our anti-ritual modernity" and its secularized theory of language culminating in Derrida's absolutizing of writing, "by restoring an apophatic liturgical 'stammer,' and oral spontaneity and 'confusion' . . . " (p. 176). The Vatican II reformers "ironed-out the liturgical stammer and constant re-beginning; they simplified the narrative and generic strategy of the liturgy in conformity with recognisably secular structures, and rendered simple, constant and self-present the identity of the worshipper" (p. 176).

Pickstock's outline for a more radical reform of the liturgy turns away from criteria of rational simplicity of argument and adherence to a presumably literal, extra-linguistic, non-semiotic reality, that of the supposedly primitive rite of the eucharistic meal present as an original event of an everyday nature. She valorizes rather the estrangements of the medieval rite (before its more artificial baroque excesses) as embodying genuine arrivals of a holy otherness, the arrival of the transcendent in the immanent, an actual occurrence of the impossible in the plenitude of Christic mediation.

> Indeed, unlike the view of reality implicit within immanentist language and the power of its textual permanence, the recommencements and stammer of the liturgical text are supremely but ineffably 'ordered' through genuine mystery and transcendent 'distance,' and are by no means devoid of cohesion, purpose, or genuine surprise. In contrast to the purified asyndetic 'advance' of secular discourse structure and its claim to apprehend the 'real' without encumbrance, the liturgical stammer bespeaks its admission of distance between itself and the transcendent 'real.' It is this very admission of distance which permits a genuine proximity with God. (p. 178)

This stress on distance from the transcendent as the condition of its proximity sounds, somewhat surprisingly, Derridean. Derrida, too, has recognized the essential moment of prayer and apostrophe, as well as of the hymn, in his studies of apophatic philosophical thought, emphasizing its role especially in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's mystical theology.[35] However, even though Derrida pays careful attention to the

hymnic enframing of the apophatic theology of Dionysius, he does no acknowledge the full implications of this hymnic character of metaphysical utterances. He still, in practice and in theory, interprets apophati thought as containing propositions claiming objective cognition, ever hyper-onto-theological knowledge of a supra-being, and therefore a vulnerable to and in need of deconstruction. This has become the chink in his armor through which he has been attacked by Pickstock, who wishes to make the doxological character of philosophical and of al language foundational for its very possibility of meaningfulness.

Pickstock argues against Derrida that Platonic philosophy is not based on metaphysical presence but on a liturgical word that interrupts presence by opening it towards the transcendent:

> But the good is precisely "beyond" the distinction of presence and absence. Its transcendence does not signify emptiness, nor that Derridean postponement which reduces absence to objectivity, since the sun which shines light onto being is present in the gifts of insight, truth, and beauty. The fact that it cannot be grasped by a *mathema* and is unsayable does not identify it with absence. Rather, its mode of 'presence' is articulated through the gifts which it bestows, the beyond-being which, as difference, gives things to be, and which (in Derridean terminology) *disseminates*. This contrasts with the *différance* of Derrida, which is assimilated in turn to his notion of writing. And it contrasts also with a perpetual postponement of an impossible giving and a radical disjunction of giver and gift. (p. 12)

Against Derrida's reading of Platonic metaphysics as the exclusion of otherness ("health and virtue . . . always proceed from within"), Pickstock points out that Plato stresses the infusion of the transcendent in beings as an exteriority penetrating into immanence, the sphere of interior knowing and reflection. Metaphysics thus turns out to be a powerful way of relating to transcendence. This is the metaphysics that is realized in the liturgical act of praise. The transcendent makes itself present in and through its gifts, eminently in the language of the hymn, for example, in our Hymn to the Transcendence of God.

While this is a powerful critique, it oversteps its own insight, for Derrida does not identify the good, or presence or God with absence. Only pure presence would turn out to be also purely absent, but the effectively present good or divinity is neither present nor absent; it is not identified with anything, for it is not identifiable at all but rather repulses all identities. In this regard, Derrida is apophatic, not dogmatic. Similarly, the liturgical word is open to its apophatic underpinnings because it faces the incomprehensible divinity before which it can only

stammer. Pickstock develops in particular the deployment in Christic discourse of "asyndeton," that is, the omission or removal of connecting syntax, to create structures open to incommensurability. And actually Derrida is anything but averse to noticing such breaks and ruptures in every kind of discourse.

