1. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), p. 421. Hereafter *GGS*.

2. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 20. Hereafter *WH?*

3. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 8. Hereafter, *THC*.

4. Fritz Ringer, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2004), p. 83

5. J. H. Plumb, *In The Light of History* (New York: Dell [Delta Books], 1972), pp. 95–96.

6. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), p. 13. Hereafter, *TTT*.

VARIETIES AND VALENCES OF UNSAYABILITY

by WILLIAM FRANKE

> BOTTOM THE WEAVER IN *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act IV, Scene I sputters: I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass, if he go about [t'] expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had—but man is but [a patch'd fool], if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was.[1]

As is typical of those who speak about what cannot be said, Bottom cannot keep it short. He stammers on. He says over and over again . . . what he cannot say. Since he cannot really say what he feels compelled to try and say, he keeps on trying. And in so doing, he reflects indirectly on what amazes him by reflecting directly on his own incapacities and foolishness as brought out by the experience of being checked in his attempt to express what he cannot. There is endlessly much to say about this experience of inadequacy vis-à-vis the unsayable and miraculous, and precisely this verbiage constitutes its only possible expression.

Bottom speaks from the bottom end of what can also be the most elevated of all discursive modes. This may be illustrated by contrasting his ludicrous noises in a comic voice with Paul Valéry's superb, perhaps even supercilious tone in his pronouncement: "That which is not ineffable has no importance" ("Ce qui n'est pas ineffable n'a aucune importance," *Mon Faust*). Nevertheless, Bottom's words are indicative of

an important direction in the drift of discourse across the centuries on what cannot be said. This drifting is precisely what severe moralists, like Augustine and Wittgenstein, have wished to put a stop to by enjoining silence. While in principle the Unsayable would seem to demand silence as the only appropriate response, in practice endless discourses are engendered by this ostensibly most forbidding and elusive of topics.

This predicament of prolix speechlessness is found over and over again in literature of all kinds, especially at its dramatic climaxes of revelatory disclosure or "epiphany." Another especially poignant instance in familiar literature, where precisely the issue of the unsayable or inexpressible emerges eloquently as the secret key to all meaning and mystery, is Ishmael's consternation vis-à-vis the whiteness of the White Whale in *Moby Dick*. This color, or rather "visible absence of color," speaks by its very unspeakability: it is "a dumb blankness, full of meaning," says Ishmael, "and yet so mystical and well-nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught."[2]

The terror of the Unnameable expressed in these lines suggests another register, besides those of Bottom and Valéry, of the limitless range of tones that are apt to be resorted to by speakers face to face with what cannot be said. Another instance in some ways like it is familiar also from Kurtz's last words—the exclamation "The horror! The horror!"—as narrated by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's novel is a further example of a fiction hovering obsessively around something unsayable as its generating source, something that the narrator despairs of being able to retell:

> "It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams . . ."
>
> He was silent for a while.
>
> "No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream, alone . . ."[3]

Although such experience is so unique as to be ineffable, it is nevertheless rather prevalent, presumably in life and in literature alike, as these few examples already begin to suggest. What are the narrative structures and strategies that enable this type of discourse about what is in principle intractable to narration and discourse? Bruce Kawain develops a theory about how "secondary first-person" narrators—telling about someone else's experience of the absolute—provide more intellectual and verbal, less purely active, heroic energy that serves to follow and record the path of the primary protagonists into the ineffable core of experience of essential mystery, the "heart of darkness." Marlow serves precisely this function for Kurtz. And Marlow's narration is itself framed by that of the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, so that from Kurtz—whose name pronounced in German, incidentally, means "short" ("kurz")—to Marlow, to the actual narrator, there is a scale of increasing verbal skill or readiness to speak and decreasing transcendental power and intensity. As Kawain cogently explains, "If this were not so, and if it were possible to communicate the heart of darkness itself, directly, in words, then both Marlow and the narrator would be as shaken as Kurtz. Indeed, each successive relation dilutes the primary experience. In this way the unrelatable material is reduced to relatable terms . . ." Something similar can be said again for the nearly negligible narrator "Sam" who transcribes the incredible monologue of Watt in Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt*.[4]

