Chapter 1
Infinite Distance, Infinitesimal Distance: Negative Theology and *différance*

The emergence of Jacques Derrida’s interest for the topic of prayer can be traced in relation to another problematic topic, that of negative theology. This is confronted in texts such as “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” (1986) and “Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices” (1992). Further attempts of a thematization or cursory references to the subject of prayer can then be identified in the second year of the seminar *The Beast and The Sovereign* [Séminaire La bête et le souverain, Volume II (2002–2003), 2010] and in different interviews and responses released in the early 2000s. Therefore, this topic appears relatively late in Derrida’s articulate philosophical itinerary, in a period – the one approximately starting from the late 80s – where one can appreciate a growing focalization on topics of ethical, political, and also religious connotation.

The relation between prayer and negative theology is of crucial significance and thus should not be overlooked. In fact, it allows us to grasp, in a rather straightforward fashion, the point of insurgence of a problem that will be at the centre of our exposition: the possibility of a different experience of language, of a “saying” exempted from the conditions imposed by the metaphysical logic. In this respect, it also will not be indifferent, for our exposition, the comprehension of a specific debate originated from some Derridean references regarding the relation between negative theology and what he calls “*différance*” – proof, perhaps, that the problem of the language of prayer was never absent but simply *latent*.

In exposing the subject of prayer in Derrida’s philosophy, we are therefore confronted with a problematic and seemingly unavoidable triad: *prayer, negative theology, and différance*. The examination of the latter elements of this triad will be the focus of the Chapter 1. The primary aim will be to comprehend the stakes of the debate on the dissimilarity between *différance* and negative theology. Following Derrida’s fascination for this theological strategy and his analysis of its procedures, we will first examine the most common assumptions on the subject. Then, we will problematize these assumptions.
through a comparison with the central idea of Derrida's thought, *difference*. This will bring us to understand prayer as the most evident point of distinction between negative theology and *difference*.

In *Chapter 2*, we will focus on the different directions taken by the topic of prayer in the philosophy of Derrida after the comments in relation to negative theology. This topic progressively assumes a certain independence; it even comes to be strictly linked to the private experience of the philosopher as a man of prayers, a fact which further complicates a theoretical analysis. Generally speaking, it is a matter of grasping an approach that operates a distinction between an undetermined and a determined form of prayer and appears – at least in a first instance – to assign a certain priority to the former at the expense of the latter. At times, in fact, Derrida seems to be falling victim to some sort of “idealistic desire”. He identifies within the language of prayer a structure that he deems can be fully exonerated from an onto-theological contamination. He calls this *pure prayer* or *prayer in its essence*, defining it as a pure address to other as other, without a determinate content or reference. This identification reduces prayer to a simple apostrophe open to a void.

This view challenges our most common perception of an act which says something to someone. Nonetheless, despite the attention that Derrida turns to this apostrophic essence of prayer, his conclusion is less radical than it seems. At a closer look, in fact, this appreciation for a pure form of prayer is tempered by the realization of an essential interdependence between the undetermined prayer and the determined prayer. In other words, prayer might be certainly non-metaphysical in the way it simply addresses the other, but it owes its existence to the inevitable slippage into metaphysical contamination. Without this failure of the pure apostrophe, there would be no actual prayer, no negative or positive theology.

**The point of departure**

The problem of the affinity between the thinking of *difference* and what the Western tradition has generally called “negative theology” was as quickly hinted at as it was
dismissed by Derrida himself during his seminal lecture “Différance”, held in Paris in 1968 (D 6). Ever since, this has been the topic of abundant discussions.  

Now observed from afar, the rather confused academic battlefield manifests an undeniable polarization of positions with regard to this problematic kinship. In picking up on Derrida’s allusion, scholars have often been hastily drawn to either defend or attack one or the other position, and thus resolve the (dis)equation by pinning down one or the other variable. For some elementary reasons, this is a temptation that needs to be opposed as much as possible. First of all, Derrida rarely faces this problem frontally or in a systematic manner. Throughout his texts— even and especially within the ones he “dedicates” to this subject— the affinity remains quite enigmatic, both différance and negative theology constituting problematic entities rather than evident references. Particularly for what concerns the topic of negative theology, Derrida’s views hardly lend themselves to monolithic readings and categorical stances. Furthermore, there is a distinctive evolution of Derrida’s position on this specific topic. Despite the philosopher’s resentments for questions concerning the “evolution” of his “thought”, this needs to be accounted for, insofar as it inevitably impacts the relation with the thinking of différance.  

It is then clear that an excessive categorizing enthusiasm could easily throw the analysis off track, at once risking annulling the enigmatic quality of the themes and reading Derrida as if he had one single, definitive thesis on them. The obstacles internal to both

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35 “I learned [... ] that my ‘thought’ [...] was ‘in full evolution’. [...] I would benefit greatly from such encouragement [...] if the value ‘evolution’ had not always seemed suspect to me by all the presuppositions it harbours [...], and if, above all, I had not always been wary of ‘thought’. No, it is a question of textual displacements whose course, form, and necessity have nothing to do with the ‘evolution’ of ‘thought’ or the teleology of a discourse” (P 48–49).  
36 This is what Derrida objects to Marion’s reading of his texts at a conference held at Villanova University in 1997: “Marion constantly refers to what I said about negative theology as if I had a thesis, one thesis, phrased in one form through a single voice— concerning the metaphysics of presence, the distinction between position and negation, and so on. Now I think that if time permitted I could show that my texts on the subjects are written texts, by which I mean that they are not a thesis on them. They have a pragmatic
Derrida’s works and the topic of negative theology will always hamper a project of categorical pigeonholing. On the contrary, to privilege as much as possible in the analysis a certain “undecidability” over an unequivocal position means advancing with caution into the essential complexity of the terms of the discourse, while at the same time reading Derrida fruitfully, in his own terms, so to speak. In short, it means capturing a tangential and evolving gesture of re-problematization – of différance, of negative theology, of their relationship and, later on, of prayer – rather than the self-referential unity of one circumscribed position.

In this rather unstable situation, it is convenient to begin by grabbing onto at least one constant. This can be identified in Derrida’s frequently admitted fascination for the movements, the promises and the boldness of negative theology (HAS 82; OD 85; LJL 61). This attraction does not wander in the void, so to speak, but it is linked to a pre-understanding of its object. This would constitute, as Derrida himself suggests, “the fact from which we should indeed start, in relation to which we would be placed-after [post-poséd]” (PS 294). The explicit reference to what Heidegger, at the beginning of Being and Time, calls the Factum of the “ordinary and vague comprehension of Being [Seinverständnis]” is not at all inappropriate. For, even if not with the same pervasiveness of the “dominating comprehension” of the vocabulary of “being”, a certain vague familiarity undoubtedly surrounds the denomination “negative theology”. One tends to speak of it without much perplexity, as if the reference of these two words were glaringly obvious. There is an already available comprehension of the meaning of negative theology, a minimal factum of this terminology. This fact, however precarious and unassured, at least allows the interrogation to take its first steps in order to start questioning the meaning of the expression “negative theology”. This point of departure is, according to Derrida, a pre-comprehension of negative theology as a critique of theology, of ontology and of language (PS 295).  

aspect, a performative aspect that would require another kind of analysis. There is a long displacement of a number of voices, not only in myself, on my side, but on the other side, so to speak, on the side of what I always refer to as ‘what one calls negative theologies’. Each time I address the question of negative theology, I very cautiously put these words in quotation marks, in the plural. […] It is this expression that is for me a problem and not simply a reference” (IN 43).


