

## ONE

### *Introduction: Denegation and Resentment*

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It should be no surprise that we here address the question of the role of negation and of negative theology in contemporary thought. Why should there not be an increasing captivation with negation in a modern epoch characterized as it is by its difference with a classical age in which the energy of synthesis and perception of unity was so necessary to forming its consciousness of self and world? Isn't it inevitable (or, as Derrida would emphasize, "ineluctable"<sup>1</sup>) that modernity's understandable concern with difference, discontinuity, and the novelty of an evolving, unfolding, unfinished (and unfinishable) experience should issue in a progressive sensitivity to and wariness of all positive terms, predications, equations, adequations? Formerly trapped within a statically hierarchial vision of the world and having won a costly freedom from a transcendently determined world structure, our autonomy is most characteristically expressed in its capacity to exceed all centrally defined and anticipatable limits and boundaries. Naturally, we could say, negation in all its forms would haunt modern attempts at (self-)definition. Nor do we want our longing to exceed and to overcome prescribed limits to be

itself anticipated and used to ambush our sense of the world as new and unfolding. We do not want to be contained by our own predictable impulse to transgression, and so we seek a negation that subverts the dialectic of ancient and modern. So we could say that—rather than measuring deconstruction as negative theology—we are rather attempting to gauge the way in and the degree to which the modern in its negativity is prefigured by the classical tradition in its own characteristic search for autonomy, to better appreciate the genealogy and/or disjunction of our era. So, again, naturally, apophaticism should inversely repeat the structure of being, should mirror, reflect, imitate it. The Orient works with a different relation of transcendental/immanent—a less absolutely dual one, in some cases a nondual one—but then neither has the ancient/modern dialectic arisen as much from its history as from that of the Occident. The question of ancient and modern, East and West, is the same and yet different: Are we the same or different, but, perhaps more to the point, what is the ethos of this question?

And so it seems, we might venture to say, altogether appropriate that a thinker such as Jacques Derrida should early, from the essay “Différance” forward, have to mark off the thought of difference and the trace from negative theology. In his recent essay “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” he finally takes up the threads of his implicit relation to negative theology, acknowledging the “more or less tenable analogy” and “family resemblance” between negative theology and “every discourse that seems to return in a regular and insistent manner to this rhetoric of negative determination.” He mimes this discourse thus:

This, which is called X (for example, text, writing, the trace, difference, the hymen, the supplement, the pharmakon, the parergon, etc.) “is” neither this nor that, neither sensible nor intelligible, neither positive nor negative, neither inside nor outside, neither superior nor inferior, neither active nor passive, neither present nor absent, not even neutral, not even subject to a dialectic with a third moment, without any possible sublation (“Aufhebung”). Despite appearances, then, this X is neither a concept nor even a name; it does lend itself to a series of names, but calls for

another syntax, and exceeds even the order and the structure of predicative discourse. It "is" not and does not say what "is." It is written completely otherwise.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, despite this, Derrida again refuses this "analogy" and "family resemblance" between negative theology and the discourse of deconstruction, but this time in some detail, since the attempt to assimilate deconstruction to negative theology has been insistent in the twenty years intervening between the two essays, beginning with the discussion following the first oral presentation of the essay "Différance."<sup>3</sup> The attempt of Derrida's critics to turn the analogy of negative theology and deconstruction into an equation and the family resemblance into a filiation is itself conducted from two opposing fronts. On the one hand, there are those who accuse Derrida of being a "mere" negative theologian, simply negating and turning on its head the ontotheological tradition, and thus as contained within the dialectical play of the logocentricity which he purports to deconstruct. On the other hand are negative theologians themselves, such as Jean-Luc Marion, cited by Derrida, who challenge Derrida's analysis of the God of apophatic theology as a hyperessentiality, which, as a "beyond being," can only be grasped in its relation to classical cataphatic ontotheology. In other words, as is to be expected, the challenge to Derrida reflects the ambiguous role that negative theology plays within the Western tradition. Is it a correlative moment of affirmative theology that an enlightened philosophy rightly suspects as a mere strategic elusion of the inherent finitude of categories? Or does negative theology exceed the predicative and constative determinations of logic in a performative enactment of a *via negativa* that intends not merely to think but to *realize* a relation to a divinity not only greater than which cannot be conceived but that exceeds the furthest reach of our conceptions, and that can be named and conceived only in that it is necessarily the very origin of articulation?

