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Book Review | *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts. Volume 1*

On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts. Volume 2

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***On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts. Volume 1.* William Franke, ed.; Classic Formulations, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xii + 416 pages, \$35.00 paperback, 978-0-268-02882-4.**

***On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts. Volume 2.* William Franke, ed.; Modern and Contemporary Transformations, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), viii + 488 pages, \$40.00 paperback, 978-0-268-02883-1.**

Negative theology, as a particular concern of philosophy of religion, has re-emerged in contemporary discourse with surprising frequency and from diverse points of origin. Philosophers like Mark C. Taylor, Gianni Vattimo, John Caputo and Richard Kearney have worked extensively with the concept of negative theology as a means of harnessing the religious insights of Jacques Derrida and others. This conversation over the last few decades has served as a post-post-mortem on God – a theme at the focus of several recent volumes such as *After the Death of God* (Caputo, Robbins, and Vattimo 2007), *After God* (Taylor, 2009) and *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (Kearney, 2011). Even these few, select voices diverge wildly at points. Their converging interests in negative theology, however, signal a potentially rich interstice for contemporary continental philosophy of religion in general and apophaticism in particular. As Arthur Bradley announces in *Negative Theology*

and *Modern French Philosophy*, “Negative theology’s position in postmodernity – now, here, today – remains very much to be decided,” but, as he explains, “This phenomenon clearly requires a more rigorous means of accounting for it than is available under the standard rubrics of secularization, or more recently, re-enchantment (Bradley, 18-9). Such generative elaboration can be found in William Franke’s recent work on apophaticism.

The genius of Franke’s two-volume critical anthology on apophatic discourses is the work’s breadth and depth of engagement with the concept in variously distinct and even conflicting contexts. Inasmuch as contemporary interest in negative theology warrants such an anthology, it has not dominated or narrowed the project in the case of Franke’s reader. As the subtitle implies, the collection samples diversely from sacred texts, philosophy, theology, poetry, mystical writing, and works of art and literary criticism. In several instances, the genre designations barely apply due to the great historical and ideological span of the sources included here.

Franke manages his sweeping and inclusive exploration of apophatic discourses by identifying a thematic lens for selecting his sources as part of a larger, conceptually-rooted genre of discourse. This theme is not more philosophical than religious, nor more mystical than poetical; the thematic parallel emerges from a properly basic reflex in language itself. While the sources sampled yield various implications and applications, Franke collects texts that reflect poignantly on the failure of language to convey the unspeakable. He explains, “The irrepressible impulse to ‘speak’ essential silence is a constant (or a close constant) of human experience confronted ever anew with what surpasses saying” (Franke, I, p. 2). For Franke, written reflections on the experience of being left ‘speechless’ before an ineffable reality develop into touchstones that transcend historical and cultural barriers; it is this experience that forms the impulse of selection in organizing this collection. In collecting these diverse accounts, he holds out hope for an “open dialogue on ‘what cannot be said’ lurking as an ineluctable provocation perhaps in all discourses” (I, p. 7).

Franke divides the two volumes of his anthology along historical lines. Volume One sets the foundations for apophatic discourse with the “Classical Formulations” that begin with Plato’s Parmenides and run up to roughly the early modern period. Volume Two isolates the “Modern and Contemporary Transformations” that surface in the 19th century and come to preoccupy the critical discourse of the 20th century and to this day. In this way, Franke’s collection spans the charged poles of irrepressible Plato at one end and enigmatic Derrida at the other with a multiplicity of radical aporias in between. He divides the classical and modern epochs with substantial introductory essays for each volume and critical essays for each selected text. Franke’s collection of unique and remarkable texts never seem to be the result of random selection or an eclectic picking driven by sheer curiosity. Rather they

demonstrate the organizing rationale of his attempts to “illustrate the principal modes that have characterized apophatic discourse by selecting from among its most historically influential and intellectually challenging instantiations” (I, p. 4).