8 See on this François Nault, “Déconstruction et apophatisme : à propos d’une dénégation de Jacques Derrida” (Laval théologique et philosophique, 55, 3 (1999), 393–411), which appears to be the only article dedicated to the affinity between negative theology and différance to follow Derrida’s suggestion in “Post-
The *factum* of negative theology

Let us start from what we could define as the grounding assumption of negative theology: “God” names a radical transcendsence, an absolute and irreducible alterity; an infinite, abyssal distance separates God from man. Hence the following critical consequence: human *positive* (“cataphatic”) discourse on God is inadequate. An anthropomorphic idiom inevitably restricted to phenomenality cannot hope to grasp a divine nature transcending the phenomenal world. Thus, the essence of the divine remains inaccessible.

All negative theology can be said to play within this dramatic gap, constantly stressing not only the inability of human logico-conceptual apparatus to make God known, but also the risk of reducing him to a being among beings. As Gregory of Nyssa writes in *The Life of Moses*: “Every concept formed in order to reach and encompass the divine nature succeeds only in fashioning an idol of God and not at all in making him known”.39 “God”, for negative theologians, rather indicates an *ineffability*: namely, what cannot be said or expressed according to forms and paradigms belonging to a conceptual dialectic.” Hence the following conclusion: only *negative* (“apophatic”) determinations can really attempt to approach the divine essence. The *Deus ineffabilis* cannot be known in what he *is* but can be known in what he *is not*; with regard to the deity, negations are truer than affirmations, incongruences and discrepancies more adequate than analogies and resemblances.

In the first instance, then, the impossibility to speak, far from reducing the discourse to silence, rather takes the form of an *injunction to speak*. This is the fundamental paradox of negative theology on which Derrida frequently insists. It can be ideally summed up with a play on Wittgenstein’s notorious concluding proposition of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must speak”.41 On the one hand,
the ineffable character of the divinity needs to be protected and maintained; on the other hand, this ineffability needs to be approached and expressed through a proper manipulation of language. This entails the deployment of a discursive strategy of negative determinations which, by a series of apparently interminable exclusions (“God is not…”; “God is neither… nor…”), would have to deny all positive attributions of God, all the divine names, the lowest as well as the highest. Ultimately, this would lead language towards an absolute conceptual rarefaction, and the faithful one towards a silent intuition of the ineffable.42

Interpreted in a slightly less rigorous fashion, this tactic would easily complement all theological activities. As a sort of critical attitude towards conceptual determination, as a corrective principle of intellectual theology, the apophatic instance would simply exclude the possibility of exhausting the numinous nature of the divinity with its formal expression through creatural attributes. In short, it would function as a reminder of God’s absolute Otherness. Nothing of what man can say of God is adequate to the excellence of his essence. As Meister Eckhart writes in one of his sermons: “There is no name we can give God so that it might seem that we have sufficiently praised and honoured him, for God is above names [über namen] and ineffable [unsprechelich]”.43 Every attempt of determination faces the impossibility of capturing his quidditas, since God always exceeds the concept of God. In this sense, it could be rightfully maintained that “all true theology is fundamentally apophatic”.44

At the same time, however, negative theology deals with a concept, that of negation, which carries with itself both the idea of an activity – that is, the process of negating – and of the outcome of this activity – that is, nothing. As it insistently applies this concept to God’s rational attributes, it comes with no surprise that negative theology has frequently been accused or suspected of hiding a secret, of straightforwardly resembling...

Wittgenstein […] Derrida maintains that of what one cannot talk about, one cannot keep quiet either” (Nault, “Déconstruction et apophatisme”, 394).

42 We are here referring – without however privileging, nor suggesting an intrinsic essentiality to an alleged “tradition” of negative theology – to a resolutive “third path” which, by transgressing the battle between the cataphatic and apophatic, would elevate the discourse to a via eminentia. As we shall see, this “third way” will play a determinant role in the discussion between Derrida and Marion regarding the belonging or not-belonging of negative theology to metaphysics.


a profession of atheism, or at least of subverting theology in its most common etymological acceptation (theo-logos, "discourse on/about God").

Insofar as it implies a mystery or a secret which should remain accessible only to the initiates, negative theology would expose itself to an obscurantist reading and to an association to phenomena of esotericism and secret society: “As if access to the most rigorous apophatic discourse demanded the sharing of a ‘secret’ […] and of a place or of a wealth that it would be necessary to conceal from the many. It is as if divulgence imperilled a revelation promised to apophasis” (HAS 88). Simply put, according to Derrida, it would be easy to identify in this form of “mysticism” – in the primitive and general sense of “mysterious”, “hidden” – a mystifying force. For the accusation of atheism, instead, Derrida (through Heidegger) reminds us of Leibniz’s claim that “with every mystery there are some places that are extraordinarily bold, full of difficult metaphors and inclining almost to Godlessness”. More recently, this reproach has been vehemently reiterated by Claude Bruaire:

45 In the exemplary case of Dionysius the Areopagite’s Mystical Theology, to those who go through a process of catharsis and separate themselves from the impure, abandoning all sensation and intellectual activities (Pseudo-Dionysius, The Mystical Theology, 1, 1, 998b-1000a). For the passages of the Corpus Areopagiticum we will generally refer to the translation by Colm Lubheid (Pseudo-Dionysius, The Complete Works [New York: Paulist Press, 1998]). In other instances, especially in Part II, we will choose the direct translation of certain passages by Marion in “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology’”, which will be indicated with [JLM].

46 This critique could be certainly linked, at least to some extent, to a rather circumscribed comprehension of the term “mystikòs” by Derrida. In his analysis of the word, the catholic French theologian Louis Bouyer has identified in the Church Fathers a different utilization, more closely connected to the biblical exegesis (the mystery of the Christ and the allegorical meaning of the Scriptures) and, later on, to the spiritual sphere (“mystic” in direct contrast with “carnal”). In Bouyer's opinion, the term as it is used by Dionysius would then have little to do with its Greek-Neoplatonic meaning of “belonging to the mystery”, “concealed”, “mysterious”. Rather, it would insert itself in a purely Christian and ecclesiastic tradition, designating an interior spiritual experience. However, given the heavy Platonic and Neo-Platonic influence on the Corpus Areopagiticum, there are reasons to express some caution. Furthermore, despite the shift of meaning, undeniably evident in some passages, it is still a matter of a “mystery”, whether this is the purely material mystery of the rite in the “profane Grecism” or the mysterium tremendum et fascinans that guides the mystical theology of Dionysius; it is still a matter of “mystical” experiences which, at least in a first moment, cannot be communicated and explained to the multitude (The Divine Names, III, 684b), or of a divine mystery which needs to be kept free from any contact with or contamination by the profane (The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, 1, 1, 372a). In this sense, an obscurantist reading of negative theology – at least in its exemplary Dionysian version – remains always possible. See Louis Bouyer, “‘Mystique’, Essai sur l’histoire d’un mot”, Supplément de la Vie Spirituelle, 9 (1949), 3–23; and Id., La Spiritualité du Nouveau Testament et des Pères (Paris: Aubier, 1960), 485–496. For a criticism of Bouyer’s position see Jan Vanneste, Le Mystère de Dieu. Essai sur la structure rationnelle de la doctrine du pseudo-Denys l’Areopagite (Bruxelles: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959), 47–48.