If deconstruction is a negative theology, then, Derrida acknowledges his critics as saying, it is either (1) merely a rhetoric of negation, and, as a rhetoric that is itself opposed to the rhetoric of negative theology, a radical skepticism or a nihilism, or (2) it is an apophatic theology that, by implication, in refusing or failing to recognize itself as such, con-

firms the inescapability of divine economy. Indeed, it would be seen to confirm it in a striking and unprecedented way for nontheists and theists alike. This view takes the form of a reversible accusation, which runs, in Derrida's *précis*:

Once the apophatic discourse is analyzed in its logical-grammatical form, it is not merely sterile, repetitive, obscurantist, mechanical, it perhaps leads us to consider the becoming theological of all discourse. From the moment a proposition takes a negative form, the negativity that manifests itself need only be pushed to the limit, and it at least resembles an apophatic theology. . . . God's name would then be the hyperbolic effect of that negativity or all negativity that is consistent in its discourse. . . . If there is a work of negativity in discourse it will produce divinity.<sup>4</sup>

But, as Derrida points out, this argument could simply be inverted by a theist or an idealist "in order to say that divinity is not produced but productive," arriving at a kind of "proof of God by His effects, or more precisely . . . by effects without cause, by the *without cause*,"<sup>5</sup> the result being that "those who would like to consider 'deconstruction' a symptom of modern nihilism could indeed, if they wished, recognize in it the last testimony—not to say the martyrdom—of faith in the present *fin de siècle*."

Derrida does not precisely refute the legitimacy of this challenge. As he says: "This reading could always be possible. Who could prohibit it? In the name of what?" But he implies that such a prohibition is obviated by his writings, however "brief, elliptical, and dilatory"<sup>6</sup> his references to negative theology since the essay "Différance." This most interesting of real and potential challenges to deconstruction as a negative theology is turned aside, Derrida says, by "two stages" of his writing. The first stage is his argument that negative theology is a discourse of the hyperessential and, as such, is merely a "wager" of ontotheological comprehension. The second is more complex, an exploration of the obligation generated or inherent in his comments on negative theology that he should at some point treat the matter more fully.

It is with this second "stage" that Derrida takes his departure in "How to Avoid Speaking," taking up his often-stated "fascination" with negative theology:<sup>7</sup> "As I have al-

ways been fascinated by the supposed movements of negative theology . . . , I objected in vain to the assimilation of the thinking of the trace or of difference to some negative theology, and my response amounted to 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 speak of 'negative theology' *itself*."<sup>8</sup> Here is the problematic that shapes "How to Avoid Speaking." To speak of negative theology "itself" is clearly a contradiction in terms. To attempt to do so would be to buy into the restricted economy of ontological and theological cataphasis, even in following the apophatic "wager" of a "beyond being" that exceeds every predicative determination. The very departure of the discourse of the trace and of difference, in its attempt to think "otherwise than being, or beyond essence," in Levinas's terms,<sup>9</sup> would be potentially contained precisely by the relation between the discourse of essence and the negative attributions of hyperessentiality and hypercategorical knowing as "unknowing." How to speak of a transgressive negative theology otherwise than in the language that negative theology was itself dedicated to exceeding? Hasn't negative theology in this sense precisely anticipated every discourse respecting it? "Is one not compelled to speak of negative theology according to the modes of negative theology, in a way that is at once impotent, exhausting, and inexhaustible? Is there ever anything other than a 'negative theology' of 'negative theology'?"<sup>10</sup>

"How to Avoid Speaking" begins in a narrative of Derrida's own attempts to think the obligation and promise inherent in his terse comments marking off the thought of difference from the discourse of negative theology. Therefore, he says: "If I speak of the promise, I will not be able to keep any metalinguistic distance in regard to it. Discourse on the promise is already a promise: in the promise. I will thus not speak of this or that promise, but that which . . . inscribes us by its trace in language—before language. . . . The promise of which I shall speak will have always escaped this demand of presence."<sup>11</sup> And so he relates the circumstances in which he is forced to submit a title in advance of the essay:

I thus improvised this title on the telephone. Letting it be dictated to me by I do not know what uncon-

scious order—in a situation of absolute urgency—I thus translated my desire to defer still further. This “fight or flight” reaction reproduces itself on the occasion of every lecture.<sup>12</sup>

The “promise” that Derrida makes in giving a title for the yet-to-be-written essay instantiates the “promise” implicit in his fascination for negative theology. It is a promise that cannot be fulfilled *as such*, insofar as any attempt to speak of negative theology *itself* will inevitably be subsumed within the discourse of negative theology. So that the “fight or flight” reaction of which he speaks in this instance is not one that merely repeats itself with every lecture on no matter what subject, but is rather (and in addition) of the very type of the position of the “subject” within a discourse that in its phonological and grammatological expressions both (1) affirms and denies the subject’s presence, its position in time and space as a topic (*topos*), and (2) neither affirms nor denies such identity. And this is the dilemma that becomes most explicit precisely in Derrida’s promise to position himself in relation to a discourse that positions itself as a nonplace, “beyond being,” attempting to exceed the very language of its expression. How to avoid speaking of that (negative theology) that, through speaking, itself already avoids speaking?