However, Derrida does argue that no hymn or prayer is actually free of predication concerning the God it praises. He distinguishes the moments of apostrophe and of encomium in the prayer (or hymn) but suggests that in the end they cannot be separated. Prayer is never completely pure apostrophe; it always also presupposes some conception or description of the divinity it praises, and so is to a degree idolatrous. From (and in fact simultaneous with) its first moment of pure apostrophe to the indescribable Other, prayer inevitably slips into a language of predication, assigning some attributes to the one that it praises. Hence, for Derrida, prayer "preserves an irreducible relationship to the attribution" ("Comment ne pas parler," p. 572).

Even if Derrida is right about this (and he may not be), nevertheless it is not what the hymn says that counts, but what it cannot say. The spiritual movement of opening towards an Other that cannot be comprehended, yet must be praised, has a kind of existential and not a cognitive content, and this makes it a link to a transcendence that cannot be said. Like the Derridean trace, then, the hymn would have a referential structure, yet no referential content. Referring to what never was nor ever could be purely present, it is nevertheless an effecting of presence, a tracing or arrival of transcendence within immanence. Radical Orthodoxy and deconstruction marvelously agree on this point. At this apophatic point of that which cannot be said, the effect of presence is perhaps indiscernibly theological and thanatological, indiscernibly a manifestation of divinity or an intimation of death, either one as the Impossible.[36] This, at any rate, is the point I have wanted to bring out into the open by returning to the Neoplatonic matrices of apophatic thinking and in particular to its hymnic realizations that have been taken in contemporary philosophy in opposite directions, as either compromising philosophical rigor vis-à-vis ineluctable nothingness or as manifesting and materializing the positive gift of revelation. My purpose is to recommend adherence to the apophatic insight that is neither the one nor the other, but that which opens and gives both of these perspectives.

I believe that godlessness might be a state potentially as open and revealing of the religious as singing the liturgy and pronouncing orthodox declarations of faith. It would seem that Derrida best of all manifests this in his tears and prayers, increasingly in his later works.[37] Pickstock's critique of Derrida and the secular city and its nihilism and death fetish seems to be based entirely on his early work, particularly on "Plato's Pharmacy,"[38] and takes little or no account of what Derrida was doing the 1980s and 1990s, at which time his texts provide the fulcrum for the turn of philosophy to religion that can be traced in elaborate detail across the numerous texts of this period.[39] Especially pivotal Derridean texts for this purpose, in addition to the one already cited, are "D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie" (1981), "Donner la mort" (1992), *Sauf le nom* (1993), and "Foi et savoir" (1996). These texts leave the question of religion undecided. Radical Orthodoxy affirms religion on the basis of the breakdown of secular reason, which is taken to be the enemy of religion. Striking is how these ideological opponents, each with their radical challenges, converge upon the apophatic currents within the metaphysical tradition. The rewriting of the history of Western philosophy proposed in this essay from the point of view of what logical language cannot say, the apophatic, is the ineluctable margin where even radical orthodoxy and radical deconstruction cannot exclude each other but find themselves contaminated by one another. Both these antagonists demonstrate indirectly how viable metaphysics in the Neoplatonic tradition has become once again, once we learn to take its affirmations apophatically, which gives priority to their poetic and religious registers, as in the hymn.[40]

Notes

1. Greek text from Proclus, *Hymnes et prières*, ed. Henri D. Saffrey (Paris: Arfuyen, 1994), 78. I have preserved the punctuation of the hymn as it appears in *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 37, ed. J.-P. Migne (Turnholti: Brepols, 1862), 507, where it is wrongly attributed to Gregory Nazianzus.
2. Throughout, where translations are not attributed to other sources, I have provided them myself. A somewhat different translation of the first several verses of the hymn is offered by Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition, Plato to Eriugena*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, vol. 19 (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1995), 162.
3. Marinus's "Life of Proclus" can be read in a translation by the eminent English Platonist Thomas Taylor (1758–1835), chief transmitter of Platonism to Romantics from Shelley to Emerson, in *Essays and Fragments of Proclus the Platonic Successor* (Somerset: Prometheus Trust, 1999), 217–44.
4. The attribution to Proclus goes back to Albert Jahn, *Eclogae e Proclo de philosophia chaldaica sive de doctrina oraculorum chaldaicorum. Nunc pri-*