It is therefore necessary to assign negative theology its official place, to give it its exact status, apart from the pious sentiments which cover with a sensible outer layer, with religious scraps, the unalterable absolute, sign of the Nothing: negative theology is the negation of all theology. Its truth is atheism.  

If it does not incline directly to atheism, it is evident that, by questioning the adequacy of any kind of *praedicatio in divinis*, negative theology is inevitably characterized by a subversive force which keeps it at the margins of the history of Christianity.

Independent of revelation, of all the literal language of New Testament eventness \([\text{événementalité}]\), of the coming of Christ, of the Passion, of the dogma of the Trinity, etc. An immediate but intuitionless mysticism, a sort of abstract kenosis, frees this language from all authority, all narrative, all dogma, all belief – and at the limit from all faith. (PS 311).

Thus intended, negative theology would subvert any forms of conventional discourse on God. In pursuing a process of negation of all the positive determinations that can be applied to God, it would go as far as denying “God” itself as a final conceivable determination. At a closer look, then, the expression “negative theology” would represent no less than an unsolvable *oxymoron*, “negation” and “theology” reciprocally excluding themselves: the former ultimately depriving the theological science of its object; the latter excluding the possibility itself of an absolute linguistic negativity with regard to God.

Insofar as the apophatic strategy pursues a rigorous erasing of all the conceptual determinations attributed to the deity, it inevitably arrives at questioning the ontological category of *being*. Hence negative theology as a *critique of ontology*, that is, “of the proposition, of the verb ‘be’ in the third person indicative and of everything that, in the determination of the essence, depends on this mood, this time, and this person” (PS 295).

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48 Claude Bruaire, *Le droit de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1974), 21. This passage is also quoted by Marion in *The Idol and Distance*. As we shall soon see, however, according to him this atheistic characterization of negative theology derives from a rather limiting interpretation of negation as an inverted category of the predication concerning an object (ID 147–148).

49 In this sense, Nault speaks of a “performative contradiction” of negative theology that appears to define its procedure (“Déconstruction et apophatisme”, 399).
Quite exemplary, in this sense, some notorious caustic statements one can find in Eckhart’s sermons: “I would be speaking as wrongly in calling God a being [Wesen] as I would in calling the sun pale or black. God is neither this nor that”; or: “If I say ‘God is a being’, that is not true: he is a being beyond being [überschwendes Wesen] and a nothingness beyond being [überwesende Nichtheit]”.50 Here the dissociation between “God” and “being” implies the association of “being” with a creatural determination: “being” means “determinate being”.51 Thus interpreted, the attribute “being” does not belong to the divine being in the same way that it belongs to the creatural beings. It is then a matter of overcoming the ontological instance and proceeding towards a de-existentialisation of the notion of God. This move involves the postulation of a discontinuity between “being” and “God” which is generally marked by a hyperbolism: God beyond being – hyperousios; superesse; überschwendes Wesen – which can assume the multiple meanings of the suffix “beyond”: more being, above being, more than being, no more being.52

An alleged “tradition” of negative theology, while stemming from early Christianity, would then sink its roots in a Platonic and Neoplatonic soil. It would owe much to the hyperbolism of Plato’s formulation of the idea of the Good as ἕπεκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, as well as to Neoplatonic henology. It would then easily inscribe itself within another “tradition” which insistently attempts to mark a heterogeneity in relation to “being”. The influence of this “tradition” can be traced up until Heidegger’s critique of the history of ontology, as well as his writing of Being under erasure in the form of a crossing out (kreuzweise Durchstreichung) and his desire to write a theology where the word “being” would not


51 Within the speculative theology of Meister Eckhart, the ferocious critique of “being” one can find in some sermons and in the Quaestiones Parisienses is only apparently incompatible with the metaphysical thesis of the Opus tripartitum according to which “Being is God [Esse est Deus]” (Prologi in Opus tripartitum n. 12, in Lateinische Werke Band I, ed. Konrad Weiss [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963], 38). It is a matter of distinguishing between two conceptions of “being”: God’s “being” (esse absolutum; esse simpliciter; esse totum et plenum), which does not belong to creatures; creatures’ “being” (esse determinatum; esse hoc et hoc), which does not belong to God. The “being” proper to creatures is the exteriorized esse, divided in the multiplicity of the entia, of the indistinct Esse of the divine Cause. This exteriorization supposes an index of inadequacy between esse producens and esse producendum, absolute Being and formal being. This distinction then allows Eckhart to “detach” God from any creatural determination by either denying of God what is affirmed of creatures, or by denying of creatures what is affirmed of God. In his fundamental study on Eckhart’s negative theology, Vladimir Lossky has quite opportunely denominated this contradictory dialectic “apophasis of opposition” (Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu, 197–207).

52 “The French expression plus d’être (more being, no more being) formulates this equivocation in a fairly economical manner” (HAS 90).

appear. Levinas’ attempt to avoid a contamination by being in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (which is no less than a recovery of the Platonic and Neoplatonic *epokeina tís outhis*), Marion’s envision of a *God Without Being* (which is no less than an attempt to take up the Heideggerian theological challenge) (*GWB* vi), as well as Derrida’s thinking of *difference* (which is no less than a reformulation of Heidegger’s project of destruction of the history of ontology) (*P* 9–10), would represent the most recent manifestations of this longstanding critique of the ontological instance.

To conclude, negative theology as a *critique of language*. Or better: negative theology as a form of language with a specific set of characteristics and, at the same time, a critical attitude towards language. Negative theology is—writes Derrida—“what questions and casts suspicion on the very essence or possibility of language” (*PS* 294), “the most exacting, the most intractable experience of the ‘essence’ of language” (*PS* 299).

The strategy of apophatic determination pushes language to its limits, exhausting it and emptying it of its content. This process of rarefaction is fundamental to negative theology as it allows the discourse to easily lend itself to formalization. At the same time, however, this exhaustion of idiomatic content allows for reproduction, mechanization and falsification. For this reason, Derrida can maintain that a “family resemblance” of negative theology would be easily traceable in any discourse deploying, in a more or less insistent manner, this exhausting rhetoric of apophatic attributions and determinations. A rhetoric of this type would cross the thresholds of a theology, being applicable to every textual practice recurring to, and pushing to its limits, a logico-discursive procedure of the type “*x* is not”, “*x* is not this”, “*x* is neither this nor that” (*HAS* 74; *PS* 310).