In Derrida’s narrative, the agent of his title, of his promise of a discourse on apophatic thought (i.e., that will “avoid speaking” of the topic), is an “unconscious order” that the “I” of the narrative “does not know.” What is this unknown unconscious order that commands him, this unknown, known as an unconscious—i.e., as that which is not conscious of, does not know, itself? And what is the “I,” the narrator, the persona, the “Derrida” who names and knows of it as an unknown, and as an unconscious, an unknowable “as such,” a presence impossibly absent to itself, and an absence that nevertheless presents, orders, and commands attention to this undecidable paradox of its desire to represent itself in language only as some “thing” that cannot and must not be determined as—i.e., *merely* as—language? Derrida’s narrative probes the abyssal apophasis of the speaking “subject.” And here we can recall the rhetorical trope of apophasis, which as “a kind of irony, whereby we deny that we say or

doe that which we especially say or doe" (OED, quoting J. Smith) is itself troped and inverted by Derrida so that we who employ the trope are enabled to do so only because discourse so orders constructs, and "subjects" us, we know not how, unconsciously, in a kind of inverse apophatics, a *dénégation*, as Derrida designates it.

We cannot but agree with Mark Taylor's recommendation that *dénégation* be left untranslated, taken over in its complex double negation from the French in preference to the monivocal "denial" of the published translation. To quote Taylor: "*Verneinung* [of which *dénégation* is the French translation] is an affirmation that is a negation and a negation that is an affirmation." This formulation captures the undecidable oscillation that Derrida figures between the narratorial "I" and its "unconscious." As Taylor goes on to explain: "To de-negate is to un-negate. . . . More precisely, denegation is an un-negation that affirms rather than negates negation." And so denegation, as the inversion of the relation of the subject in and to language, is the subversion, too, of the dialectical negation of negation by which it might render sublime its self-relation and so come into undifferentiated possession of the revelation, of a necessarily (because to-be-revealed) "secret" knowledge.<sup>13</sup> It is in terms of a motif of the "secret" that Derrida explicates denegation:

There is a secret of the denial and a denial of the secret. The secret, *as secret*, separates and already institutes a negativity; it is a negation that denies itself. It de-negates itself. This denegation does not happen to it by accident; *it is essential and originary*. [my emphasis]<sup>14</sup>

Derrida declares his desire to understand denegation "prior even to its Freudian context." Thus, when he speaks of denegation as "essential and originary," he evokes the problematic relation of the subject of discourse to an "unconscious order" that determines and already "institutes" a negativity in its desire to avoid betraying its secret resources. And lest there be any doubt as to the relation between the unconscious order previously evoked by Derrida and the *topos* of the secret, the following should be noted:

I refer first of all to the secret shared *within itself*, its partition "proper," which divides the essence of a secret that cannot even appear to one alone except in starting to be lost, to divulge itself, hence to dissimulate itself as secret, in *showing* itself: dissimulating its dissimulation.<sup>15</sup>

Derrida's desire to go behind, or rather to anticipate the "metaphysical presuppositions which sustain the psycho-analytical theorems"<sup>16</sup> enhances our appreciation of the narrative form adopted by him in leading into the problematic of apophasis as denegation.

But, as we might expect, it is not as if "denegation," even in its pre-Freudian, that is "essential and originary," form, in which it "gives no chance to dialectic," could itself establish what it suggests and marks, as if the notion itself were "essential and originary." How, between narrative and explication, do we hear Derrida's thinking-through of denegation here? As Heidegger would remind and caution us:

We do not hear it rightly [the language of thinkers], because we take that language to be mere expression, setting forth philosophers' views. But the thinker's language says what is. To hear it is in no case easy. Hearing it presupposes that we meet a certain requirement, and we do so only on rare occasions. We must acknowledge and respect it. To acknowledge and respect consists in letting every thinker's thought come to us as something in each case unique, never to be repeated, inexhaustible—and being shaken to the depths by what is unthought in a thinker's thought is not a lack inherent in his thought. What is *un-thought* is such in each case only as an *un-thought*.<sup>17</sup>

We are cautioned, but we are not much further ahead, when we read that it is precisely with Heidegger's unthought that Derrida, in his recent essay "Désistance," associates denegation.

And what about "denegation?" Especially when it is a matter . . . of a vast movement by Heidegger, . . . in a thought concerned with thinking, over and above an onto-theology without which the very concept of denegation could not have been formed, the *unthought*



itself. Concerned with thinking not just this or that unthought, but the structure, the possibility, and the necessity of the unthought in general, its quasi-negativity (the *un*-thought is an *un-thought*, he reminds us).<sup>18</sup>

So it should not be surprising that Derrida might think denegation, the “quasi-negativity” of which could not even be formulated without the propriety of ontotheology, which is also to say, without its negative theological shadow—it should not be surprising that Derrida does not explicate denegation *as such*, in its “essential and originary” function, in the essay “How to Avoid Speaking: Denegations” itself. It is in the more recent essay, “*Désistance*,” that he continues his thinking out of denegation, and he does so not through the term *dénégation* but through the term *désistance*, a neologism generated in his discussion of the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, to the selection of English translations of whose essays “*Désistance*” serves as the Introduction.