In these ways, what ultimately defeats all articulation remains nevertheless the object-elect, the darling, of copious discourses. In Marlow's narration, it is the privacy of the individual's own experience or unique "life-sensation" that turns out to be incommunicable. This constitutes, in effect, a Neo-Romantic interpretation of the mystery that apophatic discourse, literally "negative" or self-denying, self-subverting discourse intimates and yet leaves undefined. What this private, individual core of experience might be cannot be said, and such a private meaning is perhaps not even a coherent concept (as Wittgenstein argues in *Philosophical Investigations* I, 243–314). So we are left with only the linguistic form for . . . what cannot be said, and all interpretations are only guesses, "conjectures" in the vocabulary that Nicholas Cusanus (1401–1464) developed for the self-*un*saying discourse of apophatic theology. Such a postulation of the self as a secret, inexpressible core of mystery is questioned and yields to a variety of other interpretations of the sources of unsayability in modern authors like Virginia Woolf.[5] Another especially good example can be found in Henry James's later

fictions, which witness to the author's increasing doubts about and distancing of himself from language.[6]

In James, the space of the unspeakable oftentimes may be interpreted interchangeably in terms of metaphysical sublimities, sexual secrets, or social banalities. Such a layered interpretation of the inexpressible is elaborated by James in his novel *The Sacred Fount* (1901). Here it may be some special insight, a "nameless idea," or the narrator's theory about his companions, that remains beyond the threshold of speech and communication in a realm that is "unspoken and untouched, unspeakable and untouchable."[7] Or it may be quite common experiences that are transfigured by the rhetoric of unsayability, which permeates the novel, so as to take on mysterious, quasi-mystical connotations. This may happen, for instance, in the collective experience of a piano recital:

> The whole scene was as composed as if there were scarce one of us but had a secret thirst for the infinite to be quenched. And it was the infinite that, for the hour the distinguished foreigner poured out to us, causing it to roll in wonderful waves of sound, almost of colour, over our receptive attitudes and faces. Each of us, I think, now wore the expression—or confessed at least to the suggestion—of some indescribable thought; which might well, it was true, have been nothing more unmentionable than the simple sense of how the posture of deference to this noble art has always a certain personal grace to contribute.[8]

James titillates us with the possibility that this extraordinary transport, which cannot be described, may be all about nothing extraordinary at all—since, in any case, there is no *telling* what it is that subjectively excites such rapture in correspondence with the infinite, inexpressible desire of each listener. Nevertheless, in all these cases, in the Sacred Fount, as also in the White Wale and the Heart of Darkness, something mythic and transcendent is hinted at precisely by a declared shortcoming of language, something which, however, provokes a scarcely containable abundance of discourse. It is difficult, even impossible, to contain discourse when we do not and indeed *cannot* know what it is about.

The example from James collapses the distance between ordinary experience and extreme experiences at the outer limits where no language can suffice. Indeed the most provocative hypothesis concerning the apophatic dimension is that it is necessarily present everywhere in language. The extreme, liminal experiences described in literature

would then make only more starkly evident something that is perhaps always indiscernibly there, even in the most mediocre transactions in and involving language—which is, in some sense, all human experience. All our expressions harbor and are punctuated by silences, and even very banal forms of silence may after all be akin to absolute silence and participate in the pregnant pauses characteristic of apophasis, the impotence of the word.

If this is true, then the investigation of the topos of "what cannot be said" in some of its more dramatic and spectacular forms might be expected to illuminate a pervasive dimension of all experience and consciousness in language. What is made awesomely manifest in the heroes of metaphysical quests and in protagonists responding to supernatural vocations or divine visions is perhaps, albeit in lesser degrees, true for all of us and true even at the level of collective endeavors. The impossible quest to articulate the ineffable may be found always implicitly there already in some form in any articulation whatever that breaks the silence.

There are, of course, innumerable different motives for inexpressibility. Many of these motives seem to fight shy of the intrinsic unsayability of the mystical and transcendent, but there are also strong tendencies and temptations to blur these boundaries wherever we really do not and, for whatever motive, *cannot* know exactly what we are talking about. Verbal obscenity, moral indecency, religious blasphemy, the ritually abject are all either socially unavowable or, in various ways, subjectively or psychologically inadmissable.[9] All can become avenues leading to rupture with any and all systems of communication establishing normative sense and so lead to experience that is beyond the net of language and therefore removed to a transgressive—or indistinguishably, so far as words are concerned—a transcendent zone.