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54 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §6, 41–49; *Id.*, *Zur Seinsfrage* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1956), 31; and *Id.*, *Seminar*, in *Gesamtausgabe Band 15* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1986), 437.
Simultaneously, however, this kind of strategy would have the opposite effect of leading every discourse to a form of theology. Once the apophatic rhetoric is pushed to the limit, every discourse would easily resemble a negative theology. “God” would name and represent this endless emptying of language, at once the τέλος and the αρχή of this negativity. As Derrida writes:

Every time I say: X is neither this nor that, [...] I would start to speak of God, under this name or another. God's name would then be the hyperbolic effect of that negativity or all negativity that is consistent in its discourse. God's name would suit everything that may not be broached, approached, or designated, except in an indirect and negative manner. Every negative sentence would already be haunted by God or by the name of God [...] If there is a work of negativity in discourse and predication, it will produce divinity [...]. Not only would atheism not be the truth of negative theology; rather, God would be the truth of all negativity. (HAS 76).

On the one hand, then, the sheer pervasiveness of the apophatic procedure, its possible application to a wide variety of textual practices. On the other, its theological insistence: every discourse persistently recurring to negative determinations would be, potentially, a discourse on God.

The relation with différence

Derrida's fascination for negative theology certainly does not imply a straightforward analogy with what he calls “différance”. Nonetheless, it is quite easy to comprehend his general interest in the topic, as well as the early accusations of resifting its discursive strategies that are turned to him. At a first glance, the thinking of différence and negative theology, despite the different theoretical provenances and historic vocabularies, seem to share a somewhat intimate relationship. But to what extent? On the one hand, it is certainly possible to identify a “deconstructive” gesture within negative theology, in the sense of a destabilisation of the construction of intellectual theology; on the other hand,

it would also be tempting to interpret the thinking of différance as some sort of modern form of negative theology. With a gesture justified by the sheer insistence and radicalness of the apophatic strategy, one could easily substitute “God” with what Derrida denominates as “différance”. In addition to this, the thinking of différance too consists in a critique of the theological and ontological instance, as well as in a critical reflexion on the structure of the linguistic sign. Finally, a certain boldness and hyperbolism characterize the meaning of this peculiar neologism.

The term “différance” needs to be understood within the context of Derrida’s critique of metaphysics in the light of Heidegger’s reflections. In an interesting passage of an interview dating back to 1967, Derrida sheds some light on this context. He first acknowledges his debt to Heidegger, by admitting that all his philosophical attempts “would not have been possible without the opening of Heidegger’s questions”. He refers in particular to what the German philosopher calls the ontico-ontological difference, that is to say, the irreducible difference between Being and beings (P 9). At the same time, however, this debt justifies a deconstructive approach turned to Heidegger himself, in order to highlight the metaphysical presuppositions underlying his texts:

Heidegger recognizes that economically and strategically he had to borrow the syntactic and lexical resources of the language of metaphysics, as one always must do at the very moment that one deconstructs this language. Therefore we must work to locate these metaphysical holds, and to reorganize uneasingly the form and sites of our questioning. Now, among these holds, the ultimate determination of difference as the ontico-ontological difference – however necessary and decisive this phase may be – still seems to me, in a strange way, to be in the grasp of metaphysics. Perhaps then, moving along lines that would be more Nietzschean than Heideggerian, by going to the end of this thought of the truth of Being, we would have to become open to a différance that is no longer determined, in the language of the West, as the difference between Being and beings. (P 10).

Derrida operates within the space opened up by Heidegger’s questions. However, Derrida’s own questions further attempt to identify in Heidegger’s writings the signs of a relapse, that is to say of an attempt to escape the regime of metaphysics which still falls back into metaphysics. For Derrida, it is then necessary to become aware of some sort of ineffaceable metaphysical trace which marks our questioning and incessantly compels us to reorganize our questions. The ontological difference itself – which for Heidegger
represents what metaphysics has not thought and therefore calls it into question – still constitutes, for Derrida, an expression of the metaphysical discourse. After all, as Heidegger himself recognized, the words “difference”, “Being” and “beings” are still words of the language of metaphysics; in the moment of the “destruction of the history of ontology” – according to the expression of Being and Time – one is still forced to employ the linguistic resources of metaphysics. Consequently, the overcoming of metaphysics requires the total abandonment of metaphysical language, perhaps as it happens only in some of Nietzsche’s boldest works. Only then – suggests Derrida – we will be able to go to the end of the question of the truth of Being and think a “difference” that is not constituted as the difference between Being and beings.

With respect to Heidegger’s questioning, Derrida attempts to take a step back. The neologism “différance”, in his intentions, should allow one to depart from the constraints of metaphysics, or at least to indicate such a possible departure. This is accompanied by a wider reassessment of the identity of metaphysics: if for Heidegger metaphysics means forgetfulness of the ontological difference, for Derrida metaphysics is to be identified with what he calls phono-logocentrism. His fundamental assumption is that the whole philosophical tradition is determined by a peculiar conception of the voice (phoné) and its expression, of speech and writing. From Socrates to Heidegger himself, philosophers have systematically privileged speech – intended as an authentic communication, as a discourse where the locutors are present to themselves, a discourse whose meaning is immediately accessible and expressed – over writing – considered as a banal transcription of what one could say, a second-hand report whose meaning changes over time and that lacks the interaction and the immediacy of the spoken conversation.

It is starting from this point that Derrida highlights how all the binary oppositions typical of our culture (soul/body, subject/object, man/animal, rational/irrational) somehow derive from this original opposition between voice and writing. One could say that all the binary oppositions are a form of phonocentrism, insofar as they are characterized by the pre-eminence of one term – generally considered as more present, more immediate – over the other. All metaphysical thought is for Derrida exactly this: privileging one thing at the cost of another. The binary oppositions that Derrida

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57 Heidegger, Being and Time, §6, 41.

58 It must be noted that, already in this early interview, Derrida appears quite sceptical about the actual possibility of overcoming metaphysics: “Such a departure is doubtless not possible today, but one could show how it is in preparation. In Heidegger, first of all” (P 10).
strenuously attempts to deconstruct in his works are the outcome of the way in which Western culture has conceived language in a dualistic manner: the voice as the signified, the meaning, the soul of discourse; writing as the expression of the voice, the tangible body of the signified.

What Derrida attempts to illustrate with the neologism *différance* is, in a certain way, the overturning of this privilege of voice over writing. Interestingly enough, however, it is exactly in this endeavour of going beyond the ontological difference, beyond the privilege accorded to the phoné, with a Nietzschean more than Heideggerian courage, that Derrida’s discourse moves along the lines of another traditional discourse of Western thought, that of negative theology.

*Différance* – writes Derrida in his seminal lecture “Différance” – exceeds the order of sensibility and intelligibility, it opposes this opposition; it also exceeds the theoretical order of discourse and the metaphysical concepts of presence and absence; in fact, it exceeds any conceptual determinations insofar as “it” “is” the quasi-transcendental condition of their deployment, the movement which transports the opposition between sensibility and intelligibility, what makes possible truth and false, presence and absence and so on (D 5–6). According to the constitution of the linguistic sign as it is exposed by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistic,*

60 *différance* would represent the problematic line between the differential phenomena of signified and signifier (*S*/I). This line is the “a” of *différance*: neither a signified (concept, idea, meaning) nor a signifier (word, name, graphic or phonetic material), neither said nor heard, but decisive in its sheer undecidability, the very condition of possibility of every signified and signifier.