Derrida avoids saying very much about denegation in “How to Avoid Speaking,” deferring the discussion to the later essay, and pursuing it under a different term (*desistance*), one moreover that is not “proper” in either French or English, and does not, in this neologistic form, even appear in Lacoue-Labarthe’s text on which he is reflecting,<sup>19</sup> which is also to say that the thought of denegation is displaced—that is, it takes place only in the context of Derrida’s reading of the work of Lacoue-Labarthe, and specifically of texts in which the latter is himself thinking through particular issues in Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche and Plato. *Desistance* for Derrida addresses the constitution of subjectivity within a double movement of negation (as occurs with such terms as the *unavoidable*, the *ineluctable*, and the *undeniable*), a denegation in which the “supplementary redoubling of negation is not necessarily reducible to the work of dialectic or to an unconscious denegation. Lacoue-Labarthe will help us, perhaps, in stepping back from a Hegelian, Marxist, or Freudian interpretation of such a possibility.”<sup>20</sup> So Derrida looks to Lacoue-Labarthe in his attempt to “understand [denegation] prior even to its elaboration in a Freudian context,” or a Hegelian one. To “step back from” such contexts is to *desist*, to “stand away.” As a name for the structure of subjectivity,

desistance, Derrida says, "does not let itself be determined reflexively. . . . But if the 'desistance' of the subject does not first signify a 'self-desistance,' we should not come to some conclusion thereby about the passivity of this subject. Or about its activity. Desistance is better for marking the middle voice." But subjectivity does not *consist* in desistance. "No," Derrida says, "that is just the point—what is involved here is the impossibility of *consisting*, a singular impossibility: something entirely different from a lack of consistency. Something more in the way of a '(de)constitution.'"<sup>21</sup>

It is such a "(de)constitution," a deconfiguration of subjectivity, that appears in Derrida's narrative in "How to Avoid Speaking." Derrida's title, his *topos* in relation to negative theology, he relates, is "dictated to me by I do not know what unconscious order."<sup>22</sup> The speaking subject of Derrida's narrative is constituted neither actively nor passively (he "lets" it be dictated to him). It is neither constituted nor deconstituted, but *(de)constituted*. And it is so, as Heidegger reminds us, not as a "lack inherent in his thought." As Lacoue-Labarthe specifies, *(de)constitution* designates a "loss of the subject [that] is imperceptible, . . . and not because it is equivalent to a secret failing or a hidden lack, but because it is strictly indissoluble from, and doubles, the process of constitution or appropriation."<sup>23</sup> The subject is both constituted and deconstituted in the configuration of self. And further, Lacoue-Labarthe says:

The theoretical consequence . . . : the figure is never *one*. . . . There is no "proper image" with which to identify totally, no essence of the imaginary. . . . The subject "desists" because it must always confront *at least* two figures (or one figure that is *at least* double).<sup>24</sup>

This is what Derrida (re)presents to us in the form of a narrative preamble to his discussion of "negative theology *itself*."<sup>25</sup> The figures of the narrator and of the "unconscious order" that dictates to him the promise to speak on the avoidance of speaking, that speaks on negative theology as denegation, are neither one nor two, both one and two. His narration at once presents and performs a denegation as a "desistance," a standing away from negative theology that subsists in the middle voice, both constituting and deconstituting the topic, (re)presenting the subject of such a

discourse as (de)constituted in its very attempt to confront its relation to negative theology, so that the *topos* of negative theology is itself (de)constituted. It cannot be placed or figured without being split within itself between the issues of theology and of subjectivity (following of course upon its own dialectical configuration). We seem to have what Derrida perceives in the work of Lacoue-Labarthe, a “supplementary torsion” of deconstruction, a supplementary moment in deconstruction in the form of a (de)constitution, or what Lacoue-Labarthe sees as a “(de)construction, something more positive than critical, something, as it were, *not very negative*.”<sup>26</sup>

It is in relation to such a reading of “How to Avoid Speaking: Denegations” that we can turn to Kevin Hart’s recent book, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy*, and to his valuable contributions to the question of negative theology and deconstruction. Hart draws on a commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius by John Jones, in which the latter elucidates two independent movements of negative theology, one metaphysical and the other mystical. Quoting Jones:

On the one hand, negative theology functions within affirmative theology or, more specifically, metaphysics to express the preeminence of the divine cause. Here, if you will, the negations are ‘super affirmations.’ On the other hand negative theology provides for mystical unity with the divinity. Here negative (mystical) theology denies all that is and all reference to beings and, by my interpretation, ultimately denies all affirmative theology and hence, all metaphysics.<sup>27</sup>

Hart accepts the distinction as a clarification, but disagrees that what Jones calls negative (mystical) theology achieves an exit from metaphysics, since, as Hart observes, “the *denial* of metaphysics is itself a metaphysical gesture,”<sup>28</sup> precisely the point that Derrida makes respecting hyper-essentiality. Hart describes the relation between the metaphysical and mystical forms of negative theology as

*supplemental*, and as the relation between a restricted and a general economy. On the subtle hierarchical play between the two negative theologies, Hart observes:

Negative theology plays a role within the phenomenon of positive theology but it also shows that positive theology is situated with regards to a radical negative theology which precedes it. *In short, negative theology performs the deconstruction of positive theology.*<sup>29</sup>

