



University of Leicester  
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**Deconstructing the Name:**  
**Three Theological Paradoxes of Language in Literary Discourse**

By

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**Juliet**

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy:  
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.  
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
Belonging to a man. O be some other name!  
What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other word would smell as sweet.  
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,  
And for thy name - which is no part of thee -  
Take all myself.

...

**Romeo**

By a name

I know not how to tell thee who I am.  
My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself  
Because it is an enemy to thee.  
Had I it written, I would tear the word.

*William Shakespeare*

*Romeo and Juliet (II, i, 80-99)*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used in the text and footnotes for the frequently cited works by Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin. Any other references are included in the footnotes.

### Jacques Derrida

- AIJD "An Interview with Jacques Derrida," with James Kearns and Ken Newton, *The Literary Review*, 14 (18 April - 1 May, 1980), pp. 21-22.
- B "Biodegradables: Seven Diary Fragments," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 15:4 (Summer 1989), pp. 812-73.
- BM "Back from Moscow, in the USSR," trans. Mary Quaintance, in Mark Poster, ed., *Politics, Theory, and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 197-235.
- CCP "Che cos'è la poesia?," trans. Peggy Kamuf, in Elisabeth Weber, ed., *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 288-99.
- DF "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 1-27.
- DO "Deconstruction and the Other," in Richard Kearney, ed., *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 156-176.
- DS *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1993).
- EJ "Edmund Jabès and the Question of the Book," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 64-78.
- EO *The Ear of the Other - Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, ed. Christie V. McDonald (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).
- FL "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," trans. Mary Quaintance, in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson, eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67.
- FS "Force and Signification," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 3-30.
- G *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).
- HAS "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden, in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Language of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 3-70.
- LG "The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Rondell, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 221-252.
- LI *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).
- LJF "Letter to a Japanese Friend," trans. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in *A Derrida*

- Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 270-276.
- LO "Living On / Border Lines," trans. James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom, et al, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 75-176.
- MO *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- MPDM *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
- NY "A Number of Yes," trans. Brian Holmes, *Qui Parle*, 2:2 (Fall 1988), pp. 120-33.
- OG *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).
- P *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- PO *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: The Athlone Press, 1987).
- RDP "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," trans. Simon Critchley, in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau and Richard Rorty* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 77-88.
- S *Signeponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
- SN "Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)," trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., in *On the Name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 33-85.
- SNS *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).
- SOR "Sending: On Representation," trans. Peter and Mary Ann Caws, *Social Research*, 49:2 (Summer 1982), pp. 294-326.
- SQR "Some Questions and Responses," in Nigel Fabb, Derek Attridge, Alan Durant, and Colin MacCabe, eds., *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 252-264.
- SSP "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," trans. Alan Bass, in Rick Rylance, ed., *Debating Texts: A Reader in 20th. Century Literary Theory and Method* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987), pp. 123-136.
- SST "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms," trans. Anne Tomiche, in David Carroll, ed., *The States of 'Theory': History, art and Critical Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 63-95.
- TB "Des Tours de Babel," trans. Joseph F. Graham, in Joseph F. Graham, ed., *Difference in Translation*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 165-207.
- TSI "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida," trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75.
- VM "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 79-153.
- WM "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 207-271.

### Walter Benjamin

- CWB *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- OGTD *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 1985).
- OL "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," trans. Edmund Jephcott, and Kingsley Shorter, in *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 107-123.
- TOT "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1982), pp. 69-82.

Deconstructing the Name:  
Three Theological Paradoxes of Language in Literary Discourse

Amir Ali Nojournian

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of language in general and literary language in particular through a close reading of some key texts by Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin. Based on a comparative study of deconstruction and theological discourse, it identifies three paradoxes in literary language and argues that this can deeply affect the act of literary reading. The thesis is divided into three sections. Each section deals with a particular paradox and stages a theoretical discussion of the relation between two oppositional forces and ends with a reading of a literary text.

Part I is a study of the relation between the notions of singularity (originality) and generality (multiplicity). I contend that these two poles are not oppositional in a literary text. While the translated text always bears the singular mark(s) of the original text within it, the singularity of the text demands further translations. I read Jorge Luis Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" and argue that singularity and multiplicity interconnect in this text.

Part II examines the representational aspect of language against the self-referential (immanent) one. It then explains how referentiality takes the meaning effects of the text to both the edges and the centre. I look at these points in relation to Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* in which I suggest a labyrinthine structure illustrates this 'tug of war'.