Therefore, as the systematic and undecidable play of differences between signified and signifier, *différance* is neither a concept – as it is rather the possibility itself of the constitution of any concept or system of concepts – nor a word – that is to say, “what is

*60 Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistic,* trans. by Roy Harris (Illinois: Open Court, 1983).

61 In French the word “difference” is written with the “e” (*différence*), not with the “a” (*différance*). However, this substitution is not audible in French and can only be perceived in writing. The vocal expression is determined by a writing gesture, thus overturning the traditional phonocentrism.

On the often misunderstood and misrepresented term “undecidable”, let us refer to what Derrida said during an interview in 1998: “I hesitate to use the word *undecidable* now because it has too often been interpreted, in ridiculous fashion, as paralysis, hesitation, neutralisation, in the negative sense. For me, the undecidable is the condition of any decision, of any event […]. The undecidable, and all the other values that may be associated with it, are anything but negative, paralysing and immobilising. For me it is exactly the contrary” (*Sur parole: instantanés philosophiques* [La Tour d’Aigues: Éditions de l’Aube, 1999], 52–53).
generally represented as the calm, present, and self-referential unity of concept and phonic material” (D 11).

Given that *différance* is neither a word nor a concept, a semantic of it would be, strictly speaking, impossible. Nonetheless, Derrida approximates an analysis which links the term to the two values of the Latin *differre: to defer* – to temporize, to delay, “to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfilment of ‘desire’ or ‘will’” (D 8); *to differ* – to diverge, to deviate, to be different and other, hence *making space*, producing an interval between two elements. “*Difference as temporization, différance as spacing*” (D 9), where the ending –*ance*, however, denotes an undecidability between the active and the passive meaning of this deferring-differing.

It is then clear that its ontological precedence as well as its transcendental role put *différance* in contact with the *Denum ineffabilis* of negative theology. Furthermore, the language with which Derrida speaks of *différance* – as well as the hesitation, the paradox of speaking of what cannot be conceptually expressed – recalls the one through which negative theologians have traditionally spoken of their God. This resemblance was pointed out quite early by an interlocutor during the discussion that followed the lecture on “*Différance*” in 1968: “I began to wonder what this *différance* might be, in short, it is the source of everything. It the source of everything and one cannot know it: it is the God of negative theology”. Derrida’s immediate sharp answer – “it is and it is not… It is above all not” (OD 84) – indicated more a divergence than a straightforward juxtaposition of the two discourses. And even though “this infinite distance is also an infinitesimal distance” (OD 85), at the beginning of his lecture Derrida had expressly highlighted a clear difference between the two forms of thoughts. Let us quote this passage in its entirety:

So much so that the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. Already we have had to delineate that *difference is not, does not exist, is not a present-being (on), in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything that it is not, that is everything and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. And yet those aspects of *difference* which are thereby delineated are not theological, nor even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which as one knows are always concerned with
disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being. (D 6).

Derrida admits the existence of an undeniable syntactical similarity between différance and negative theology. Both discourses deploy a strategy of denial which recurs to a series of “neither… nor…” in order to break down the apparent solidity of propositional language, thus asserting its constitutive inadequacy. In this sense, the thinking of différance and negative theology deal with the same issue – that of naming without naming, speaking without speaking – and with at least similar, paradoxical and ineffable objects – a word or concept that is neither a word nor a concept (différance), and an ineffable transcendence that has neither existence nor essence (God). Hence the general criticism to which the philosopher consciously exposed himself.

Nevertheless, at this early stage of his reflexion, Derrida thinks that the similarities go no further than these. In order to defend the thinking of différance from an assimilation to negative theology, the philosopher launches an offensive that has become paradigmatic and, if proven to be true, would strike a fatal blow to negative theology’s purpose and significance. Contrary to différance – he claims – negative theology would remain, even and especially in its most radical manifestations, a mode of positive theology. This discourse, in fact, would deny all the attributes of God simply in order to affirm its presence in a more eminent way. In this sense, the negative moment of negative theology would rather represent a disguised positivity. Through a paradoxical hyperbole, the phenomenal deletion transmutes itself into an hyper-affirmation. It is for this precise reason that negative theology cannot be negative all the way down as différance is. Even in its most radical forms, when it denies the predicate of “being”, it does so in order to reaffirm hyperbolically a superessentiality, a higher and more eminent mode of being.

The Derridean critique could not be more radical and clearly dissociates the meaning of différance from that of negative theology. First of all, différance is not theological: it is not concerned with any postulation of an occult and superior being, even if this being is beyond being or any other categories; it does not let itself be enclosed and determined as a thing or a present-being in general; and it is not oriented by any kind of divine télos, but rather lets itself be delineated by an “adventurous strategy”, a “strategy without
finality” (D 7). It is not even an arkhé as the interlocutor pointed out: “To ask about différance a question of origin or a question of essence, to ask oneself ‘What is it?’ is to return abruptly to the closure which I am attempting, with difficulty, laboriously and obliquely, to ‘leave’” (OD 85). In the lecture, right after the remark on negative theology, Derrida affirms that there is no place, principle or origin from which it is possible to trace the “sheaf” of différance: “For what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility” (D 6). Secondly, différance is hardly negative in the same sense of negative theology: the latter would negate in order to disengage an ineffable hyperousious, while the former would exceed the metaphysical order of discourse “without dissimulating itself as something, as a mysterious being in the occult of a nonknowledge” (D 6).

Therefore, the similarities between the two would be limited to the mere utilization of negative locutions, thereby confirming the ubiquity of the apophatic procedure and the family resemblance of negative theology to every discourse pushing a rhetoric of this kind to its limits. In this sense, the thinking of différance would be no more similar to negative theology than any other discourse recurring to apophatic attributions and determinations. Most significantly, by reinstating the category of presence in a more eminent way, negative theology represents the culmination of metaphysics as onto-theology. This is the very framework which, in Derrida’s mind, the thinking of différance should deconstruct. Différance, instead, having no theological inclination, constitutes nothing more than the playing movement of infinite differences and deferrals opening the time-space of the unfolding of language. These differences and deferrals “do not find their cause in a subject or a substance, in a thing in general, a being that is somewhere present, thereby eluding the play of différance” (D 11). Thus, insofar as negative theology is inscribed in language, différance invariably includes it and deconstructs it: “Différance is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological – ontotheological – reappropriation,

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61 The closure Derrida is referring to is that of the history metaphysics. Différance, as production of the differing/deferring, “would be more ‘originary’, but one would no longer be able to call it ‘origin’ or ‘ground’; those notions belonging essentially to the history of onto-theology, to the system functioning as the effacing of difference” (OG 23).

62 And further on: “If we accepted the form of the question, in its meaning and its syntax (’what is?’ ‘who is?’ ‘who is it that?’), we would have to conclude that différance has been derived, has happened, is to be mastered and governed on the basis of the point of a present being, which itself could be some thing, a form, a state, a power in the world to which all kinds of names might be given, a what, or a present being as a subject, a who” (D 15).

but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology – philosophy – produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding without return" (D, 6).