Hart explicates this claim with respect to Derrida's emphasis on hyperessentiality in Dionysius:

The prefix '*hyper*' has a negative rather than a positive force. To say that God is *hyperousious* is to deny that God is a being of any kind, even the highest or original being. As Jones remarks, Pseudo-Dionysius denies that God is a being and denies that God is being (*on*). . . . Given this Derrida is wrong to say that negative theology reserves a supreme being beyond the categories of being. Just as 'sign' must be crossed out in the deconstruction of metaphysics, so too must 'God' in the deconstruction of positive theology.<sup>30</sup>

So Hart aligns himself with Jean-Luc Marion, who, as Derrida notes in "How to Avoid Speaking,"<sup>31</sup> employs the word *Dieu* under erasure in his book *Dieu sans être*.

Liddell and Scott cite as one of the nuances of *hyper* the sense of beyond as a "transgression" or "violation" of what is exceeded, appearing to support Hart's claim of a negative connotation to the notion of hyperessentiality. At any rate, Hart's argument for a relation of supplementarity between the metaphysical and mystical moments of negative theology, of a deconstruction of metaphysical by mystical theology, is clarifying and helpful. Hart's book was in press when "Comment ne pas parler: dénégations" first appeared, so that text does not figure in his deliberations, but his argument adds to our appreciation of Derrida's itinerary in this essay. The complex and tangential approach to avoidance of negative theology in "How to Avoid Speaking" is dictated by the careful delineation of a prior condition of negation in a denegation, an un-negation that subsists in the very structure of discourse and of the constitution of consciousness in discourse.

As instantiated in Derrida's narrative of his complex response to the proposed topic of negative theology, prior to any negative determination within discourse there is a denegation of the perspective of consciousness in its very discursive formation, that works, in Lacoue-Labarthe's helpful formulation, a (de)constitution of subjectivity. Prior to addressing the secret place of a divinity beyond being, the subject is addressed by a secret abyss in its constitution. As Lacoue-Labarthe observes, "The subject 'desists' because it must confront *at least* two figures (or one figure that is *at least* double)." <sup>32</sup>

Prior to negative theology is, so to speak, an apophatic psychagogy. As Derrida comments in "How to Avoid Speaking," "it would be necessary to reelaborate a problematic of consciousness, that thing that, more and more, one avoids discussing as if one knew what it is and as if its riddle were solved. But is any problem more novel today than that of consciousness?" <sup>33</sup> The deconstruction of negative theology by mystical theology that Hart points to is preempted (and preempted) by "something more positive than critical, something, as it were, *not very negative*" <sup>34</sup> a (de)construction of the subject of negative theological, as of every, discourse.

Immediately following his narrative of the circumstances under which his title was generated, Derrida acknowledges: "Under this title 'how to avoid speaking,' it is necessary to speak of the secret." <sup>35</sup> Regarding secrecy he observes:

According to [a] somewhat naive philosophy of the animal world, one may nevertheless observe that animals are incapable of keeping or even having a secret, because they cannot *represent as such*, as an *object* before consciousness, something that they would then forbid themselves from showing. One would thus link the secret to the objective representation (*Vorstellung*) that is placed before consciousness and that is expressible in a form of words. The essence of such a secret would remain rigorously alien to every other nonmanifestation; and, notably, unlike that of which the animal is capable. <sup>36</sup>

This is a delineation of something approaching a "material" basis for a characterization of human consciousness. "According to this hypothesis," Derrida says, "it would be necessary to reconsider all the boundaries between consciousness and the unconscious, as between man and animal and an enormous system of oppositions."<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, Derrida declares that the "negativity of the secret and the secret of denegation"<sup>38</sup> is "essential and originary,"<sup>39</sup> is, in other words, in the order of a *founding difference* of human consciousness as *representation*.

Eric Gans, in his 1981 essay on Derrida and René Girard, "Differences," anticipates this question when he suggests that "difference 'always already' exists, in a form that Derrida refuses to recognize, and that Girard recognizes but then forgets. The original difference is precisely that of life itself, which from its own problematic origin has distinguished structurally, if not conceptually, between the organism and its appetitive objects."<sup>40</sup> Gans roots the difference and deferral that structures systems of representation in this material reality, explaining human as distinct from animal representation as a system of socialization motivated by the avoidance of conflict. Human systems of representation, he reasons, are structured around absence and difference because they are founded on a gesture of renunciation of appetitive desire, as an avoidance of the conflict to which it inevitably gives rise.

