Minimal Theologies
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Appendix

The Theology of the Sign and the Sign of Theology

The Apophatics of Deconstruction

The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The epoch of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never end. Its historical closure is, however, outlined.

one does not leave the epoch whose closure one can outline. The movements of belonging or not belonging are too subtle, the illusions in that regard are too easy, for us to make a definite judgment here.

—Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology

It has become common to introduce Derrida’s thinking by paraphrasing its supposedly “neo- (if not post-) structuralist” character. Manfred Frank’s Was ist Neostrukturalismus? (What Is Neostructuralism?) is the best-known example of this trend. The classification “neostructuralist” suggests that Derrida’s work is immediately linked to the classical structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and others and preserves, as Frank asserts, an “inner continuity” with them: “Put differently, neostructuralism is not only—as the title ‘post-structuralist’ suggests—a line of thinking that appears after structuralism; it is also one that is critically linked to structuralism, without which its origin cannot be understood.” Whereas classical structuralism had been understood as a consequent continuation of a renewed linguistic method in the human sciences, specifically ethnology, political economy, and literary criticism, neostructuralism, according to Frank,

1. In Logics of Disintegration, a no less critical book, Dews chooses the adjective poststructuralist.
must be understood as a philosophically inspired revolution in the history of reception. The novelty of neostructuralism, so Frank’s argument goes, consists first of all in the fact that in its transformation of the structuralist method it let itself be inspired by Nietzsche but also by Freud, Heidegger, Bataille, and Levinas.

Neostructuralism?

The attempt to understand Derrida’s work against the backdrop of the “structuralist controversy” easily results in a warped image. This widespread interpretation, I would claim, is disputable not only in that it overlooks that the structuralist insight into the arbitrary character or differentiability of the sign is merely one of many possible entries for clarifying the “point” of deconstruction—supposing that there is one or is just one. What is particularly striking in this reduction of Derrida’s writings to a variant of neostructuralism is that it neutralizes beforehand the ethical effort and implications of deconstructive practice. The very circumstance that the term structuralism has become a well-known term has undoubtedly contributed to the association of the term deconstruction with a “negative” operation—the dismantling or destruction of structures. If we disregard terminological details and skip over subtle reinterpretations of the Heideggerian notions of Destruktion (destruction) and Abbau (dismantling), we easily forget that deconstruction involves in the first place an affirmative act. To demonstrate this we must not only keep sight of the line of argument in Derrida’s texts, particularly his much-discussed analyses of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss; equally important are the diverse occasional references to the appeal of the Viens! (Come!), to the original, even preoriginal, gift, and to the response of the Oui, oui (Yes, yes), in short, to motifs that have little in common with a prolongation of structuralism or with its supposed Nietzschean or Heideggerian transformations.

Why does Frank’s *What Is Neostructuralism?*—one of the most frequently cited works in recent French philosophy—repeatedly lose sight of this complexity? What is it that makes him link the criticism of *logocentrism*, a term Derrida, Lyotard, and Deleuze have used, with nothing less than Bäumler’s, Spengler’s, and Klages’s *pre-fascism*? Is this comparison a “slip of the pen”? Or is it a symptom of a widespread inability to read what is written, combined with total inattention to elementary premises of academic ethics? To answer this question we must turn to several ostensibly abstract problems of interpretation. That much is at risk here should be obvious by now.

I noted that, according to Frank, Derrida’s thinking about writing and difference must first of all be understood as a critical analysis and further development of the *differential interpretation of the sign* in Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiology (*semeion* is the Greek word for “sign”), most pregnantly formulated in his *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*). Derrida is said to have found in this theoretical matrix of later structuralism a “theoretical matrix” (to use Derrida’s expression in *Of Grammatology* and *Positions*) of a whole intellectual movement, as diverse as it may otherwise have been. The double stature of Saussure’s work as the foundational text of particular disciplines (phonetics, comparative linguistics, etc.) and the main source of a general cultural episteme was enabled by a certain ambiguity in his project. As the editors of the newly discovered manuscript point out, Saussure appears there at once as the epistemologist of a scholarly discipline and as the philosopher of language which he also wanted to be. The thinker who now emerges both provides the categories and conditions of possibility of any future science of language and treats these categories in terms of their temporality. Indeed, the question of the relationship between the system of language (and signification in general), on the one hand, and history, on the other, is one of his most pressing concerns. The fact that Saussure distinguishes between the actual usage of language (*la parole*) and the abstract system of language (*le système de la langue*) in itself had already touched upon a preeminently philosophical insight into the condition of possibility of all signification: namely, that the system of language—though never tangibly present—is a prerequisite for every linguistic utterance that could be identified and thereby understood or iterated. Without the presupposition of this “deep” structure, every use of language, all ability to understand and communicate, would be inexplicable. Yet he also saw that this does not mean that the use of language is merely a deriva-

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5. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. Charles Baillly and Albert Sechehaye, with the collaboration of Albert Riedlinger, critical edition prepared by Tullio de Mauro, postface by Louis-Jean Calvet (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1995) / *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle: Open Court, 1986). Since my present essay first appeared, the publication of a recently discovered manuscript by Saussure, *Écrits de linguistique générale*, ed. Simon Bouquet and Rudolf Engler (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), has rekindled a long-standing debate concerning the legacy and original intentions of Saussure’s work, which heretofore had been transmitted only through the heavily edited *Course in General Linguistics*, originally published in 1916. A reading of this manuscript helps us newly understand how a seemingly technical and formalist program could come to be viewed as the “theoretical matrix” (to use Derrida’s expression in *Of Grammatology* and *Positions*) of a whole intellectual movement, as diverse as it may otherwise have been. The double stature of Saussure’s work as the foundational text of particular disciplines (phonetics, comparative linguistics, etc.) and the main source of a general cultural episteme was enabled by a certain ambiguity in his project. As the editors of the newly discovered manuscript point out, Saussure appears there at once as the epistemologist of a scholarly discipline and as the philosopher of language which he also wanted to be. The thinker who now emerges both provides the categories and conditions of possibility of any future science of language and treats these categories in terms of their temporality. Indeed, the question of the relationship between the system of language (and signification in general), on the one hand, and history, on the other, is one of his most pressing concerns. The fact that Saussure distinguishes between the actual usage of language (*la parole*) and the abstract system of language (*le système de la langue*) in itself had already touched upon a preeminently philosophical insight into the condition of possibility of all signification: namely, that the system of language—though never tangibly present—is a prerequisite for every linguistic utterance that could be identified and thereby understood or iterated. Without the presupposition of this “deep” structure, every use of language, all ability to understand and communicate, would be inexplicable. Yet he also saw that this does not mean that the use of language is merely a deriva-
turalism the argumentation, central to his own thinking of *différance*, that every linguistic sign is *essentially arbitrary*. What does this mean?

Saussure's use of the term *arbitrary* reflects a simple, yet abyssal, insight into how language and meaning work. He summarizes it in three closely related propositions:

1. Neither the linguistic sign (the signifier, the *signifiant*) nor the concept or notion that it represents, and to which it refers (the signified, the *signifié*), are ever given “positively,” that is, as endowed with intrinsic “meaning.”
2. There is no natural, that is, immediately evident, link between written and acoustic signs (graphemes and phonemes) and the concepts to which they refer.
3. Linguistic signs derive their meaning solely from the endlessly expanded tissue or network of mutual references or differential relations. In Derrida's words: “in language there are only differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. The idea or phonie substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it.”