Despite their syntactic similarities, Derrida’s neologism and negative theology show some obvious semantic incompatibilities. Is then différence the God of negative theology, as stressed by the interlocutor in the audience? Yes and no: it is, at least at a syntactical level; and, above all, it is not, at a semantic level.

“Negative theology”

The brief remark during the 1968 lecture in Paris was not sufficient to dismiss the association of différence with negative theology. Quite the contrary, in fact, as it had the immediate effect of multiplying the questions on this rather strange affinity and on Derrida’s analysis of negative theology as “onto-theology-to-be-deconstructed”. Evidently, Derrida’s avoidance of dealing with the subject in the two decades that separate the lecture “Différance” from another lecture, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials”, did not help his case. At the beginning of the latter address, in Jerusalem in 1987, he admits that his response to the accusations of simply rehashing the strategies of negative theology “has always been brief, elliptical, and dilatory” (HAS 77); that he objected in vain to these accusations, always responding with a promise: “One day I would have to stop deferring, one day I would have to try to explain myself directly on this subject, and at last to speak of “negative theology” itself, assuming that such thing exists. Has that day come?” (HAS 82). Once again, yes and no.

“How to Avoid Speaking: Denegations” is a polysemous and oblique text to say the least. It would be certainly misleading – or at least reductive and simplistic – to

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[64] Mark C. Taylor has first proposed a different translation of the subtitle of this lecture: “How to Avoid Speaking: Denegations”. This choice has the virtue of preserving and better capturing the duplicity of the French term “dénégation”, in which “affirmation and negation are conjoined without being united or synthesized” (Mark C. Taylor, “nO nOt nO”, in Derrida and Negative Theology, 175). This version is also kept by Jeffrey L. Kosky in his translation of Marion’s “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology’”, a contribution to the conference “Religion and Postmodernism”, held at Villanova University in September 1997. In a note he explains this choice in quite a clear fashion: “It is not simply a matter of denying that one, be it deconstruction or ‘negative theology’, does something, be it predicate of God or ‘negative theology’; rather, at issue is whether or not in claiming not to speak about X, or in denying that they do Y, negative theology and/or deconstruction are in fact speaking about X, doing Y” (IN 48–49n7).
interpret it solely as a “direct” explanation on negative theology. On the contrary, within the text one has often the impression that the problematic of negative theology represents just a pretext, a sort of springboard for Derrida to treat other related subjects: the promise, the secret, prayer. Once again, the Derridean discourse does not lend itself to a systematic reading and one needs to carefully navigate through its detours. Here more than elsewhere, however, this tangentiality is justified by the now recognized inherent complexity of the subject. Especially in this sense, “How to Avoid Speaking” signals an important change of perspective in the Derridean analysis of negative theology. One could certainly speak of an evolution, insofar as contrary to the early remarks in “Diffrance”, around this time Derrida begins to express a certain dissatisfaction with his rather monolithic reading of negative theology. As a consequence, he radically problematizes its relationship with the thinking of différance.

Two problems arising from Derrida’s text will particularly interest us here: the first concerns the nature and identity of the subject (“what to speak of”); the second concerns the appropriateness of the discursive modality that should approach the subject (“how to speak of”).

As for what concerns the identity of the so-called “negative theology”, Derrida contests the unity, the solidarity, and the legitimacy of this designation. Now put in quotation marks, “negative theology” represents a rather loose heading, a textual practice whose historical unity is very hard to delimit, a pluralized and heterogeneous project which cannot be restricted or attributed to any historical figure, as exemplary as this might be. Who, in fact, asks Derrida, has ever assumed a project of this kind, “reclaiming it in the singular under this name, without subjugating and subordinating it, without at least pluralizing it?” (HAS 131). It is undeniably relevant that even within Dionysius’ *The Mystical Theology* – the figure and text around which one normally attempts to organize a “tradition” of “negative theology” – the formula suffers from a general indeterminacy. Marion, among others, has highlighted on different occasions that Dionysius employs nothing which can actually be translated as “negative theology” (*ID* 145; *IN* 21; *V&R* 104). As a matter of fact, the two words appear together only once, as the heading of a chapter.

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65 In a letter to John Leavey Jr., dated 1982, he expresses this change of perspective in the following terms: “[…] am quite convinced of the need for a rigorous and differentiated reading of anything advanced under this title (negative theology). My fascination at least testifies to this, right through my incompetence: in effect I believe that what is called ‘negative theology’ (a rich and very diverse corpus) does not let itself be easily assembled under the general category of ‘onto-theology-to-be-deconstructed’” (LJL 61).
(which is likely an addition of the redactor), in the plural ("negative theologies") and — most importantly — without separating these apophatic theologies from the affirmative theologies.\footnote{The title of the chapter reads: “Which are the affirmative theologies and which are the negative [tones of kataphatikai theologai, tines ai apophatikai]” (Pseudo-Dionysius, \textit{The Mystical Theology}, III).}

Derrida, for his part, does not push himself as far as Marion in saying that, for these series of reasons, the formula has no historical legitimacy whatsoever and most probably constitutes a modern invention (IN 21). Nonetheless, he might have certainly agreed with this statement. In fact, throughout his lecture in Jerusalem he advocates for a radical change of perspective which prevents the formalization of a determinate “tradition”. The purely quidditative question of the “what”, now first requires a conditional “if”. It is not a matter of asking \textit{what} negative theology is, but rather \textit{if} there is \textit{one} negative theology, \textit{the} negative theology. The definite article would imply the assurance of a signified, the existence of a determinate “thing”, “idea” or “concept” neatly distinct from others, which one could confidently indicate as “negative theology”. However, as we have seen, there are reasons to question the solidity of a stable meaning which the formula would refer to.

At the outset of this chapter, we have highlighted how this heading lends itself to the most different and often opposite interpretations: corrective principle of intellectual theology, form of obscurantism, subversion of theology, profession of atheism, critique of the ontological instance, experience of the essence of language. Now, we are faced with the uncertainty of a historical legitimacy of this expression. In front of all this indeterminacy Derrida cannot but ask: “Are there sure criteria available to decide the belonging, virtual or actual, of a discourse to negative theology? […] Is there, to take up again an expression of Mark Taylor, a ‘classic’ negative theology? […] Where are the ‘classic’ frontiers of negative theology?” (PS 288).\footnote{Taylor’s expression can be found in “nO nOt nO”, 176.}

It is impossible not to notice here the typical Derridean deconstructive gesture that questions the possibility itself of enclosing the object of thought into a self-evident identity.

It is the idea itself of an identity or a self-interiority of every tradition \textit{(the one} metaphysics, \textit{the one} ontotheology, \textit{the one} phenomenology, \textit{the one} Christian revelation, \textit{the one} history itself, \textit{the one} history of being, \textit{the one} epoch, \textit{the one} tradition, self-identity in general, the one, etc.)
that finds itself contested at its root. (PS 311).
It is a matter for Derrida of dis-enclosing the presupposed identity, that is to say, of reopening it to its non-identity (its difference), remobilizing the energies and tensions which animate it, restoring it to its most proper potentialities.68 In this sense, “negative theology” would represent, at once, an exemplary manifestation of this closure of the object of thought (the one negative theology, the classic negative theology), and “one of the most remarkable manifestations of this self-difference” (PS 311).