Volume One opens with an epigraph from Proclus’ “Hymn to the Transcendence of God” that begins, “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” (I, xi). Proclus provides a fitting entre to this half of Franke’s collection in that his hymn reminds the reader that for the most part this epoch of apophatic discourse took up the mode of personal address to a nameless and unnamable entity. In the first introductory essay “Historical Lineaments of Apophasis,” Franke traces a narrative for the genesis of apophatic discourse in the methodological cues provided by Plato’s *Parmenides* and the subsequent reception of those modes in Neoplatonism and every successive generation of investigation on apophasis. In telling this story, the paradox of metaphysics takes center stage. Apophasis, for Franke, illumines the peculiar irony of metaphysical speculation in its classical orientation, for “Metaphysical statements inevitably mean something different from what they are able to say; only by recovering the apophatic sense, or rather nonsense or more-than-sense, behind these statements will we be able to see what made such traditions so compelling for so long” (I, p. 12). In the classical epoch, these traditions constitute various receptions and applications of Plato’s foundational example, and with this historical matrix, Franke groups the resulting Platonisms into three movements, each demonstrating the successive stages of apophatic discourse in late antiquity, the Middle Ages and the late Middle Ages. Rather than strict historical sequencing, these movements reflect a more or less similar approach to incorporating the Platonic touchstone to their own discussion of the unsayable.

The contents of Volume One reflect these three movements well in the organization of sources, but the majority of texts included here occupy the second and more diverse period of medieval philosophy and theology. The first bookend around this larger middle section is the foundational unit showcasing Plato’s thought and the immediate reception of it in Neoplatonism. In the first section entitled “The Ineffable One,” selections from Plato’s *Parmenides* and *The Enneads* of Plotinus are followed by excerpts from the commentaries of Porphyry and Proclus and the apophatic prolegomena of Damascius in the sixth century. Though Damascius verges on a mystical tone, these sources constitute the best example of the classical character of apophasis as a pre-religious discourse, a trait that was already dissolving in the spirit of Neoplatonism. “The Nameless God” - the next and largest section of Volume One, however, transitions to a much more explicitly religious orientation to apophatic discourse. By not only sampling from sacred texts and sacred writers, this section opens up the reader’s view on what Franke calls the “metaphysical transmogrification of the Platonic source text” as each of the Abrahamic religions explores the paradoxical character

of revelation from the nameless and unnamable God. Franke explains the paradox of revelation as a discourse of intentional contradictions: “God reveals himself, but what he reveals is not himself. He is revealed in everything everywhere, but nowhere as Himself” (I, p. 14-5). The Platonisms evident in this period yield three dominant strands of apophatic reflection: Christian apophatic theology from Dionysius the Areopogite to Thomas Aquinas, Sufism in Islamic thought, and the Jewish Kabbalah. Here, Franke samples from religious texts such as the Bible (both an Old and New Testament passage), the Corpus Hermeticum, Gnostic works from Nag Hammadi, and the Kabbalah itself. Theologians like Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine along with philosophers like Philo, Johannes Scotus Eriugena, Moses Maimonides, Ibn al-‘Arabi, and Albert the Great receive an opportunity to add to the buffet of apophatic theology in the middle ages. From this array of religious writings, Franke then focuses on the refined reflections of the Christian mystics of the late Middle Ages in a section labeled “In-Finite, In-Fant Spirit.” At this point, the peculiar character of Christian devotional literature from this period provides fresh categories for apophatic discourse as a vehicle for attempting to represent the “end of theology,” or the ineffable experience at the heart of all mystical encounters with God. Here, an appreciation for the “silence beyond words” of mystical experience is offered in conversation with the likes of Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Teresa of Ávila, and John of the Cross to name a few. The range of this literature is further demonstrated by the inclusion of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Canto XXXIII of Dante’s *Paradiso*. Thus, as a collection, Volume One brings together a profound wealth of literature on the apophatic impulse in ancient and medieval reflection – a survey of diverse documents that will be difficult to match in the modern and postmodern periods taken up in Volume Two.