Derrida notes that this differential, structuralist semiotics breaks to a certain extent with traditional (and modern) semantics. Saussure shows clearly that the signified is inseparably bound to the signifier and is incomprehensible without it. They are two sides of the same coin, of the same effort to “produce” meaning. Linguistic signs are never a purely sensible reflection of an intelligible meaning “beyond meaning,” nor are they the ultimate expression of any preceding inner (psychic, intentional) process.

If there is no “meaning” or “idea” that can exist independently of the linguistic signifier or differential articulation of this meaning or idea, then a *transcendental signified* is from the start, that is, structurally or a priori, impossible. A “first cause,” “idea,” or “purpose” in any metaphysical sense which is not itself a link in an endless chain of finite mutual references but,
rather, grounds, orients, or terminates this chain would not only be unthink-
able and unspeakable but would remain without any physical, semantic,
practical, or historico-political “effect.”9 In consequence, the “effects” of lin-
guistic differences are effects in an unusual sense of the word: “Since lan-
guage . . . has not fallen from the sky, its differences have been produced,
are produced effects, but they are effects which 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 différence.”10 Metaphysics stands or falls
by the postulation of such a transcendent and transcendental being. It is
borne by the conviction that the world of transitory phenomena is a more
or less accurate reflection of a deeper, more original, unchangeable, and
permanent reality. Derrida points out that we could understand the his-
tory of Western thinking as a sequence of different names for this mean-
ing—conferring foundation, center, and goal, which pretend to be unique
and which must guarantee the cohesion of reality, “eidos, archè, telos, ener-
geia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendental-
tality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth.” Their common denomina-
tor, Derrida assures us, following Heidegger, is “the definition of Being as
presence.”11

By reducing the “structural character” of all experience to a “something”
that is not part of any “structure,” metaphysics both constitutes and effaces
itself. It puts itself out of bounds, literally and figuratively. If metaphysics
claims to be meaningful, then its concepts must be defined to a certain ex-
tent. But, as Saussure shows, every sign in a spoken or written discourse —
every phoneme and grapheme — always refers to something other than itself.
It can only be understood, thought, read, spoken, and discussed insofar as
it is delimited from other linguistic elements. The centrality the sign claims
is thus an “illusion.” No metaphysical postulate can be proclaimed or claim
validity without betraying itself, without becoming something other than it
means or pretends to be. Nothing has meaning and sense in, of, or as itself.
There is no meaning without context, that is to say, without difference.

Derrida notes that even the theoretical-systematic distinction between
signifier and signified remains in debt to the binary opposition between the
intelligible and the sensible, which it had made it its purpose to compli-

10. Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 11 / 12. On the notion of “play,” see Of Grammatology,
50 / 73, in which Derrida also defines writing as “the play in language” (trans. modified).
cate and undercut. Nor does Saussure fully escape the Stoic and scholastic distinction between the *signans* and the *signatum*. Although he concedes that signifier and signified can never de facto act separately, he nonetheless believes that they differ de jure. But, if every signifier in its turn takes on the role of signified, then this analytical distinction, Derrida notes, loses its foundation from the very outset.

Yet this conclusion should not lead us to forsake the distinction between signifier and signified altogether. Use of this opposition is even, within certain limits, unavoidable. As Derrida rightly observes: “Without it *translation*, for example, would be impossible. It is within the horizon of an absolutely pure, transparent and unequivocal ability to translate that the theme of transcendental signifier has been constituted. To the extent that it is possible, or *appears* possible, translation puts into practice the differentiation between signified and signifier. But if the differentiation is never pure, the translation cannot be. The notion translation will have to be replaced by *transformation*. “\(^12\) Translation can thus no longer be thought as if it were a “transportation” of pure meaning between two languages or linguistic systems in which the “vehicle” is irrelevant. Similarly, *communication* is no longer imaginable as the transposition of a content in or by a neutral, homogeneous medium that does not change the shape of the message sent.

According to Derrida, the teaching on the differentiability of meaning and sense also has repercussions for the *concept of system* used by classical structuralism. The metaphysical-critical potential of the (re)discovery of the sign’s arbitrary character itself returns to a certain degree to semiotics. Saussure distinguished between the actual usage of language (*la parole*) and the abstract system of language (*le système de la langue*). The latter—though never tangibly present—is a prerequisite for every linguistic utterance that can be identified and thereby understood or iterated. Without the presupposition of this deeper structure, every use of language, any ability to understand and communicate, would be inexplicable. This does not mean that the use of language is merely a derivative or realization of the linguistic system. Each presupposes or implies the other. Although no *parole*, no *repetition* of meaning, is imaginable without accepting the silent basis of the *système de la langue*, the reverse is equally true: the linguistic system is present only in reiterated linguistic usage. Put more forcefully, “historically the fact of speech always comes first.”\(^13\)


\(^{13}\) Cited after Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 12 / 12.
Derrida does not reject without further ado that the linguistic system is the (quasi-, simili-, or crypto-transcendental) condition of possibility of any linguistic utterance. But he leaves no doubt that a consequent reflection on the differentiality of all meaning is hardly compatible with the assumption of synchronicity, taxonomies, and the supposed ahistoricity of the concept of the structure or the system of language. This does not mean that the principle of differentiality “has no structure [or is ‘astructural’].”\textsuperscript{14} It should be described as a “moving structure,” to which we can scarcely apply the customary contrasts used to define concepts such as “movement”—dynamic and static, present and absent. The “structural character” at risk here precedes and destabilizes every system, every real or virtual structure of langue or parole (or of code and message, schema and usage), even the constitution and structure of all experience, and is thus in a certain way their “foundation.” This should not be understood in a logical or chronological sense. Furthermore, the principle of differentiality is nowhere else a separate—intelligible—area of being. Nor is it Being. It is “revealed” only in the meaning it effects. Alone it “is nothing” and not even that: it withdraws not only from the Hegelian dialectical logic of negativity but also from the movement Heidegger attributes to the Nichts. This differentiality meshes with the more complex working of the sans (without) and the pas (not) which play such an important role in the writings of Maurice Blanchot and which also permeate the tradition of negative theology.\textsuperscript{15} (In “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” Derrida cites Eckhart, who in turn cites Augustine: “God is wise without being wise, good without being good,” etc.). I will return to this.

Interestingly, the circular relationship or mutual implication that Saussure ascribes to la langue and le parole resurfaces in Derrida on another plane and, I would claim, in a far more differentiated way. Saussure thought that, when we pause at one of these two necessary postulates of (linguistic) communication, we can never explain how meaning is created or transmitted. Only their interaction makes them comprehensible. Compared to this interaction, linguistic system and usage are, in a certain sense, secondary and abstract. In a certain sense, because the principle of differentiation is located nowhere as such. From the start it differs from “itself”; that système and parole are secondary to both this interplay and their “own” interaction must not be taken in any logical or chronological sense. The interplay of differentiation “marks” the paroles in language and the relationship of these paroles

\textsuperscript{14} Derrida, Positions, 28 / 39.
\textsuperscript{15} See Derrida’s essay “Pas,” in Parages.
to language. It is the “detour” we must take if we are to speak, but then again it is also “the silent promise [or pledge, gage silencieux] I must make.”