It then seems that both the signifier and the signified of “negative theology” are rather problematic. In its simple singularity this heading would betray an “original” plurality of the terminology (as well as a rather explicit relation with the positive theologies), and imply a non-existent unity at the level of its meaning. This essentially entails two things. Firstly, that the genericity of the designation “negative theology” may be the cause itself of the confusion that surrounds it: for instance, its assimilation with the thinking of difference; or, by the same token, its dismissal by Derrida as a concealed and refined hyperaffirmation of a being beyond being. If one agrees on the fundamentally enigmatic nature of the label “negative theology”, then one needs to take into consideration the possibility that both Derrida’s antagonists and Derrida himself might be misguided, for the simple reason that they might be shooting their arrows towards the wrong target. Secondly, this could mean that perhaps there is at the heart of “negative theology” “a voluminous and nebulous multiplicity of potentials to which the single expression ‘negative theology’ yet remains inadequate” (HAS 82). In other words, if there is something like a “canonical” or “exoteric” tradition of negative theology, one cannot discard the possibility of an “apocryphal” or “esoteric” “negative theology”.69 It is no longer a matter here of associating negative theology to phenomena of esotericism, but rather to unveil, under the enigmatic quality of the heading, previously hidden and unknown resources.

68 In this sense, deconstruction could be seen as none other than a form of profanation in view of an expropriation. On the idea of profanation as a restitution of the object of thought to its common use see Giorgio Agamben, Profanations, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007). On the interpretation of deconstruction as a form of profanation, see Patrick O’Connor, Derrida: Profanations (London: Continuum, 2010), 60–83.
The irrepressible metaphysics

A second, more radical difficulty raised by Derrida in “How to Avoid Speaking” concerns the modality of treatment of the subject. More precisely, it concerns the possibility itself of speaking of *différance* and “negative theology” without implicitly or explicitly recurring to the terminology, the discursive strategies, the syntax, the semantic – or, in one word, the *language* – which these discourses at the same time criticise and attempt to overcome.

This is the crucial problem of a *metaphysical reappropriation* of the discourse which Derrida inherits directly from Heidegger. According to the latter, metaphysics is *onto-theology*: that is, first of all, forgetfulness of the ontological difference between Being and beings; and, as a consequence, strenuous research of the most universal ground through an *onto-logy* (Being as *logos*, *substance, subject*) or of the highest ground through a *theo-logy* (Being as *causa prima, causa sui*). At the end of his lecture entitled “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics” [“Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik”, 1957], Heidegger poses the issue of a metaphysical reappropriation in the terms of a limit internal to the structure itself of Western languages. A step back (*Schritt zurück*) is required for thought to move away from metaphysics and grasp the essence of metaphysics.

The path that needs to be trodden is the one from the forgetfulness of the ontological difference to the difference itself, from the onto-theo-logical foundation of metaphysics to the di-vergence (*Austrag*) of Being and beings. However, this step back of thought is perilously compromised by the constitution itself of the language with which thought expresses this step. The risk indicated by Heidegger is that this step remained unaccomplished, and untrod the path that it should open, or that this path is enclosed once again by the “irrepressible metaphysics [der fortbestehenden Metaphysik]”.70

The difficulty thus lies in language, claims Heidegger. This indicates an opportunity or a necessity: a non-metaphysical utterance is required in order to express the step back into the essence of metaphysics in an appropriate manner. At least since *Being and Time*, Heidegger has perceived this issue as a necessity, without however being able to attempt an articulation of a non-metaphysical language perhaps until the latest contributions published within the *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (1989).71 Nonetheless, he is aware that, in spite

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of any attempts, the essence of Western languages could be definitively shaped by onto-theology and thus inseparable from a metaphysical structure. For this reason, at the end of the aforementioned lecture on the constitution of metaphysics, he can only indicate the need to maintain this an open question:

The difficulty lies in language. Our Western languages are languages of metaphysical thinking, each in its own way. It must remain an open question whether the essence of Western languages is in itself marked with the exclusive brand of metaphysics, and thus marked permanently by onto-theology, or whether these languages offer other possibilities of utterance – and that means at the same time of a saying not-saying [das sagende Nichtsagen].

One should not overlook Heidegger’s rather cursory reference to a saying not-saying (das sagende Nichtsagen) in the moment when it is a matter of understanding whether there exist other, non-metaphysical, possibilities of utterance. With this peculiar expression – rather unusual within his vast opus – he seems to touch upon a point that is central to our exposition of the problematic of negative theology and, later on, of prayer. This saying not-saying is not exactly a silence, however eloquent this may be; it is not even that “proper silence”, to which Heidegger alludes in the “Letter on ‘Humanism’”, in direct opposition to a “precipitate expression”. It is nonetheless clear the oppositional relation of the saying not-saying to the propositional or predicative character of metaphysical language, of which Heidegger often laments the limits.

In what appears as the only other instance where a similar expression is employed, Heidegger writes:

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72 Heidegger, Identity and Difference, 73 (trans. modified).
73 In reference to this passage and the expression “saying not-saying”, Marion writes: “Thus the theme of ‘negative theology’ has resurfaced in philosophy in recent years, at least in a vague manner. Among other indications, one can cite Heidegger, who was unable to avoid ‘comparing’ the step back of the thought of presence toward that of giving (Geben) ‘with the method of negative theology’” ([V/102]. For the comparison Marion refers to Martin Heidegger, “Protocole à un séminaire sur la conférence Zeit und Sein”, Questions IV, ed. Jean Beaufret (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 83. As we shall see in the following chapter, the Heideggerian formula has many affinities with what Marion calls denomination (denomination), a function of speech that, in his opinion, is incarnated by the language of praise.

74 “‘Everything depends upon this alone, that the truth of being come to language and that thinking attain to this language. Perhaps, then, language requires much less precipitate expression than proper silence. But who of us today would want to imagine that his attempts to think are at home on the path of silence?’” (Martin Heidegger, Pathmarks, ed. William McNeill [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press], 261–262).
Supremely thoughtful utterance does not consist simply in growing taciturn when it is a matter of saying what is properly to be said; it consists in saying the matter in such a way that is named in not-saying [im Nichtsagen genannt wird]. The utterance of thinking is a telling silence [Erscheinen]. Such utterance corresponds to the most profound essence of language, which has its origin in silence.78

To name in not-saying; to say in not-saying. The step back into the essence of metaphysics requires a rather peculiar transformation of language. This transformation, however, cannot simply stand in perfect opposition to Western languages: “We are instead witnessing a transformation of language that, because language always stands in a relation to previous language, cannot simply turn its back on what has gone before”.79 To the loquacity of the metaphysical saying, one cannot merely substitute the quiescence of silence. In other words, the saying not-saying is still a modality of the saying; it is still, as Heidegger indicates, a possibility of utterance offered by the metaphysical languages. This passage to a saying not-saying certainly entails a distancing from the typically metaphysical priority accorded to the predicative dimension of discourse. Nonetheless, it is still a matter of saying, of naming. Hence the risk of a metaphysical reappropriation; hence the question that needs to remain open.