mum ed. et commentatus est A. J. Accedit hymnus in deum platonicus uulgo S. Gregorio Nazianzeno adscriptus, nunc Proclo Platonico uindicatus (Halle a.S.: Pfeffer, 1891), 49–77. Werner Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1998), 55–6, accepts this attribution, since the hymn's citation by non-Christian authors such as Ammonios Hermieu (ca. 445–517) and Olympiodoros (second half of the sixth century) argues for a pagan provenance, whereas Saffrey, in *Proclus, Hymnes et prières*, finds its poetry not up to Proclus's standard and considers it more likely the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

5. *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, trans. Glenn R. Morrow and John Dillon (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987). Greek text in *Commentarium in Parmenidem*, ed. Victor Cousin, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1864). Reprinted in *Procli Philosophi Platonici*, Opera inedita, pars Tertia, Continens Procli Commentarium in Platoni Parmenidem (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchandlung, 1961).
6. This arc of development of Greek thought is lucidly traced by Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence, Vol. 1: The Rise and Fall of Logos* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986).
7. E. R. Dodds, "The *Parmenides* of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic One," *Classical Quarterly* 22 (1928): 129–42; citation, 134.
8. W. C. K. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 33–4.
9. For readings of Neoplatonism as originating in and revolving entirely around interpretation of the hypotheses of the second part of the *Parmenides*, see Jean Trouillard, "Le 'Parmenide' de Platon et son Interprétation Néoplatonicienne," in *Études Néoplatoniciennes* (Neuchâtel: À la Baconnière, 1973), 9–26, and H. D. Saffrey, "La théologie platonicienne de Proclus, fruit de l'exégèse du 'Parménide,'" *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 116 (1984): 1–12.
10. See Hans Joachim Krämer and his Tübingen school of philologically oriented interpreters, especially Krämer's *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics: A Work on the Theory of the Principles and Unwritten Doctrines of Plato with a Collection of the Fundamental Documents*, trans. John R. Catan (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990) and Konrad Gaiser, *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre: Studien zur systematischen und geschichtlichen Begründung der Wissenschaften in der Platonischen Schule* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1963).
11. John Chrysostom, Περί ἀκαταλήπτου, ed. Jean Daniélou, *Sur l'incompréhensibilité de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 1951).
12. See Émile Zum Brunn, "L'exégèse augustinienne de 'Ego sum qui sum,' et la 'métaphysique de l'Exode,'" in *Dieu et l'Être: Exégèse d'Exode 3.14 et de Coran 20.11–24*, ed. Paul Vignau (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1978), 141–64. Further essays in this volume I also draw on are Marguerite Harl, "Citations et commentaires d'*Exode* 3.14 chez les Pères grecs des quatre premiers siècles," 87–108; Pierre Nautin, "'Je suis celui qui est' (*Exode* 3, 14) dans la théologie d'Origène," 109–19; and Goulven Madec, "'Ego sum qui sum,' de Tertullien à Jerome," 121–39.
13. *In Parmenidem* XII, 25, in *Porphyre et Victorinus*, ed. Pierre Hadot (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968), 104.
14. *Plotinus*. In seven volumes with an English Translation by A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).
15. Dionysius's works are cited from *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). Greek texts from *Corpus Dionysiacum*, 2 vols., Patristische Texte und Studien, ed. K. Aland and E. Mühlenberg (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990–1991).
16. Such lines of distinction are drawn, for example, by Gislain Lafont, "Le 'Parménide' de Platon et Saint Thomas d'Aquin: L'analogie des noms divins et son arrière-plan néoplatonicien," in *Analogie et dialectique: Essais de théologie fondamentale*, ed. P. Gisel and P. Secretan (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1982). The relation of Thomas and his views on analogy to the tradition of Dionysius and John Damascene are probed in detail by Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2004).
17. Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence, Vol. 2: The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986), 240–1.
18. On the multifarious manifestations in images that do not represent, but nevertheless mediate a relation to God for Dionysius and his tradition, see Werner Beierwaltes, "Realisierung des Bildes," *Denken des Einen: Studien zur Neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1985), 73–113.
19. Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 107.
20. A passionate re-actualization is proposed by Christos Yannaràs, *Heidegger e Dionigi Areopagita* (Rome: Città nuova, 1995).
21. Cf. A. Hilary Armstrong, "Plotinus's Doctrine of the Infinite and its Significance for Christian Thought," in *Plotinian and Christian Studies* (London: Varorium Reprints, 1979): V. 47.
22. John H. Heiser, "Plotinus and the *Apeiron* of Plato's *Parmenides*," *Thomist* 55 (1991): 80.
23. *Enneads* V. v. 6. Quotations from *Enneads* V. iii and V. vi in Heiser, "Plotinus and the *Apeiron*," 56, 72–3.
24. The key role of Plotinus in this development, which passes also through Augustine, is emphasized by Patrick Madigan, S.J., *Christian Revelation and the Completion of the Aristotelian Revolution* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988).
25. Cf. Werner Beierwaltes, "Das seiende Eine: Neuplatonische Interpretationen der zweiten Hypothesis des platonischen 'Parmenides' und deren Fort-