In his early writings Derrida calls this differentially “Différence” (with a capital D), whereas later he speaks of “difference in general,” and finally différence. This neologism—or better, “neographism”—is, like so many other of Derrida’s key terms, untranslatable, neither a word nor a concept. But the inability to translate it by no means excludes precision and rigor in describing it. More than once Derrida typifies différance as “the product of a system of differences,” “the movement . . . in which the linguistic system, like every code, every system of references, is ‘historically’ constituted as a tissue of differences.” Seen in this way, différance stands for another “order” (a “law,” necessity, fate, or fatality but always an order, command, or imperative) than the one delimited by our traditional ontological or deontological concepts. This explains why Derrida puts immediately after the sentence cited here the warning: “‘Is constituted,’ ‘is produced,’ ‘is created,’ ‘movement,’ ‘historically,’ etc., necessarily being understood beyond the metaphysical language in which they are retained, along with all their implications.” The customary distinction between a diachronical-generative and a synchronic-structuralist reflection is no longer applicable to the differential movement or production of différence “as such.” Différence is “no more static than dynamic, no more structural than historical. But also no less.”

Put differently, “the differend, the différence, between Dionysus and Apollo, between ardor and structure, cannot be erased in history, for it is not in history. It too, in an unexpected sense, is an original structure: the opening of history, historicity itself. Difference does not simply belong either to history or to structure.” It is certainly no preoriginal “cause” or (supreme) being whose purely “phenomenal” reality gives only signals.

The introduction of the silent but legible a in the French word for “difference”—with unmistakable reference to the active connotations of the present participle of différer (i.e., différent) — not only draws attention to the

16. Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 15 / 16.
22. Ibid., 12 / 12–13.
23. Derrida, Writing and Difference, 28 / 47.
“production” and movement of temporal and spatial displacement; it marks the “conflict” side of this process. Long before the publication of Lyotard’s *The Differend* and anticipating the interpretation of Heidegger’s “Herakleitos” lecture, this *différance* (*différante* and *différend*) evokes the connotation of controversy, conflict, and *polemos.*

Against this backdrop we can now bring together several lines in our argument. Derrida uses the motif of the “arbitrary sign” and that of “differential structure” to refer indirectly to a production or movement that permits meaning (without itself having any meaning, strictly speaking). The concepts “sign” and “structure” are not simply adopted or rejected but are grafted onto “something else”: onto the “otherness,” the difference par excellence, the *gramme* (or, better, the *marque*), or, in still other words, onto *différence*. The last figure, if that’s the right word, is a *grapheme*, not a word, concept, idea, substance, or material. It represents a “configuration,” “bundling,” or “graph” of various transformational and transgressive motifs. The semiological formulation of the principle of differentiation is only one of these, and certainly not the most striking. Derrida leaves no doubt that writing (about) *différance* “develops the most legitimate, fundamental demands of structuralism.” But it should be noted that this does not turn *différance* into, say, a neostructuralist motif.

Farther along in *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida therefore explains that a relentless reflection on the “structural nature” of linguistic experience “consists neither a) in restoring the classical motif of the system, which can always be shown to be ordered by *telos*, *aletheia*, and *ousia*, all of which are values reassembled in the concepts ‘essence’ or of ‘meaning’; nor b) in erasing or destroying meaning. Rather, it is a question of determining possibility of meaning on the basis of a ‘formal’ organization which in itself has no meaning, which does not mean that it is either the non-sense or the anguishing absurdity which haunt metaphysical humanism.”

As a “formal” organization, the interplay of differences is stripped of every specific content; as the prerequisite for the functioning of every sign and thus of all meaning, it is itself “silent.” It remains noncommittal and “exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point, but without dissimulating itself as something, as a mysterious being, in the occult of a non-knowledge

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25. In ibid., 8 / 16, Derrida speaks of the (silent) graphic and grammatical “aggression” of the *a* in *différence*.
27. Ibid., 28 / 39.
or in a hole with indeterminable borders (for example, in a topology of castration).”29 This means, again, that différance goes beyond the psychoanalytical frame of mind (from, say, Freud to Lacan). Nor can it be envisioned simply as the hidden object of a negative theology, even though Derrida recognizes that various formulations could very well lead us to this conclusion. Différance is neither this nor that, no essence or existence, and, while it is nothing specific, it is therefore not merely “nothing.” All this allows us to conclude only that it is sufficient to remember that insofar as psychoanalysis or negative theology rests on the—intolerable—premise that ultimate reality must be pictured as self-satisfied Being present to itself, or felt only as a lack or absence, it is not immune to deconstructive reservations. Nothing more and nothing less is claimed here.

Metaphysics stands or falls by the misjudgment of the “principle of difference,” which states that no single linguistic or other element of meaning can function—or have meaning—without referring to others, without invoking something other than itself. What does this mean? Metaphysically speaking, every attempt to snatch a privileged concept away from the differential chain in which everything refers to something else—and does so, infinitely, in an infinite way, ad infinitum—is to be avoided: “every time people pretend to cut free or isolate an area or layer of pure meaning or pure signified [in the play of signifiers], they make the same gesture.”30

In this corrosion of the supremacy of meaning above the sign and the unity of the concept, of the sign above the play of marks, we find the deconstruction of an at-bottom theological motif: “The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological.”31 The deconstruction of the sign ipso facto disrupts the ontotheological presuppositions and ramifications linked to the Western Logos. And, while this theology of the sign may never end, it has already demarcated its historical limit.

It would be incorrect to think we could just abandon the metaphysical gesture of wanting to reach beyond differentiability. The metaphysical hypostasis of a single signifier is a transcendental illusion or a longing in reason, to use Kant’s terms, which is given with thinking, speaking, and judging or acting “as such.”32 When we read in the essay on Lévi-Strauss found in Writing and Difference that “even today the notion of a structure lack-

29. Ibid., 6 / 6.
30. Derrida, Positions, 32 / 44.
32. Derrida, Positions, 32; see also 22 and 60 / 45; see also 33 and 82.
ing any center represents the unthinkable itself,” the reason for this is not so much an empirical-psychological secondary condition humaine (a desire for firm footing or cherishing of a presupposed certainty that makes fear of the unmanageable manageable). Instead, Derrida means that we cannot simply put behind us the structural distortion of reality by claiming some supposedly Archimedean vantage point. Western metaphysics is only the best-known and most dominant expression of this need to posit a foundation. If “postmetaphysical” thinking were possible, it would still have to obey the same “law.” And deconstruction is no exception to this rule, which explains, perhaps, why traditional—ethical and theological—images and motifs continue to play a crucial role in Derrida’s analyses. We cannot simply push aside this heritage (and the accompanying concept pairs of spirit and letter, “pneumatology” and “Scripture,” symbol and allegory), as if a totally other, more adequate, nonmetaphysical conceptual apparatus were somewhere available. Without concepts, Derrida insists no less than Kant, thought would be impossible.