While the character of apophatic discourse changes drastically in the modern period, Franke continues to trace a thematic narrative for apophasis in the representative literature. Volume Two organizes various trajectories in contemporary reflection for the apophatic intuition created in antiquity. These trajectories represent different agendas and concerns that often produce conflicting and rival impulses toward the unsayable. Whereas the ancient tradition of apophasis sought to unify our knowledge of the ineffable, the modern age craves a splintering and shattering of that knowledge. Franke describes this age as a time of re-discovery – a “relearning to read for what words do not and perhaps cannot say” (II, p. 1). Not surprisingly, the second half of this collection turns to the failure of language and the sources included here have a particularly linguistic orientation. In the introductory essay “Modern and Contemporary Cycles of Apophasis,” Franke endeavors to further his narrative of apophasis with particular reference to the altogether novel embrace of silence so characteristic of modernity and postmodernity. Instead of being rendered speechless before the wonders and grace of heaven as represented by many of the classical examples, the modern turn depicted in Volume Two adopts the “imperative of silence” in response to the

overpowering despair in the world caused by social collapse, war and genocide. Indeed, Franke's collection demonstrates the dark tone that surrounds much contemporary rumination on apophasis.

In Volume Two, Franke segments his collection of apophatic discourse into four, roughly chronological groups. The first group is labeled "Fragments and Finitude" and it draws mainly from voices in the 19th and early 20th centuries that in their own ways acknowledge the anxiety and angst that attends the unraveling of a social and cultural fabric that once held meaning intact for so many; these are poets such as Hölderlin, Dickinson, and Hofmannsthal, writers like Rilke and Kafka, and philosophers like Schelling, Kierkegaard, and Benjamin. These laments give way to a new mood of apophatic reflection in the period during and after the great wars of the 20th century – what Franke groups together as the "New Apophatic Philosophies." These include Rosenzweig, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Weil. Each voice from this group engages apophasis and offers a substantial new trajectory in the discourse that presents the world with a logic, grammar or practice – in the case of Weil – for constructing something out of the apophatic condition of life. Whereas these seminal voices in philosophy interrogate the limits of language for the benefit of resetting expectations, the next group sets the terms for artistic creativity in light of the apophatic condition. Under the heading "Depicting, Composing, Representing Nothing," Franke hosts both creatives and critics – all of which have a particular interest in keeping silence. This grouping boasts the likes of Samuel Beckett, the composers Arnold Schoenberg and John Cage, the Abstract Expressionist painter Kasimir Malevich, and critics as different as Theodor Adorno and George Steiner. In this field, the imperative toward silence has reached a hitherto unknown level of instantiation and dominance. In the same way that Wittgenstein's oft-repeated maxim "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," remains, the spirit of Adorno's denunciation of all poetry after Auschwitz hangs over the practice of criticism in this period like a vengeful specter (II, p. 179). Thus, in the final section, Franke groups together perhaps the most difficult voices or what he describes when he calls the modern period "especially prodigal in apophatically-pitched discourses and productions in all the arts" (II, p. 37). These voices that Franke organizes under the heading "The Unutterably Other" take up apophasis as a means of interrogating the alterity of saying itself and developing in response a mode of unsaying. In this way, concern for the other, the stranger, and the abject rise to the surface in this last grouping, a unit that includes the poets Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan, the surrealist Georges Bataille, and titans of recent reflection on the apophatic condition like Levinas, Blanchot, Derrida, and Marion. In a surprising recurrence of earlier themes, ethics and theology return at this end of the survey with a consideration of the face in Levinas and Marion's engaging of Derrida on "the gift." The breadth and scope of such a collection almost completely resists assessment, but a brief analysis of the work's great strengths must be given.

If the subject matter of *On What Cannot Be Said* is as old as the Parmenides, its configuration is as novel as an eBook version of the Parmenides. In other words, the greatest strength of Franke's two-volume collection resides in the sheer fact that nothing like it exists. While there are many monographs addressing the influence of negative theology on certain, discrete periods of philosophical or theological reflection in the history of Western culture, it appears that none attempt the broad and critically engaged survey that Franke's work represents. As a critical introduction to and reader for apophatic discourse in Western culture, this anthology will not be replaced or surpassed anytime soon, and the unique contribution of this work can be seen in three aspects.