In the economy of our discourse on différance and “negative theology”, the difficulty expressed by Heidegger presents itself in the following terms: how to speak suitably of différance and “negative theology”? How to name them? Which for Derrida means: how to avoid speaking of différance and “negative theology”? In other words: how to avoid an onto-theological reappropriation of différance and of the God of “negative theology”?2

As we have previously seen, différance is a word or concept that is neither a word nor a concept, “something” that has no relation with the categories of being, essence or

79 Robert Bernasconi, The Question of Language in Heidegger’s History of Being, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1985), 87. Bernasconi comments further: “The transformation of language is a passage into a “saying not-saying”. This does not mean only a passage away from the priority accorded to the assertion. The ‘not’ of ‘not-saying’ is the ‘not’ of the lack of a word of Being in the way in which it permeates all language. A-letheia says ‘unconcealment’, but at the same time says this pervasive concealment” (ibid.). A few pages further, instead, he draws a comparison with the language of negative theology: “Heidegger’s way with language is akin to that of negative theology insofar as it speaks by denial and renunciation. It is, however, much more than this. The ‘saying not-saying’ cannot be reduced to the assertion and negation of one and the same proposition in quick succession. It is an invitation to a certain kind of reading where we hear first the metaphysical at work throughout language and then in a second reading the silence, the concealment, that resounds in it” (ibid., 93).
presence, does not arise from them nor points toward them in an eminent and supreme way. In Derrida’s opinion difference would include onto-theology, as it represents the opening event of the space itself where something like onto-theology can take place. Nonetheless, Derrida admits that a movement of ontotheological reappropriation of difference cannot be entirely discarded. Actually, he maintains that it remains irrepressible and “doubtless inevitable insofar as one speaks, precisely, in the element of logic and of onto-theological grammar” (HAS 79). This metaphysical hold might imply, at a first instance, a general failure of the Derridean project of deconstruction of the history of ontology. Or better, a recognition of the impossibility of such a project. Difference itself would remain a metaphysical name for the simple reason of being a name (D 26). Secondly, and more specifically, the metaphysical reappropriation would allow for a theologization of difference: “One can always say: hyperessentiality is precisely that, a supreme Being who remains incommensurate to the being of all that is, which is nothing, neither present nor absent, and so on” (HAS 79). Simply put, difference would represent another name for “God”, a grounding and transcendent causa sui. The phantoms of negative theology would once again haunt every discourse recurring, in a rather insistent manner, to negative determinations. As Derrida writes, “God would be the truth of all negativity” (HAS 76).

For what regards “negative theology”, instead, to speak of it according to the economy of predicative discourse would seem to represent a contradiction in term. One would in fact utilize the form of language that negative theology constantly attempts to subvert. Consequently, it would seem impossible to speak of “negative theology” without practicing ourselves a form of “negative theology” and thus proceed to a rarefaction of language. One is constrained to speak of it according to its modes, “in a way that is at once impotent, exhausting, and inexhaustible”. For this reason, Derrida asks: “Is there ever anything other than a ‘negative theology’ of ‘negative theology’?” (HAS 83).

“Negative theology” would subsume any attempt to speak of it not according to its rhetoric of apophatic determinations. At the same time, this theological language would remain inseparable from what Derrida generally refers to as the “ontological wager of hyperessentiality” or “the promise of presence” (HAS 78–79). This thirst for presence would manifest itself in what Ernesto Laclau has determined as the “historical limit” of mystical discourse in general: that is to say, “in most cases, its having surrendered to the
temptation of giving a positive content to that ‘beyond’ – the positive content being dictated not by mystical experience itself but by the religious persuasion of the mystic”.

Prayer’s difference

These lengthy considerations on the what and the how of différance and “negative theology” surely soften a sharp distinction between the two. It clearly remains some undecidability, and throughout “How to Avoid Speaking”, Derrida is very cautious in considering that not only the name of “negative theology” might create confusions and hide some unknown resources, but also that both différance and “negative theology” remain inevitably exposed to the risk of an onto-theological reappropriation.

Nonetheless, for Derrida it remains impossible to negate the ontological wager of negative theology which inscribes it within onto-theology. At least for what concerns a few of the most paradigmatic figures that can be ascribed to an alleged tradition of negative theology, the insistent reference to a hyperessentiality cannot be considered accidental. How to deny the role of this being beyond being (hyperousious) in the discourse of negative theology? How to deny the promise, and thus the privilege, of presence that leads to divine union and accompanies the apophatic voyage? Accordingly, just like in the early “Différence”, in “How to Avoid Speaking” Derrida criticizes the hyperessential wager and restates negative theology’s belonging to the space of the onto-theological promise (HAS 78–79; 132).

The thinking of différance, on the contrary, by remaining alien to the intuition of the ineffable which guides the apophatic strategies, would remain extraneous to this wager. The risk of an onto-theological reappropriation is always possible, as Derrida admits. However, it is exactly on this point that one can trace the most substantial difference between the two discourses. We can sum it up as follows: what for difference represents a risk – or, as Derrida says, “a question that needs to remain at the heart of a thinking of différance” (HAS 79), an uncertainty inscribed in the metaphysical essence of Western languages – is already a factuality in the discourse of “negative theology”. And the place

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where Derrida traces this onto-theological factuality is the 
prayer which, at the beginning of 
Dionysius’ The Mystical Theology, orients and determines the apophasic journey.

Ultimately, then, prayer constitutes the most evident point of distinction between 

différance and “negative theology”. One does not pray to différance, whereas – as we shall 
now see – one needs to invoke the Trinity beyond being in order to be uplifted to the 
mystical summits. This seems to put the two discourses at an infinite distance between 
one another: the deconstructionist rhetoric lacks a devotional horizon within its 
procedures; the apophatic rhetoric, instead, must be guided by a prayer which gives 
purpose to the otherwise empty raving of its mechanical negations.

However, right in the moment when one would think to have finally put an end to 
the discussion, here sneaks in a further issue which once again shortens the distance. As 
while there are certainly reasons to believe that the prayer’s guidance supplements 
Dionysian apophatics with a positive dogmatic content, one is also confronted with the 
issue of a certain “religious” fervour of Derrida, who has somewhat frequently referred 
to prayer in his texts and admitted being a man of prayers and tears (C 188). The problem 
of the affinity between différance and “negative theology”, then, is somehow not entirely 
solved, but rather shifted, reformulated. It is now a matter of understanding another 
affinity, between what appear to be two different prayers: the one represented by the 
invocation to the Trinity at the beginning of The Mystical Theology, on one side; the one 
theorized and perhaps practiced by the Arab-Jew Derrida, on the other.

The problem of prayer then enters the analysis of “How to Avoid Speaking” in 
order to mark the distinction between the thoughts of différance and “negative theology”. 
However, from this indication it immediately gains space, progressively taking different 
directions within the Derridean reflection.