If we deduce from the arbitrary character of the sign that everything is merely a signifier and that every theoretical initiative is based solely on a random collection of arbitrary perspectives, then every attribution of meaning becomes obsolete and thinking loses its critical potential. At the risk of returning to a “regressive” stage, we must therefore try to set traditional concepts in motion to the point where they begin to betray their own internal and external limits. Through this narrow opening in language, Derrida writes, we can, perhaps, perceive the “yet unnameable glimmer” of the other. The repetition (Wiederholung) of “the same,” of the inherited fundamental structure of metaphysics, is thus never a repetition in the strict or even Heideggerian and Kierkegaardian sense of the word. It always causes a certain minimal, yet critical, shift and thereby displaces the borders of possible experience.

Seen against this backdrop, a certain indelible distance from linguistic structuralism seems to dominate Derrida’s reading of Saussure within the “theoretical matrix” of his own work, that is, in the first part of Of Grammatology, in Margins of Philosophy (notably “Différence”), and in the opening interviews of Positions. What is more, Saussure’s text is presented only as a “privileged example” of the question of the sign. No more and no less. The “particularity of the example,” Derrida writes, does not “interfere” with

33. Derrida, Writing and Difference, 279/409.
34. Derrida, Of Grammatology, 14/25.
35. Ibid., 29/44; see also Positions, 18/28, which refers to it as “only one example.”
the “generality” of his “argument.”\textsuperscript{36} There is no question of any affinity in content or method, let alone any natural alliance between deconstruction and semiotics or semiology. Derrida’s exposition of the differentiability of the sign fits with Saussure’s linguistics because the latter is the backbone of the “dominant discourse,”\textsuperscript{37} one that in truth prolongs metaphysics, although it pretended to have superseded it once and for all. Derrida’s assertion that he draws only extreme consequences from the legitimate—metaphysical—critical—aspiration of structuralism does not contradict this conclusion.\textsuperscript{38}

Saussure’s linguistics and the structuralist sciences that espouse his methodological principles have “reminded” us again of the arbitrary character of the sign,\textsuperscript{39} but deconstruction does not halt at this insight. It aims at nothing less than “the transformation of general semiology into grammaticology.”\textsuperscript{40}

But then, the term \textit{grammatology} also falls short as a description of the effort and process of deconstruction. Its concern cannot be encapsulated in any term ending in \textit{-ology} and does not even coincide with the \textit{gramma}, the written sign, which easily leads to misunderstanding, for example, as a limited interpretation of the \textit{written} text.

Deconstructions rather obey, and bear witness to, a paradoxical \textit{pas d’écriture} (step of [not] writing)—a “step” and also a crossing out—which can probably best be expressed as a “practice” (\textit{pratique}),\textsuperscript{41} at least insofar as this term is removed from the traditional Aristotelian opposition between \textit{theoria} and \textit{praxis} and delimited by the Hegelian, dialectical (i.e., “negative”) “labor of the concept.”

The argumentative pattern in which Derrida approaches Saussure—playing the text’s letter against the spirit, exposing the “tension between gesture [\textit{geste}] and statement [\textit{propos}]”\textsuperscript{42}—does not differ in effort and result from that of his accompanying deconstructive readings of Hegel, Freud, Heidegger, Levinas, or, for that matter, anyone else. The ambiguity uncovered in Saussure is also found in Hegel’s semiology, in Freud’s psychoanalysis, in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, and in Levinas’s thinking of the Other. Yet one would hesitate to call the deconstructive readings neo-

\textsuperscript{36} Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology}, 29 / 44.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 99 / 147; and \textit{Positions}, 8 / 109.
\textsuperscript{38} See Derrida, \textit{Positions}, 27–28 and 36 / 39 and 49.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 9 / 17.
\textsuperscript{40} Derrida, \textit{Margins of Philosophy}, 15 / 16.
\textsuperscript{41} Derrida, \textit{Positions}, 90 / 124.
\textsuperscript{42} Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology}, 30 / 45. He also writes: “my quarry is not primarily Ferdinand de Saussure’s intention or motivation, but rather the entire uncritical tradition which he inherits here” (45–46 / 67, trans. modified).
Hegelian, neo-Freudian, neo-Heideggerian, or neo-Levinasian. Why, then, insist on the adjective *neostructuralist*?

Frank’s assertion that Derrida both “radicalizes” and “refutes” Saussure’s theory of signs and system of concepts—from a Nietzschean perspective or, rather, perspectivism—can only with great difficulty be seen as an adequate response to this question.43 Neither the repertory of radicalization nor that of radical refutation and decisive breaks—of *a coupure épistémologique*, to use Louis Althusser’s terminology—characterizes the gesture or practice called “deconstruction.” All characterizations of deconstruction in terms of some iconoclasm are of little help in clarifying its “point”—if there is one (or only one). They put Derrida’s enterprise in a certain—suspect, adventuristic, and at bottom irresponsible—light.

Derrida and the Jewish Tradition: Habermas’s Critique

If Derrida’s notions of Scripture and trace should be understood neither as neostructuralist nor as Heideggerian, Nietzschean, Freudian, or even Levinasian, against what backdrop should they be understood? Is it useful and justifiable to carry them back to a Jewish or negative theological and mystical heritage? Or does this hermeneutical search for the most appropriate context neutralize the purpose of Derrida’s work from the start? In other words, does such a maneuver block the ability to observe his particular use of, for example, religious idiom?

In a cultural climate in which deconstructive thinking is often accused of “indifferentism,” its surprising links with the religious-theological tradition can offer an important counterweight. Yet here, too, care should be taken. We meet here a theme in Derrida’s work which until recently has appeared marginal in several respects. Except for one crucial lecture devoted to his preoccupation with negative theology, the theme announced itself mainly in marginal notes to texts by Kafka, Benjamin, Celan, Jabès, Blanchot, and Levinas, in which ethical-religious motifs were traced and varied. The undeniable involvement of these and other writings with the Jewish heritage can only with difficulty, if at all, be traced back to religious sources (Tenach, Talmud, let alone Kabbalah) and is only obliquely observable in a continuous process of translation and reinscription. At the same time, it seems to involve no more than occasionally inserted quotations. But a quotation is never “merely” a quotation: it summons, shakes awake, spurs on,44 even (or

44. A quotation, says Derrida, referring to the Latin connotation of the term, is an “incitement,” a “solicitation” (see *Parages*, 10).
especially) where it is cited out of context. This does not deny that for de-
construction all supposedly “original” motifs are always already subject to a
ceaseless process of shifting meanings. The “origin” that Derrida’s text more
or less expressly “reflects” and to which it reacts was in a certain sense never
there in its integrity or as such.