Such apparently circumstantial motives for silence seem to dominate even in the case of Cassandra, the prophetess who foretells Troy's doom but is silenced because no one will believe what she says. In Christa Wolf's rewriting of the myth, building on Aeschylus's character isolated and condemned to silence by her inexpressible visions, this is due to the curse of Apollo, who was not sexually gratified as promised in exchange for granting her the power of prophecy. Kassandra narrates: "Now I understood what the god had devised: You speak the truth but no one will believe you" ("Jetzt verstand ich, was der Gott verfügte: Du sprichst die Wahrheit, aber niemand wird dir glauben").[10] Confronted with disbelief Kassandra feels herself entrapped within "a ring of

silence" ("ein Ring des Schweigens"). Being right isolates her, and she feels herself "grow dumb" ("verstummen") in a society bent on wrong and with ears only for what is false. Nevertheless, she discovers a unique, incomparable kind of power in this very impotence of enforced silence. It becomes her essential form of expression, and she recounts how she learned to use silence itself as a weapon: "I learned in that I observed the ways of being silent. Only much later did I myself learn what a useful weapon silence is" ("Ich lernte, in dem ich die Arten zu schweigen beobachtete. Viel später erst lernte ich selbst das Schweigen, welch nützliche Waffe," p. 56). This suggests how an external, circumstantial silence can always be revealed as sign of a deeper, more intrinsic silence where alone all true being and power are gathered in secret and hiding. It is only at this level of what cannot be said that some fugitive sort of unity of comprehension and authentic apprehension of the true is possible, if at all.

The most banal reasons for silence communicate in myriad ways with its most deeply metaphysical grounds in a great range of literature. The strong transcendental emphasis of literature in German from Eckhart through Hölderlin and Rilke, continuing in Hermann Broch's *Der Tod des Vergil* and Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* in their attempts to transcend language, must be ranged alongside the oftentimes deflationary approaches characteristic of Louis-René Des Forêts's *Le bavard* or Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, as well as of contemporary theatre by playwrights like Harold Pinter and Nathalie Sarraute.[11] The ambiguities, however, can be traced all the way back in literary tradition. Emblematic cases are plentiful in ancient Greek tragedy. Aeschylus's Niobe (*Niobe Fragment*) powerfully inaugurates the principle of *patheismatheis*, learning by suffering silently what cannot possibly be said (see *Prometheus Bound*, 105–6). Indeed Sophocles's Electra recalls Niobe's eternal mourning that can never be expressed (150 ff). And the "dangerous silence" of Creon's Queen, Euridice, signifies her own immanent extinction by anticipating an absolute cessation of all expression through suicide in *Antigone* (1251–55).

In more modern times, the drama of silence is played out loquaciously in Spanish Baroque drama, particularly that of Calderón with its speculative penchant for the explicitly transcendental. Shakespeare, on the other hand, makes the most everyday language, when it touches upon silence, tremble with metaphysical resonances.[12] Cordelia's motto "Love, and be silent," her saying "nothing" in response to her father's demand for words of love, is a poignant instance. "Unhappy that I am,"

she says, "I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth," and yet she is not so miserable as one who does not love, for, as she says, "I am sure my love's / More ponderous than my tongue" (Act I, scene i). It is impossible for her to say anything sincere after her sisters, vying in lies, have so debased the currency of the word. The king, reduced in the course of the tragedy from his pompous self-importance, becomes beggar enough by the end to follow her example himself: "No, I will be the pattern of all patience, I will say nothing" (III. ii. 38).

These select examples must suffice to suggest the uncircumscribable diversity of motives for unsayability. The question is whether they all have anything in common. When something cannot be said because of politeness or obscenity or deceit or strategy, does this have anything to do with the metaphysical motives for unsayability? These things are not per se unsayable but only conditionally so, in certain circumstances. However, the problem is that any way of distinguishing accidental from essential unsayability is itself circumstantial. An essential unsayability must necessarily remain, precisely, unsayable, and any essential distinction that may be proposed to qualify it would be, therefore, unsayable. This does not mean that there is no distinction—it suggests rather the opposite. But still the distinction cannot be made explicit without becoming arbitrary with respect to what is really unsayable and, therefore, strictly undefinable.