First, Franke provides a conceptual schema for the broad reception of all apophatic discourses. While the strategic editorial choices made throughout his collection model a new paradigm of reading broadly for the apophatic impulse in all kinds of literature and writing, Franke's essays that frame each half of the collection provide a helpful picture of his methodology and the intentions behind his reading of these texts. With his two introductory essays, he charts a new course for recognizing the apophatic impulse in a variety of texts from diverse mediums and a new practice of reading them against/alongside one another. Two particular insights from Franke's model of reading stand out as remarkably helpful assertions for the contemporary dialogue on negative theology.

In the second essay "Modern and Contemporary Cycles of Apophasis," Franke wants to ensure that his reader does not get the wrong idea about modern responses to the apophatic condition. He is careful to point out in the preface to the second volume that even in the modern period, "apophaticism is not nihilism." He explains:

The apophatic allows for belief before any determinate belief, and for passion before any object of passion can be individuated: all definitions are only relative, approximate delimitations of what is not as such any object that can be defined. Apophatic thought thus relativizes every verbal-conceptual formulation and orients us toward the unformulated non-concept, no-word that is always already believed in with in(de)finite passion in every defined, finite confession of belief. (II, p. 3).

While the fact of Franke's warning may be obvious to many who have considered negative theology and apophatic discourse carefully, pointing out this unavoidable starting point for readers of such an anthology, however, directs their reading in profound ways. This insight along with the narrative of modern apophatic discourse provided by the introductory essay alerts readers to precisely the conceptual thread that holds together such seemingly disparate voices as those brought together in this volume. It also acknowledges the inescapable reality

of what George Steiner describes in *Real Presences* as hospitality for the divine visitation; in his words:

In natural and unbounded discourse God has no demonstrable lodging....Negative theology, this is to say the postulate of His non-being, is as legitimate in respect of word and proposition as is the dogma of His presence. Hence the symmetrical abyss within genuine faith and genuine denial; hence the potential anarchy of spirit on either side of the free spaces of utterance” (Steiner, p. 57-8).

In this way, Franke’s acknowledgement of the belief that precedes belief cautions his reader to leave open all possibilities when coming to engage apophatic discourse. The openness that the editor encourages here will serve the reader well when she comes across what is perhaps Franke’s greatest aporia regarding apophasis.

In his first essay “Historical Lineaments of Apophasis,” Franke concludes his discussion of the various currents of reception for Plato’s foundational experiment in apophasis with a somewhat dramatic look forward to the voices that would conclude the second volume of the anthology. His reason for forecasting the very end from the beginning of the survey’s expedition was revealed in Franke’s positing of two, quite opposite poles of emphasis in the philosopher’s engagement with apophasis. Whereas Plato stands at one end of the anthology and Derrida the other, concern for unity and concern for difference animate either poles of opinion on apophatic discourse. Citing this tension is not a revelation in the field, but rejecting its resolution and renouncing the apparent promotion of one pole over the other is Franke’s contribution. He explains this principle thus:

Unity and difference each furnish the motive and the motto for apparently divergent strains of apophatic experience and reflection: they can even be ranged into opposing camps of a seemingly intractable ideological divide. However, precisely as supposedly characterizing the apophatic, these cleavages can no longer be positively articulated and asserted. History demonstrates repeatedly that the conflict sharpens to a breaking point – and then self-destructs and disappears. In apophasis, which empties language of all positive content, absolute difference cannot be positively distinguished from absolute unity, even though the respective discourses of difference and unity nominally stand at the antipodes. Both configurations, unity and difference, are exposed as relatively arbitrary and, in the end, equally inadequate schemas for articulating what cannot be said (I, p. 33).

For him, neither unity nor difference provides the stability necessary to guarantee the apophatic quest; both fail to deliver what their proponents promise. By articulating this position on the debate, Franke has effectively removed his anthology from the easy

accusation of privileging one period or epoch of apophatic reflection over all the rest, and at the same time, this move further commends his work as an open and objective presentation of the long, strange story of apophatic discourse in Western culture – a story, as he demonstrates, that needs telling with as little ideological bias as possible. While Franke protects his anthology from ideological bias by developing an intentionally open conceptual schema for identifying apophatic literature, his work is not without careful and precise arrangements of the material he collected.