It does not help to remind Derrida of the — unconscious or unplanned —
Jewish signature of his work.\textsuperscript{45} Although he sings the final essay in \textit{Writing and Difference} “Reb Dérissa,”\textsuperscript{46} Derrida reacts with unconcealed irony to the
suggestion that he may be under the latent influence of the Jewish tradition of
commentary and midrash. In an interview, he admitted that he regrets
being unfamiliar with the Talmud. The supposed echo of Jewish themes in
his writings cannot be explained by a thorough familiarity with Hebrew or
by religious education. The most that could be suspected, he suggests, is
that the Talmud, in some puzzling way, knows \textit{him}—or perhaps \textit{itself in him}.\textsuperscript{47}

To further analyze the scope of Derrida’s use of religious tradition, we
may perhaps best turn to the interpretation, equally intriguing and moot,
that Habermas has given to his work. In a polemical treatment of several
alleged characteristics of Derrida’s thinking, in his \textit{Philosophical Discourse
of Modernity} Habermas defends two apparently contradictory theses. First,
he asserts that, all things considered, Derrida has been unable to free him-
sel from the “subject-philosophical” premises in Heidegger’s “temporalized
philosophy of origins.” Second, he stresses that the \textit{tenor} of these thinkers’
writings nevertheless exhibits a remarkable difference. According to Haber-
mas, Derrida’s work, like Heidegger’s, is obsessed by the—as it were ex-
ponentially—increasing volatility of meaning in the modern epoch. Both
would agree that this “withdrawal” of what was once unified in the true, the
good, and the beautiful is no longer comprehensible in classical, metaphysi-
cal, or substantialist referential—or even differential—terms. What we are
left with is no longer the feeble silhouette of an original divine revelation
and the reason reflected in and on it: in principle and, if we might say so,
in fact the trace of the other “is” at once much less and, paradoxically, far
more than what traditional ontology and onto-theology, including the late
Heideggerian thinking of Being, aim at.

Yet Derrida is supposed to (want to) give a more radically different turn

\textsuperscript{45} See François Laruelle, \textit{Les Philosophies de la différence: Introduction critique} (Paris:
\textsuperscript{46} Derrida, \textit{Writing and Difference}, 300 / 436.
to this diagnosis than does Heidegger. This other orientation finds its foun-
dation, according to Habermas, in the numerous themes or quotations taken
from Jewish messianism and from mysticism. But various characteristics of
rabbinical and kabbalistic hermeneutics are also said to have left their traces
in Derrida’s reading. His rehabilitation of Scripture is said to have drawn on
religious sources without being theological or confessional in the custom-
ary sense. What is more, Derrida owes to this thematic and methodological
heritage his resistance to the political-moral insensitivity of the “paganism
purified by Hölderlin” which, Habermas believes, ultimately characterizes
Heidegger’s work. Unlike Heidegger, Derrida is said to have been on his
guard against discovering a diffuse ontological “fluid” in what withdraws in
or from modern experience.

A labyrinthine mirror of texts is thus found to
have replaced the epochal history of Being. These texts—and the com-
mentary attached to them—refer to a primeval scripture that as such can never
be discovered by any text, concept, or poetic word.

Yet Habermas thinks that, in the final analysis, this different tone leaves
a fundamental agreement between the two authors intact. And that is ulti-
mately his point. Both Heidegger and Derrida are thought to abandon the
task of critical reflection, preferring to invoke an indefinable authority. To
be sure, Derrida is said no longer to fixate on a thought of “Being that being
lacks” but, rather, turns to deciphering a “no longer holy Scripture, wan-
dering in exile, alienated from its own meaning and witnessing to the ab-
sence of the holy testament.”

Undermining the hierarchy of living word
and dead writing, of spirit and letter, as well as the contrast between pneu-
matology and grammatology, reveals in essence a radically transformed rab-
binical hermeneutic. It is no longer a reflection on the unique incarnation
of a divine act of will, creation, or recreation, for from now on only an in-
terminable process of revelation that takes place in the indefatigable inter-
pretation of texts is deemed to bring about the redemption of humanity and
the world. Even the most secular translation of the holy continues this reve-
lation. Derrida drastically modifies the traditional way of commenting on
texts because he includes nonreligiously inspired texts in his considerations
and gives no text absolute authority. But this procedure nonetheless guaran-
tees him a place in the tradition of what is called the “heretical hermeneutic,”

49. Ibid., 164 / 196.
50. Ibid., 182 / 214.
52. Ibid., 104, 120.
which Gershom Scholem’s historical studies on Jewish mysticism, especially on Kabbalah, have recalled from oblivion. Derrida’s work is thus likewise said to return to orthodox tradition via a heretical way of thinking.\textsuperscript{53} His Kafkaesque vision of the documentary value of modern experience is said to renew a Jewish tradition that, in contrast to Christian teaching, cannot be incorporated in the one book that seals the canon but seeks traces where totality or ultimate meaning no longer shines through. For the same reason his work is said to show no archaic or fatalistic traits. On the contrary, the bent toward subversive, anarchistic revolt dominates.\textsuperscript{54}

According to Habermas, this difference in intention is linked to a difference in frame of reference. Not Hölderlin and the romantic Dionysus reception but monotheistic tradition ultimately determines the horizon of deconstruction. Whereas Heidegger turns against the ontotheological heritage, even against all of modernity, Derrida “luckily”\textsuperscript{55} — that is to say, less radically than Heidegger — falls back on the critical point where monotheism and mysticism turned into Enlightenment. Seen in this way, the main point of Derrida’s work is not the destruction of all traditional dogmatic content but the renewal of a “discourse with God,” albeit this time under postmetaphysical and, perhaps, postmodern conditions.\textsuperscript{56} What makes Derrida’s undertaking more responsible but — philosophically speaking — no less problematic, in Habermas’s opinion, is a melody whose timbre, while not excluding certain perilous dissonances, does, in the end, temper and eventually silence them.

How are we to understand this minimal but crucial and indelible distinction between Heidegger and Derrida? Must we examine biographical and historical elements, \textit{data}, in the emphatic sense Derrida gives to these notions, in the wake of Celan?\textsuperscript{57} Or does a more meticulous reading provide us with additional information on the undeniable differences between Heidegger and Derrida? Does not Habermas’s polemical essay unwittingly provide the best proof of Derrida’s thesis that the decisive difference between philosophical discussions ultimately lies in their different \textit{tonality}? What is decisive seems thus not an argumentative, reconstructible difference in the way thought is structured but a distinction in tact and judgment. The “thinking of Being,” or \textit{Andenken}, unlike deconstructive thinking, responds to an

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{54} Habermas, \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity}, 182 / 214.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 183 / 216.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 184 / 218.
\textsuperscript{57} See de Vries, “Le Schibboleth de l’éthique: Derrida avec Celan.”
indefinable sending of Being, or Seinsgeschick. Nevertheless, Habermas is suspicious, even in the subversive Derridian thinking about difference, of a merely formal pattern of thought, which is poor in concrete political content and must be filled in, as the historical-social situation requires, in an arbitrary and therefore ultimately decisionist manner. Nevertheless, Habermas is suspicious, even in the subversive Derridian thinking about difference, of a merely formal pattern of thought, which is poor in concrete political content and must be filled in, as the historical-social situation requires, in an arbitrary and therefore ultimately decisionist manner. 58 Needless to say, this is not Derrida’s own view.