The compelling interest of this problem lies in what it reveals, for example, about the very logic of essence and accident, to take just one classical philosophical distinction. The idea of essence has come to be treated as simply erroneous and illusory in much critical discourse since postmodernism. But to condemn this concept as false is just another way of rigidifying an important insight concerning the inherent instability and contingency of every definable essence into a general, formulaic skepticism concerning essence that can be applied with presumed assurance and authority. What needs to be acknowledged, rather, is that any essences can be adequately stated only in accidental terms of some contingent, arbitrary language. What is unsayable on intrinsic grounds cannot be separated by any fully explicit criterion from what is unsayable for only extrinsic reasons. Any definition of the unsayable introduces linguistic factors and their contingencies that do not and cannot belong to unsayability per se. Of course, the idea that there is anything such as unsayability per se may itself be an illusion, but it is a necessary illusion because language cannot exhaustively account for itself: that there is language at all cannot be explained in language.

any more than language can explain, among all the facts it can state about the world, the fact *that* there is a world. What language *shows* by its logical form, enabling it to represent the world, is unsayable in language (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 4.12). What lends power of purchase to our language about the world remains itself unsayable. This is the unsayable or "inexpressible" ("das Unaussprechliches") that Wittgenstein calls "the mystical" ("das Mystische," 6.522).[13]

The apophatic as expressed in literature gestures beyond all casual motives for unsayability to what cannot under any circumstances be said, yet holds attention rapt to its specific, indefinable mystery. There will always be some element in the mystery of the unsayable that escapes exhaustive definition in every supposedly definitive statement. To admit this is to recognize an economy of the unsayable and the sayable as the basis of every possible language, every system of saying and defining. Any language capable of making determinate statements is axised on an implicit, never completely accountable distinction between what, under any circumstances, remains unsayable to it versus what it is able to articulate.

It is not hard to see that the import of this issue of the unsayable extends throughout the whole range of philosophical discourse, for something unsayable lies in the crease between extrinsic and intrinsic, essential and accidental, necessary and contingent, and almost every other philosophical or conceptual dichotomy. The distinction between abstract and concrete as well depends on some sort of demarcation between what can and cannot be said. The concrete as such is infinitely dense and is never adequately expressed. Only its relatively abstract form can be stated in language. Everything in philosophy depends on how these sorts of divisions are negotiated. Such negotiations, however, take place behind the scenes by means of silent, pragmatic pacts and tacit understandings that can never be completely articulated or explained but are simply embedded in the conventions of the language we use, and so are implicitly accepted and in effect obeyed. Whatever points may be expressly stipulated and so made explicit presuppose others that are not but must simply be assumed. We always need to assume rules in order to operate at the level of a meta-communcation about the very rules of communication. The classical problems of philosophy are thus, in untold ways, all implicated in the problem of the unsayable.

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1. *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

2. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hermshel Parker (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1967), p. 163.

3. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Ross C. Murfin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 42.

4. Bruce F. Kawain, *The Mind of the Novel: Reflexive Fiction and the Ineffable* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 61–62. In addition to treating *Moby-Dick* and *Heart of Darkness* as prime examples of narrating the ineffable, Kawain also dedicates detailed discussion to Proust, Faulkner, Jabès, Beckett, Borges, Gertrude Stein, and others.

5. See Patricia Odek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) for Woolf's transformation of the narration of interiority in the English novel.

6. John Auchard's *Silence in Henry James: The Heritage of Symbolism and Decadence* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1986) documents James's "retreat from the word" and his embrace of "the gospel of silence" during the last twenty years of his life.

7. For a reading of the novel informed by apophatic traditions, see Ann-Marie Piest, "In the Mystic Circle: The Space of the Unspeakable in Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*," *Style* 34/3 (Fall 2000): 421–43, special issue entitled "Go Figure: Troping the Unspeakable." Citations, p. 241 and p. 223.

8. Henry James, *The Sacred Fount* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 166.

9. See, for example, Peter Michelson, *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Poetics of Obscenity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993). On abjection as prior to the verbal or symbolic, see Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) and Anne-Marie Smith, *Julia Kristeva: Speaking the Unspeakable* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), as well as Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

10. Christa Wolf, *Kassandra* (München: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993), p. 157.

11. A good survey of high-points of this apophatic literature in German tradition is Oskar Seidlin, "The Shroud of Silence," *Germanic Review* 28/4 (1953): 254–61. More comprehensive is Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig, *Rhetorik des Schweigens. Versuch über den Schatten literarischer Rede* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1981). For insightful discussion of examples from modern drama (Maeterlinck, Chekhov, Bernard, Beckett, Pinter, Albee), see Leslie Kane, *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1984).

12. See, for example, Alwin Thaler, *Shakespeare's Silences* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929) and Harvey Rovine, *Silence in Shakespeare: Drama, Power, and Gender* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987).

13. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden, with introduction by Bertrand Russell (London: Routledge, 1992), originally 1921.