Culture is truly *différance* because it *re-presents* this primal difference [between the organism and its appetitive objects]. The attractive object will indeed be appropriated; but for this appropriation to proceed in an orderly fashion—for an order to be founded according to which the peaceful attribution of the object can indeed be made—immediate, instinctive appropriation must be renounced. That is why the first cultural act, the act of representation, must originate in an *aborted* act of appropriation. It is when the fear of conflict leads man to *designate* this object rather than to grasp at it that the deferral of conflict by the differentiation of the object can be adequate to its task.<sup>41</sup>

That the founding act of specifically human culture is a gesture of renunciation of instinctual and appetitive desire lends to human culture, Gans says, its structure of simultaneous presence and absence, the presence of the community and of the individual to themselves and the absence through deferral of the instinctual content of desires:

The position I propose . . . is that the difference of man is one of form, not content, and that the birth of this form derives from the felt need to defer the immediacy of this (appetitive) content. It is this deferral that produces presence in the uniquely human sense—the presence of the community to itself and of each member to the others. The world of traditional culture as expressed in privileged discourse—within which category I include both religion *and* philosophy—has envisioned this presence as itself an immediate reality, guaranteed either by a transcendent divinity, the self-presence of the thinking self, or a more or less well-defined combination of both. It is this hypostasized presence that is the primary target of Derrida's deconstruction which reintroduces into it the anthropological reality of deferral. But Derrida . . . sees deferral and absence as incompatible.<sup>42</sup>

The act of representation, in that it arises in “an *aborted* act of appropriation,” constructs an *imaginative* desire that compensates for the inaccessibility of the real object of appetite. For Gans explains in his *The End of Culture*:

The origin of desire is directly linked to that of the imaginary. The imaginary prolongation of the designative gesture toward the object constitutes the original experience of desire. This prolongation takes place on the imaginary scene of representation, which it exploits to create an impossible image. For the object is *necessarily* inaccessible, and it is precisely this that permits each individual to imagine himself as alone acceding to it. The imagination thus originates as essentially paradoxical.<sup>43</sup>

The paradoxical and imaginary structure of desire become problematic, says Gans, not in early, ritual culture with its

reciprocal and communal vehicles for the sublimation of desire, but in later hierarchical and nonreciprocal cultures where some have the means to satisfy desire while others inevitably go without. "Instead of . . . desir[ing] in vain a central position in the community," says Gans, "the victim of nonreciprocity comes to desire as well the ousting of the actual holder of this position. . . . The social inferior's desire, whether or not it gives rise to a praxis, constitutes a source of impotent frustration."<sup>44</sup>

It is this "impotent frustration" that Nietzsche characterized as *ressentiment*, which he saw as the impetus behind Judeo-Christian morality as a revolutionary cultural movement. Gans argues that the very same phenomenon gave rise to Greek art forms as much as to Judeo-Christian morality,<sup>45</sup> but the two traditions, Judeo-Christian and Hellenic, adopt different modes of mediation of resentment. Judeo-Christianity is a moralism that, while it may lead to "hypocritical denunciations of those whose real accomplishments one envies,"<sup>46</sup> as Nietzsche accuses, at its best it seeks to effect real social and political change: "The real recentering carried out by the Judeo-Christian tradition is more strenuous than the aesthetic recentering of the Greeks, for it must overcome the resistance of the real order of things, whereas the aesthetic operation offers rather a means of adapting to this order."<sup>47</sup> Greek secular culture transforms and transcends resentment in its works of art:

In contrast with abstract morality, which poses as a norm the reciprocity that has become an ethical impossibility, art renounces normativity in order to realize this reciprocity in the purely imaginary relationship between the spectator and a fictional universe. Within this relationship, resentment is demystified and abolished. The artist . . . acts as the regnant divinity of the fictional universe, the spectator's temporary subordination to whom is untroubled by resentment because it is purely transcendental, lacking in any element of worldly rivalry.<sup>48</sup>

Unlike in ritual culture like the Judeo-Christian, where the otherness of the desired image, "reinforce[s] the solidarity of the community, all of whose members are equal in being



unable to possess it,"<sup>49</sup> in Greek secular culture, "esthetic otherness must now guarantee the imaginary existence of a fictive universe wherein the inaccessibility of the object is the same for all."<sup>50</sup> Thus, Greek esthetic culture achieves a negative transcendence of resentment, in which the "spectator can imagine himself, secure in his awareness that the desiring imagination of his fellow spectators is no less unrealizable than his own."<sup>51</sup>

In Greek culture, Gans includes the theoretical, that is philosophy and science, with the esthetic in this negative transcendence of resentment. As he observes, resentment "is a negative revelation; it constitutes the Self by the centrality it lacks, but of itself conceives no transfigured image of centrality to which it might legitimately aspire." Such a negative transcendence is not, he emphasizes, a "ritually induced catharsis," but "a transformation of the old structure of significance that requires a lucid awareness of the futility of the utopian desires that this structure has—always already—aroused in us." Nor is Gans blind to the implication of his own analysis in the mechanism that he attempts to elucidate:

For if what is resented is the significant other, and if one's choice of subject is significant by definition, then there is no way to avoid resentment toward whatever one speaks about, to the extent, at least, that it concerns the human subject. . . . But the point is precisely that resentment in itself is not a source of falsification, but a means of discovery—the only means, indeed, by which we as readers are called upon to put into question the founding oppositions by means of which texts signify. For all such oppositions are versions of the fundamental one between the significant and the nonsignificant.<sup>52</sup>