Derrida notes that his thinking is marked by

what is more at home in literature than in philosophy, . . . an idiomatic writing, . . . , a character that you cannot appropriate [because] it characterizes you without belonging to you. You never notice it, only others do, except in fits of madness that fuse life and death. It is ruinous to dream of creating a language or song that would be yours—not as the attributes of an “ego,” but rather the accented timbre, I mean, the musical timbre of your own most illegible history . . . ; not a style but an intersection of singularities, life styles, voices, writing, the baggage you carry with you and cannot leave behind. 59

In this sense there is in Derrida a certain participation in a manner in which a community—the Jewish—deciphers its forcefully uprooted existence in writings and, in this way, lives out its restlessness. 60

It is not in any religious content or substance, therefore, that we should seek the common element that links deconstruction to the Jewish hermeneutical tradition. Habermas again shows this in a comment as involuntary as it is apt. He refers to Scholem’s analysis of a kabbalistic tradition according to which only the aleph (as first letter of all commandments) really belongs to revelation in the strict sense of the word. This revelation would then become a mystical concept that “while itself being infinitely filled with meaning is yet without specific meaning. It is something that— to ground religious authority—would have to be translated into human languages. . . . Every utterance that grounds authority [in this way], however valid and eminent it may be, is still a human interpretation of something that transcends this explanation.” 61

58. Habermas, Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 140–41 / 168–69. See for this and the following analysis also Habermas, “Comment répondre à la question éthique?” in Cohen and Zagury-Orly, Judéités, 181–96.
61. Gershom Scholem, Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik (Frankfurt a.M.; Suhrkamp, 1973), 47; cited after Habermas, Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 183 / 216. See also Habermas’s
In this kabbalistic, mystical concept of a revelation that precedes every articulation of content, being its prerequisite without being its possession, Habermas sees an analogy with the \( a \) of Derrida’s \textit{différence}. Is this analogy plausible? Does it bring us any farther? My closing considerations center on the inevitability and limited value of such a parallelism.

**Derrida and Negative Theology**

There is a good deal of confusion about the ethical-theological purport of Derrida’s work. Some authors accuse Derrida of a suspect revival of mysticism and negative theology; others do just the reverse, accusing him of being insensitive to religious and ethical questions. At the basis of both interpretations lies a widespread incomprehension that, in concluding I would like to try to clarify. My hypothesis is, once again, treacherously simple, almost trivial. In tune with my insistence on the diminishing and abiding intelligibility of the discourse on (and of) God, in part 1 of this study, and in line with my overall argumentation in \textit{Philosophy and the Turn to Religion}, I wish to show that Derrida neither writes off the core questions of negative theology nor naively repeats them. His position is best summarized in an early quotation from \textit{Of Grammatology}: “The ‘theological’ is a determined moment in the total movement of the trace.”\(^{62}\) What does “the theological” mean here? In what sense is it a “well-determined,” \textit{inevitable}, and even perhaps \textit{constitutive} “moment within the total movement of the trace”?

Peter Kemp has noted that there is a deep abyss between deconstructive thinking and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century humanism and materialism. The latter, in his view, only reverse the hierarchy of metaphysical oppositions, specifically theology and anthropology, without putting them into question, as deconstruction does. But, Kemp continues, the deconstruction of these oppositions also overshoots its goal because it loses sight of the \textit{ethical impetus} of modern religious criticism. By contrast, Kemp concludes, Derrida’s work, all things considered, leads to the defense of an \textit{amoral atheism}.\(^{63}\)

Various motifs in Derrida’s post-1972 work after the “turn,” or \textit{Kehre}, apparent in the publication of \textit{Dissemination} (Kemp refers to \textit{Glash} and \textit{Spurs}) essays on Scholem in \textit{Philosophisch-politische Profile} and in \textit{Vom sinnlichen Eindruck zum symbolischer Ausdruck}, trans. in \textit{Religion and Rationality}, ed. Mendieta. For an interpretation of the so-called mystical postulate, see my \textit{Religion and Violence}, chap. 3.


contradict this interpretation on virtually each and every page. They are all linked to the notion of a gift, which is said to precede Being, its truth, and, it should be added, also the very figure of the es gibt, and is thus no longer thinkable or utterable in ontological terms, in terms of the thought of Being, of Seyn or Sein, crossed out or otherwise. But even this new timbre in Derrida’s work does not, in Kemp’s opinion, undo the ethical lacuna.

At the other end of the spectrum of interpretation, Mikel Dufrenne pleads for a philosophy that is no longer overdetermined ethically or theologically.64 Dufrenne contends that Derrida’s work should not be understood as amoral or atheistic but, rather, as a resumption of the very tradition of theology—especially negative theology—from which it seeks to set itself apart. In negative theology we encounter the secret core of truth in every theology, which says that above all we must avoid giving names to God that do not do Him justice. Since every determination (determinatio) of the divine essence is at once a negation (a denial of other determinations, i.e., other negations), only a permanent “negating” of all feasible negations could, in this view, guarantee respect for the name called. Only by traversing the via negationis might the idolatry of anthropomorphism be put aside indefinitely. Or so it seems.

Dufrenne believes we find a similar idea in the thought of différence. Like negative theology, deconstructive reading affirms the effectiveness of a “non-presence.” It endorses the absence of the origin, the “originary” supplementarity, of all meaning. Such a notion is incompatible with affirmation of a highest Being, an absolute telos, or, for that matter, a creation out of nothing. If anything, we are dealing here with a “nil that creates, a determining indeterminateness.”65 In Derrida’s analyses of the differential play that precedes Being and beings (and both permits and precludes them from coming into existence), Dufrenne thus sees “a sort of pre-God,” meaning “not the negation of God, but the negative of a God.”66

I see at least two different argumentative strategies in Derrida’s work which require an analysis of the relationship between deconstruction and negative theology more nuanced than those Kemp and Dufrenne give. I will analyze them more closely using two texts: the early, programmatic Differance, published in 1968, and “Comment ne pas parler: Denégations” (“How to Avoid Speaking: Denials”), delivered as a lecture in Jerusalem in

65. Ibid., 20.
66. Ibid.
1986. Both texts contain a subtle resumption of the destruction of onto-theology in the line of (and in discussion with) Heidegger. They also anticipate and reiterate certain central arguments and motifs we have analyzed in Adorno and Levinas.

In the first essay Derrida emphasizes that *différance* is preeminently the “inexpressible.” But being the interplay of temporal and spatial differences, the “production” of difference, it “is” in no way “the primary prescription or the prophetic annunciation of an imminent and as yet unheard-of nomination.”67 It includes no “ineffable Being which no name could approach: God, for example.”68 *Différance* cannot be classified in any category of being and must be not only distinguished from a religious doctrine and imperative but also withdrawn from the jurisdiction of any ontology or any other semantic system: “yet aspects which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which 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.”69

In “How to Avoid Speaking” Derrida’s goal is to demonstrate this proposition using citations from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart. His later “Sauf le nom” (originally published as the postscript to a book entitled *Derrida and Negative Theology*) further explicates this analysis in a few ostensibly poly-voiced comments on work by Angelus Silesius.70

Certainly, some mystics withhold every ontic characteristic, sometimes even the predicate “existence,” from the superior, divine, existing. Speaking about God’s “perfection” amounts to referring to a reality on the far side of being, or even to more than all that. Derrida tellingly sets out this condition. He writes that, in the tradition of negative theology, the *hyper-* of the *hyperousios* attributed to God indicates both “no more being” and “being more than being,” that is, a “being more” beyond all negative and positive predication. The prefix *hyper-* refers to more than a removal in a spatial or temporal sense. It evokes more than a reality that precedes space and time, surpasses, encompasses, or permeates them. The *hyper-* also evokes a notion

68. Ibid., 26 / 26, my emph.
69. Ibid., 6 / 6.
70. See Jacques Derrida, *Sauf le nom* (*Post Scriptum*) (Paris: Galilée, 1993); trans. under the title *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). See also the section devoted to Angelus Silesius in my *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*. 
of hierarchy. Derrida summarizes this pluriform meaning in the expression “plus (être) que l’être: no more being and being more than Being.”