bestimmung in der christlichen Theologie und in Hegels Logik," *Denken des Einen, cit.*, 193–225.

26. This compenetration is an overarching theme of Beierwaltes's *Platonismus im Christentum* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1998). Neoplatonists' attention to the second hypothesis is also highlighted by Beierwaltes in "Das Seiende Eine. Zur neuplatonischen Interpretation der zweiten Hypothesis des platonischen *Parmenides*: Das Beispiel Cusanus," in *Proclus et son influence*, ed. G. Boss and G. Seel (Zurich: Grand Midi, 1987). For an exegesis of the second hypothesis of the *Parmenides* by Proclus and Syrianus as leading to the theory of divine *henades* that bridge transcendence and immanence, see Proclus, *Théologie platonicienne*, vol. 3, ed. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1978), xl–li.
27. Jean-Luc Nancy lucidly defines monotheism as entailing not just that there is one God but that all being is one, inasmuch as all beings are dependent for their very being on a unique ontological principle, "the excellency of being." "Des lieux divins," in *Qu'est-ce que Dieu? Hommage à l'abbé Daniel Coppieters de Gibson (1929–1983)* (Bruxelles: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 1985).
28. See, for example, Denys Turner, "Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
29. Proclus, *Théologie platonicienne*, 6 vols. ed. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerlink (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968–97). See, further, H. D. Saffrey, "Accorder entre elles les traditions théologiques: Une caractéristique du Néoplatonisme Athénien," in *On Proclus and His Influence in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. E. P. Bos and P. A. Meijer (New York: E. J Brill, 1992), 44.
30. Cited in R. M. van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 14, 16, 22.
31. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* (South Bend, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1979). Among innumerable reflections emphasizing the centrality of this liturgical setting for philosophy in Anselm are Jean-Luc Marion, "L'argument ontologique relève-t-il de l'ontologie?"; and Mark C. Taylor, "How Not to Think God," in *L'argomento ontologico*, ed. Marco Olivetti (Padua: CEDAM, 1990). Seminal in this regard was Karl Barth's *Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselms Beweis der Existenz Gottes im Zusammenhang seines theologischen Programms* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981; originally, 1931).
32. Samuel Vollenweider, *Neoplatonische und christliche Theologie bei Synesios von Kyrene* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985),
33. *Synesii Cyrenensis Hymni et Opuscula*, ed. Micolaus Terzaghi (Rome: Typis R. Officinae polygraphicae, 1939–).
34. Catherine Pickstock in *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), xii.

35. See especially Jacques Derrida, "Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations," in *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 435–95.
36. Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
37. See John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997),
38. Jacques Derrida, "La pharmacie de Platon," in *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972); originally published in *Tel Quel* 32 and 33 (1968).
39. Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
40. Versions of segments of this paper were delivered and discussed publicly: "Negative Theology in the Neoplatonic Parmenides-Commentary Tradition and as Revived in Contemporary Apophatic Thinking" at the 2003 Society for the Contemporary Assessment of Platonism (SCAP) meeting under the auspicies of the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division; and "Apophasis and the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Religious Revelation" at the 2004 American Academy of Religion (AAR) national convention in the Platonism and Neoplatonism Group. I thank John Rose, Gregory Shaw, and Willemien Otten for invitations to present and all participants for their questions, comments, and suggestions.