Gans's analysis of resentment provides a perspective from which to observe Derrida's strategy of avoidance of negative theology in "How to Avoid Speaking." Derrida's commentary on the secret gives rise to his reflections on what characterizes human, as distinct from animal, consciousness. This secret representation of the object before consciousness is seen by him as the basis for its designation in language. But this secret representation within ourselves, is "first of all . . . the secret shared *within itself*, its partition 'proper,'

which divides the essence of a secret that cannot even appear to one alone except in starting to be lost." It "separates and already institutes a negativity,"<sup>53</sup> Derrida says, and for Gans it founds representation as a fiction, as an imaginative desire that compensates for a renunciation of appetitive desire that avoids conflict, an aborted act of appropriation. As Lacoue-Labarthe sees it, the subject is (de)constituted in representation, because there is no "'proper image' with which to identify totally, no essence of the imaginary."<sup>54</sup> The subject "desists" in its secret (de)constitution, for, as Derrida says, "the secret amounts to a negation that denies itself. It de-negates itself."<sup>55</sup> And so Derrida need not avoid the revelation:

There is no secret *as such*: I deny it. And this is what I confide in secret to whomever allies himself to me. This is the secret of the alliance. If the theo-logical necessarily insinuates itself there, this does not mean that the secret itself is theo-logical.<sup>56</sup>

As Gans helps us to appreciate, the secret is itself not moral and theological, because the secret subsists in and with the philosophical subject, rather than the theological soul. As Raoul Mortley concludes in his two-volume study of negative theology, with the exception of Pseudo-Dionysius, "there is almost no formal *via negativa* in the Christian thought of antiquity" he says. And he explains:

The absence of the *via negativa* in ancient Christian thought may be explained by the fact that the nature of God is scarcely an issue in Christianity. It is the character of Greek thought, from its Presocratic origins, that ontological questions predominate; the traditional Greek question is: "What is X?" If one reads the teachings of Jesus as reported in the Gospels, one notes an absolute lack of interest in the question "What is God?" . . . It is with the progressive Hellenization of Christianity that questions about the essence of reality come to the fore, and the nature of God becomes an issue.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, insofar as negative theology is an ontological, rather than a characteristically theological, movement of thought, its concern is not the righteous supplanting of a worldly

order by the realization of a divine one, as with the Church, but the noetic transcendence of the resentment aroused by a material order that will not yield to a secret desire, except in the equivocal realm of the imagination, the realm not of the soul but of the desiring subject that knows its denegation, its desistance from its own appropriation, its (de)constitution, in imaginal transcendence of a resentment aroused by the powerlessness of its relation to any actual or potential Transcendent.

In the Orient, the history is more consistent because of a lesser tendency to anthropomorphize and personalize the Transcendent, a more universally ontological than theomorphic ethos. Because Hinduism thinks in terms of a positively subsisting self, however contingent and readily subsumable Atman is within Brahman and vice versa, the more comfortable it is with the thematizing and essentializing tendencies of language. Because Buddhism not only refuses anthropomorphizing but resists essentializing the relation of samsara and nirvana, no-self and sunyata, we find in its tradition the most thoroughgoing philosophical and praxial apophaticisms in either the East or the West. However, since the realm of the historical is either bracketed or thought ontologically in the East, language is either sublimated and transcendentized, as seems to be the tendency in Hinduism, or conceived as *upaya*, skillful means, as in Buddhism. But the realm of history is the realm of the performative rather than the constative, and it is here that language—along with every action and passion—challenges us as praxis.

In our approach to the question of “Derrida and Negative Theology,” two texts are chosen on which to focus: “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy” and “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials.” These texts are reprinted here, with Derrida’s kind permission. The principal chapters in the book are the four by Mark C. Taylor, Michel Despland, Harold Coward, and David Loy. The order of presentation is intended to promote East/West and classical/modern associations. Taylor’s and Despland’s essays are on Western apophatic ontotheology, with Taylor writing from a decon-

structionist, and Despland from a Platonist, orientation. Coward's and Loy's papers are on apophaticism in Hinduism and Buddhism in relation to deconstruction.

As we have learned to expect from his seminal work in the area of deconstruction and religious thought, in "nO nOt nO" Mark Taylor offers an important probing of negation and affirmation in "Of an Apocalyptic Tone" and "How to Avoid Speaking." The four principal sections of his essay—"[L]et[t]re[s]," "Titles," "Recuperation," and "Avoidances," explore the moments of a nondialectical negation, an apophatic atheology in Derrida, ranging at times beyond the two principal texts, and drawing on Freud, Bataille, and particularly Blanchot. Taylor frames his essay with considerations as to what it actually implies to gather and write "in the name of" Derrida, and particularly in the name of a function of negativity and of "negative theology" in his writing. Taylor's rich and whimsical grasp of the ambiguity of the enterprise harbors and engenders a differentiated analysis of Derrida's strategic and laminate handling of negation and of theology throughout his work. That these questions open, Derrida admits in "How to Avoid Speaking," onto the matter of "autobiography" and what it would mean for him to write one, Taylor is particularly sensitive to. What is affirmed and denied, and who affirms and denies, under the signature of Derrida?