Negative theology’s hyperbolic imagery thus doubly outdoes the thought of presence. Its project stands or falls by this strategy, for, however much it succeeds with a given form of presence, the deus absconditus, the theos agnostos—about which it is said that He surpasses all intellectual, discursive knowledge—is not Himself nothing. The antithesis between theism and atheism and the question of God’s existence has lost most of its relevance here. But this does not deny that the plus d’être of His essence includes not only a negation but above all a superlative modifying Being. Even more, the most negative theology “is” a super-ontology.

The negative theological thinking that Derrida studies here is marked by an “unusual alliance,” a double bind of “two powers” and “two voices”: first, a “hyper-critique” that leaves nothing intact and, all things considered, undermines every philosophy, theology, science, ethics, aesthetics, and common sense; and, second, an affirmation that withdraws from every discussion and every critique and which in the tradition sometimes can adopt an extremely dogmatic tone.

By way of clarification Derrida cites Meister Eckhart’s sermon “Quasi stella matutina.” There Eckhart states that the assertion that God proceeds above Being (über wesen) in no way implies that He should be denied all Being. The expression stresses that Being is “heightened [gehöhet].” Thus, the negative predications that Eckhart adopts from Augustine—“God is wise without wisdom, good without goodness, powerful without power”—are, all things considered, denials without negativity. Formulations in the pattern of “God is X without X” not only liberate God from all generalities; they are hyper-affirmative. They shed light on a “grammatical anthropomorphism” inherent in the vernacular that can only express an inner worldly—finite—negativity. Above all, they evoke a transcendent instance that, as Derrida suggests in “How to Avoid Speaking,” is at once “nothing else” and “totally other” than whatever it is that is transcended. It is this process of reiteration without strict or simple repetition (without mimesis, analogy, or specula-


72. Levinas, too, makes no secret of this hyperbolic double bind. In his deployment of the via eminentiae, the plus has, above all, the meaning of being better than Being. But this is not to deny that the way of the superlative consists less in devaluing ontology than in attempting to outdo it: the “other-than-being” is more ontological than ontology.
tive reflection) which permits negative theology to augment finite language “ad infinitum.” Thus, according to Eckhart, all being can be considered as a “gateway” to the divine space (temple) or, put differently, as a threshold that must be crossed on the way to God’s atopia, but one that also separates us from it. And, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, all anthropomorphic words and images can assume the function of “holy allegories” when they are used and taught in the right way.73

The hyperbole of the “X ‘is’ above/beyond all that is,” Derrida writes. It witnesses to this transcendence and announces it. It does this in more than one sense: it not only displays it as one possibility; it also evokes it. It “provokes” and “produces” the structure that it describes: it is a postscript and an introduction simultaneously.

Derrida’s deconstruction of theology therefore takes aim at both its classical and its nonclassical concepts. Theology here means the hard core of the thought of presence (i.e., of the parousia, the logocentrism at the heart of every ontotheology), as well as the ontologizing or hypostasizing of an absence or lack. Every theology continues to be borne by the biblical assurance “someday we will see in the light.” On closer analysis this eschato-apocalyptic prospect of removing the veil in a divine manifestation makes of every theology a “positive” argument, even when it is presented as a via analogiae, a via negativa, a via eminentiae, or takes the silent form of some inexpressible mysticism. Where one has no conceivable prospect of visio dei, one has forsaken the realm of theology.

Measured against such a conception of theology, deconstruction can only be called “atheological.” It calls into question every postulation of a center that gives meaning — although it does not disclaim the desire for one — and so it examines classical and modern variants of the via analogiae, via negationis, and via eminentiae against the light of a more original “event”: a differential “interplay” without beginning or end which literally thwarts the existence of every spiritual secret through its writing — through the grammē or, more precisely still, the seriatire of marks.

This procedure has an unmistakably negative aspect. Deconstruction brings about a certain corrosion of the authority of tradition and more: it disrupts the theological investment as well as the emotional charge of every sign. When it is correct that “the sign” and “the divinity,” as Derrida writes, have “the same time and place of birth,” when the “epoch of the sign” is

73. The same logic of denial also explains why, according to Derrida, mystical theology is in a certain sense coextensive with the symbolical.
“essentially theological,” there follows an unavoidable conclusion. Deconstruction of the linguistic sign shakes the foundations of nothing less than the central theological premise of Western Logos—“even when it professes to be atheistic.”74 Outside the generalized matrix, conception, and practice of “writing” there is no question of a theological notion, and “within it” or, better, as “writing” it becomes extremely problematic.

Is that the only, or even the most decisive, conclusion to be drawn from Derrida’s argument? Or does this merely blur the line that demarcates the religious and isolates the profane? Does Derrida’s analysis stipulate without further ado that theological difference can only be found in extreme asceticism, or does he also betray a singular inscription of theology? Is it perhaps even possible to interpret his reading as a revival of the discursive strategy and the central motif of negative theology?

In “How to Avoid Speaking,” this question is not answered with a mere denial. This extremely difficult and subtle text promises a more detailed development of what Derrida admits is thus far a brief, elliptical answer to the problem of how the paths of deconstruction and negative theology cross only to diverge again. “How to Avoid Speaking” gives nuance to the delimiting line drawn in “Différance”: insofar as negative theology postulates, or at least accepts as possible, a hyperessentiality and an intuitive assessment prepared by the via negativa, it rests on premises that can indeed be deconstructed.

Yet is it so easy to speak of the tradition of negative theology, as if we knew what that means? Supposing, furthermore, that this negative theology can be identified as a more or less homogeneous corpus of texts with its own theme and rhetoric, how is one to speak of it? Is not the via negativa the only suitable approach to negative theology? In other words: “Is there ever anything other than a ‘negative theology’ of ‘negative theology’?”75 If this is the case, the intention to enumerate the agreements and differences between deconstruction and negative theology once and for all is a promise that can never be fulfilled. Derrida’s intention, expressed in Jerusalem, to take up this subject without further delay indicates an almost impossible task. Perhaps, he suggests, this circumstance is the sought-for “answer” to the fact that one “can never decide whether deferring, as such, brings about precisely that which it defers and alters.”76

74. Derrida, Of Grammatology, 323 n. 3 / 13 n. 3.
75. Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking,” 13 / Psyché, 546.
76. Ibid.
The text that “keeps” an old promise has itself the character of a promise. There is more to be said on the complex structure of this Versprechen, as analyzed by Heidegger and Paul de Man. It will suffice here to note that Derrida’s lecture not only, or not primarily, tries to provide a theoretical essay about negative theology. Rather, it consciously adopts—as always—the contours of what it describes. But this “performative interpretation” is, in all seriousness, also a parody. Derrida does not speak of a fable—a “mystic fable,” as Michel de Certeau would have said—without reason.