The second, major contribution of Franke's anthology is the great diversity of sources from which he samples and the organization of this variety into a series of movements and matrixes in the story of apophatic discourse. While it is clear that the editor does not pull arbitrarily from genres and cultures, the rationale behind his chorus of voices is not immediately available to the casual reader. As each unit in the anthology reveals a conversation between various texts and traditions significant to that period or movement, the reader can begin to discern the logic of Franke's arrangements. Like perhaps one of the composers he samples from in Volume Two, the editor assembles a dialogue based on "patterns of connection" that seeks to reveal certain parallels in how different thinkers approach the apophatic condition. In this way, Franke seizes the opportunity to allow monumental texts and dominant traditions to demonstrate their influence upon other writers and thinkers. He explains his strategy in this way:

I have invented groupings of selections that highlight patterns of connection. I do not propose them as anything more than heuristic constructs. Nevertheless, it seems historiographically as well pedagogically helpful to recognize new paradigms that emerge into clarity and prominence with certain authors, who are then followed in their basic assumptions by various constellations of consolidators, developers, revisers, and rebels. I do not mean to suggest that there are any neat divisions into discrete epochs, but I prefer not to completely erase all sense of historical succession – or regression – of apophatic modes and models (I, p. 6).

In the character of its selections and arrangements, *On What Cannot Be Said* not only showcases the background and context from which much of the contemporary interest in negative theology springs but it also provides a rich matrix of new connections between key works that many students of negative theology are already reading and sources that many may not even think to consider reading alongside such staples of apophatic discourse. That Franke's collection includes both the most recognizable voices in philosophical discussion of apophasis alongside artists, poets and composers sets this work apart from less ambitious surveys and holds out the promise of many generative encounters across disciplinary boundaries. While the selections may seem eclectic at times, the truth is Franke has a wealth

of unused voices that could seemingly be added to the already full sections of each volume, as evidenced by the almost encyclopedic breadth of his introductory essays. Indeed, those essays pull broadly from current research on apophasis that spans across disciplines and draws from numerous languages other than English. In this way, Franke demonstrates a voracious curiosity for all sorts of works that entertain apophatic themes in various disciplines and media.

The last and perhaps most commendable attribute of this volume for students in need of a reader like it is the remarkable quality of Franke's critical introductions for each text. These introductions demonstrate a depth and range of insight available only through careful and thorough research. It may be enough to merely collect these various sources in one place, but Franke has gone much further than that with the critical preparations he provides the reader for each new text. Each work sampled in the anthology receives a combination of the following: explanation of the historical context for the text, biographical details about the author, brief examination of the critical issues related to interpreting the text, discussion of the history of reception for the text, and thematic connections for the unit and the anthology to the particular text under consideration. In many cases, Franke provides his own translation of the works that he adds to his collection, and his attention to detail in this translation effort is evident on nearly every page. These characteristics alone inspire great confidence in the editor's careful consideration of and familiarity with the long, strange story of apophatic literature in Western culture. The additional benefit of introducing each work so carefully provides scholars both a convenient and reliable guide for apophatic texts previously unknown and also makes this collection an excellent resource to use with students in undergraduate and graduate courses. *On What Cannot Be Said* will be a leading resource for anyone studying apophasis and negative theology for many years to come.

In an essay called "Art, a fragment," Jean-Luc Nancy describes the present condition of the culture of Late Capitalism as an age of the fragment. He writes: "By this time, no doubt, fragmentation, spacing, exposition, piecework, and exhaustion have begun to arrive at their most extreme limit. We have done so much fracturing, fraying, wounding, crumpling, splintering, fragilizing, shattering, and exceeding that we would seem to have begun to exceed excess itself" (Nancy, 123). The fragmentation that Nancy identifies names a profound loss and surely constitutes a moment like unto the "historical moments of crisis" that Franke uncovers in his research (II, p. 49). The periods of crisis, "when confidence in established discourses crumbles, when the authoritative voice of orthodoxies and their official affirmations – and even affirmative, assertive discourse per se – begin to ring hollow," form pockets of creativity and imagination that address the apophatic condition of each age (I, p. 31). In such a moment, Franke's monumental anthology on apophatic literature seems a welcome companion to help remind us of the rich traditions prostrate

before what cannot be said and perhaps return us to ourselves in hopes of ending our alienation.

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