In Michel Despland's "On Not Solving Riddles Alone," we find a living Platonism fully capable of responding in stride to Derrida's challenge to classicism, of seeing it as participant in the Socratic tradition and as integral with an attempt to recapture the fuller dialogical intentions of antique philosophy. But Despland's focus is on theology and on what Platonist and Neoplatonist apophaticisms, in the light of Derrida, have to teach us about (re)gaining a theology responsive to lived (and spoken and written) experience. He contends that "the promise of negative theologies comes from . . . their disruption of the rolling waves of ordinary theological rhetoric, alerts us to the matter of virtuosity in textual procedures and to the rapport with the reader that is being cultivated by any teacher." He suggests that logocentrism is a phallogentric and monologic perversion of reason, rather than the authentic expression of *logos*, and that "the distinc-

tion between positive and negative theology can be replaced by the broader distinction between didactic (or scholastic) theology, and literarily crafted theology" (as in Kierkegaard). Despland concludes with four points for or invitations to theologians, suggested by his reading of Derrida, that bear on the subtle relations of theologies to their own and other traditions and to the cultures from which they are (in some ways) inseparable.

Harold Coward's "A Hindu Response to Derrida's View of Negative Theology" explores apophatic movements in the thought of the Advaitan Śaṅkara and the Grammarian Bhartrhari. While the transcendent noumenal is realized in Sankara by means of the negation of every phenomenon, including all language and the very conception of distinct negative and affirmative moments, in Bhartrhari language itself has phenomenal and noumenal dimensions, the latter manifesting the very kernel or seed of ultimate reality as Brahman. Advaita constitutes a classical heuristic *via negativa* (as distinct from a cognitive negative theology), but the Grammarian philosophy affirms an inescapability of language that Coward relates to Derridean textuality, seeing, as a correlative, a demystifying and therapeutic dimension to deconstruction.

It is significant that the distinction between negative theology and *via negativa*, between cognitive and heuristic apophaticisms, though subtly informing both Taylor's and Despland's essays, emerges most explicitly in David Loy's "The Deconstruction of Buddhism." While unfolding the thoroughgoing deconstructive movement of Indian Buddhist Mādhyamikan thought as exemplified in Nāgārjuna, Loy acknowledges Sanskrit's Indo-European tendency to essentialize and dichotomize, to philosophize even in its antiphilosophical advocacy of language as *upaya*, skillful means, over cognitive approaches to language, self, and world. This tendency is countered in the Chinese (Ch'an) and Japanese (Zen) Buddhist emphasis on meditative practice and the experiential character of the nondifference between samsara and nirvana. Loy concludes with a challenging view of the relation between deconstructive textual *praxes*—whether Derridean or Mādhyamikan—and the character of meditative *praxis* in Buddhism.

## Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, "Desistance," Introduction to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 1-6.

2. Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 4.

3. See Derrida, "The Original Discussion of 'Différance,'" in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 84.

4. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 6.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

7. See Derrida, "The Original Discussion of 'Différance,'" p. 85, and Derrida's "Letter to John Leavey," *Semeia* 23 (1982), p. 61.

8. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 12.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 64 n. 3.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

13. On the enigmatic material and tropic character of initiation into the secret, see Derrida's meditation on poetic singularity, circumcision, and the password in "Shibboleth," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 307-47.

14. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 25.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

17. Quoted in Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, pp. 60-61 n. 22.

18. Derrida, "Desistance," p. 11.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-5.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

22. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 16.
23. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 174.
24. Ibid., p. 175.
25. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 12.
26. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 123.
27. Quoted in Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 200.
28. Ibid., p. 201.
29. Ibid., pp. 201–202; my emphasis.
30. Ibid., p. 202.
31. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 64 n. 3.
32. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 175.
33. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 17.
34. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 123.
35. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 16.
36. Ibid., p. 17.
37. Ibid., p. 17.
38. Ibid., p. 18.
39. Ibid., p. 25.
40. Eric Gans, "Differences," *MLN* 96 (1981), pp. 803–4.
41. Ibid., p. 804.
42. Ibid., pp. 804–5.
43. Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 27.
44. Ibid., p. 173.
45. Ibid., p. 179–300; and Eric Gans, "The Culture of Resentment," *Philosophy and Literature* 8 (1984), pp. 55–66.
46. Gans, *The End of Culture*, p. 173.
47. Gans, "The Culture of Resentment," p. 62.
48. Gans, *The End of Culture*, p. 174.

49. Ibid., p. 174.
50. Ibid., p. 174–75.
51. Ibid., p. 175.
52. Gans, "The Culture of Resentment," p. 64.
53. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 25.
54. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 175.
55. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 25.
56. Ibid., p. 26.
57. Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. 2 (Bonn and Frankfurt-on-Main: Hanstein, 1986), pp. 274–75.