“How to Avoid Speaking” is, in Derrida’s own words, the most “autobiographical” text he has written thus far (except, perhaps, for “Circonfession”). Yet here Derrida does not directly pursue what we would expect. There is no explanation of a Jewish (and Arabic) heritage. These resound only indirectly. That this lecture lets the way of arguing—the via negativa—speak for itself has repercussions for the contours that this text’s “author” adopts: this “autobiographical” lecture follows or performs the figure it describes. The question “How to Avoid Speaking?” touches more than theology; it touches the author, the self in question. How is one to avoid speaking of oneself? How can one, in an explanation of oneself, be it arbitrary or not, also find or discover the other, perhaps even oneself as another (Soi-même comme un autre, as Ricoeur’s title suggests)?

Thus, in the present text Derrida speaks about himself in obliquo, in the nearly casual reference to a negative-theological or quasi-mystical figure of thought that is neither Greek nor Christian but, rather, Jewish or Arabic. As he says himself, he constructs his reading of three different paradigms, which he borrows successively from Plato, Christian mystics (particularly Pseudo-Dionysius and Eckhart), and finally Heidegger, into an open space—an emptiness or desert, the most consistent apophasis—in which the vague echo of these alternative traditions concerning the absolute otherness of the other can resonate.

What permits Derrida to link his indirectly discussed “heritage” to the tradition of negative theology? He gives the following reason. Wherever (philosophical, ethical-political, or literary) assertions or presentations appear in a negative guise—and deconstructive reading is compelled to use a similar mode of speaking and writing—a first step on the path of negative theology has already been taken and the argumentative procedure becomes in a certain sense “theological.” Adorno’s dialectical critique of dialectics and Levinas’s phenomenological critique of phenomenology—the two main examples of negative metaphysics whose contours we have been exploring—would be no exception to this general rule and hence, like Derrida’s own
oeuvre, resemble the apophatic path up to a certain point. Indeed, in Derrida's words, “Every time I say: X is neither this nor that, neither the contrary of this nor of that, neither the simple neutralization of this nor of that with which it has nothing in common, being absolutely heterogeneous to or incommensurable with them, I would start to speak of God, under this name or another.” The name (not the concept) of God, seen this way, represents all that cannot be named directly: “‘God’ would name that without which one would not know to account for any negativity.” Even in denying or suspending God’s existence, a certain respect can be heard, a “respect for a divine cause which does not even need to ‘be.’” According to Derrida, it is here that those who want to brand deconstruction a symptom of (post)modern nihilism (or the last convulsion of faith) find their primary argument. Nothing forbids such a reading. One can always with reason assert that the hyperessence of which negative theology speaks has “the same” referent as the term différence, that it expresses an “event” that does not use the terminology of Being in giving to understand all that is or all that matters, that is to say, signifies or counts in the end. It is true that such a theological annexation of deconstruction, as well as of all its negative dialectical or phenomenological analogues, backfires and is successful only when the theological reading empties itself and the name God is—unsuccessfully—stripped of every proposition and reference and thereby becomes a virtual abstraction or emptied X and is hence divided in and against itself. But this does not deny that this annexation always remains possible, even inevitable, as the inescapable horizon of idolatry and blasphemy, of fidelity by way of betrayal. Such betrayal always remains the “opportunity” (and the risk) of an “incomparable” structure of “limitless ability to translate,” which has nothing to do with a “universal language,” with an “ecumenism” or a “consensus,” but with a future-oriented speaking and writing that in a much more radical sense can be shared and on whose basis the Greek, Christian, and European apophasis permits, or requires, numerous other instantiations. The real question then becomes how not to speak, now that theological speaking has become unavoidable and silence impossible.

For these reasons alone, Derrida believes that the well-known last sentence in Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus—“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”—cannot be the last word, giving way to a mere wordless showing of what matters and, if not signals, then at least

77. Ibid., 6 / 538.
78. Ibid., 7 / 538.
79. Ibid.
appeals to us most. Like Adorno, whose explicit reversals of Wittgenstein’s proposition we have studied in part 3, Derrida turns this logical inference from “transcendental lingualism” upside down: whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must speak. There can, therefore, be no question of God’s death in language. In Derrida this “obligation” to speak of (or from) “God” is not a moral obligation. It is, as in Wittgenstein, a must, not (or not primarily) an ought. Every moral obligation that one adopts with regard to this having to “name what cannot be named” is always borne by a special structure that makes this injunction a troublesome necessity. For Derrida, this necessity differs from the necessity to keep silent which Wittgenstein analyses in his Tractatus: it has less to do with the propositional structure of language than with the unavoidable risk of a defilement (or contamination) of every mark.

This structure fares poorly with the express affirmation that, not accidentally, is the converse of Wittgenstein’s well-known dictum “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words [Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches]. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical” (Tractatus 6.522). According to Derrida, this assurance should make clear that Wittgenstein’s radical imperative to be silent, like the circumscribing movement of negative theology, nonetheless prepares for the manifestation of an emphatic (or apophatic) reality. By contrast, this is a promise that the thought of the trace can never keep. Can a totally other “discourse,” an articulation that precedes and exceeds every enunciation of speaking and writing—in deed, every gesture of doing and judging—possibly respect the alterity of this trace?

Sometimes it seems as if Derrida sees this respect guaranteed in pre-predicative prayer. But a closer analysis shows that when negative theologies begin or end with prayer, this does not turn them into a purely performative genre. They are never protected from the accusation of secretly postulating or implying metaphysical or ontological truths. Although prayer may be ante-predicative in the way it addresses the other, Derrida leaves no doubt that it owes its very existence to a possible contamination. Praise is never purely performative (or never simply “neither true nor untrue,” to use Aristotle’s words). It always contains a constitutive component, however implicit. If prayer did not contain the risk of being lost (in predication, citation, mechanical repetition, Scripture, code, or parody) and thus of missing its mark, no theology, positive or negative, would be necessary or, for that matter, possible. In a certain sense it is only prayer’s failure that calls theology into existence. Yet this “negativity” also presupposes an indelible “affirmation”—an “acquiescence” or “originary affirmation,” as Derrida says
in *De l’esprit* (*Of Spirit*)—lest the trace’s lapse become inexperienceable “as such,” that is to say, in its barely dialectizable structure and even less phenomenologizable givenness or event.

This signaling of and appeal to the other (or others, or Other), which, says Derrida, “always already preceded the speech to which it has never been present a first time, announces itself in advance as a recall [a reminder and warning, *rappel*]. . . . Prior to every proposition and even before all discourse in general—whether a promise, prayer, praise, celebration. The most negative discourse, even beyond all nihilisms and negative dialectics, preserves a trace of the other.”\(^8^0\) As Derrida remarks elsewhere, in the original affirmation given with (and through) the introduction of language (or any other system of signification), we are linked via a faith that cannot be eliminated by any erasure in any discourse and by any narrative. A text in which such erasure would be complete would be, precisely, a “figure of evil [figure du mal],”\(^8^1\) the very specter of the worst, of violence become absolute.

80. Ibid., 28 / 560.