Part III focuses on the notion of negation in language and its relation to Derrida's thought. I explain how in theological discourse, language is perceived as both negative and affirmative and later explain the curious relationship between deconstruction and negative theology. I also examine Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* to argue how the notion of 'silence' as the negative side of language cohabits with the literary text.

Finally, I ask to what extent literary discourse - through deconstructing the oppositions of singularity/multiplicity, representation/immanence, negation/affirmation - can take language to the limits of its metaphysical existence.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Redrawing the Lines*

Over the past thirty years or so, deconstruction as the nickname for Derrida's 'philosophy' has become part of the syllabus of most literature and some theology departments. It has not had the same luck in philosophy departments, though. This tells us a great deal about the state of deconstruction and its relation to the humanities disciplines. Deconstruction was first embraced by the literature department of Yale University. The book *Deconstruction and Criticism* in 1979 which is a collection of essays by Yale scholars such as de Man, Bloom, Miller, and Hartman, together with an essay by Derrida, became the canonical text for deconstruction and its reading of literature.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, the literary deconstruction of the Yale School is often looked upon with some disdain. Many believe in fact that the Yale scholars have got it all wrong. Deconstruction is not a negative reading of language that only looks for 'aporias' of logic. It effectively goes beyond this. Despite the fashionable murmurs that 'deconstruction is dead,' its fervour among literary scholars has not abated. A brief look at the literary theory section of any library will prove the fact that there are few "Literary Theory: A Reader" collections that have not included a text or two by Derrida and his disciples or have not added a chapter on 'deconstructive theory'.

Literary theory has not been able to ignore deconstruction not only because Derrida's thought focuses mainly on the process of signification, reference and meaning effects in a text, but also because deconstruction has introduced a new way of reading literary discourse. In 1980, on the defence of his thesis, Derrida reminded the

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, et al, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

committee that his constant interest has been literature and his first thesis (in 1957) was to be called "The Ideality of the Literary Object". He was to formulate a new theory of literature based on Husserlian phenomenology.<sup>2</sup> Derrida's own interventions in literary criticism are endless. To name a few, one can include his study of proper names in *Romeo and Juliet*, the notion of date in Celan's poetry, Mallarmé's name and his transgression of literature into criticism, Francis Ponge's signature of the text, Kafka's paradoxical implication of law and its relation to the divisions between the 'literary' and the 'non-literary,' his study of the notion of 'yes' in Joyce's *Ulysses* and readings of *Finnegans Wake*, Jabès's notion of 'the book,' and his many readings of Artaud, Genet, Bataille, Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Blanchot. However, despite Derrida's manifest enthusiasm for literary reading, and his frequent attempts to define the objectives and working practices of deconstruction, critics remain unsure of what one exactly does to a literary text that is called 'deconstruction'. More importantly, one correctly has to ask whether deconstruction is in fact an application of an approach to literature (the same as psychoanalytic, historicist, etc) or not. One of the motives behind this thesis is to examine the possibility of reading literary discourse without applying an approach. I will return to this later.

As I mentioned earlier, deconstruction has also been taught in theology departments. The most prominent one is Villanova University. Mark Taylor and John Caputo among many others, despite their differences, share the view that there is something deeply theological about Derrida's work. In this area, there are numerous number of writings that deal with the relation between deconstruction and Christianity, Judaism, Zen Buddhism and the many other religions of India and China. This is simply because from the very beginning of his deconstructive enterprise, Derrida has always invoked the notion of God and the sacred discourse. Yet, as I will explain later, Derrida's paradoxical view of these notions has motivated readings of deconstruction based on theological and atheological outlooks. One of the aims of this

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations," trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in Alan Montefiore, ed., *Philosophy in France Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 36-38.



thesis is to show the extent to which Derrida's critics have created misunderstandings and diversions in what we might call 'deconstructive criticism' by assimilating him to theology, negative theology, or mysticism in a reductive manner. However, I will explain that a comparative study of deconstruction and theology is still necessary yet in a restricted manner. In short, the discourses of theology and deconstruction share many questions regarding their use of language and text, but their final object of study is different.

Those who have not taken Derrida seriously enough are the philosophers and philosophy department scholars who are ironically the closest to Derrida's academic background. There are several reasons for this. *First*, since the mid-twentieth century the boundaries between philosophical discourse and the social sciences, literature, psychoanalysis, aesthetic studies, politics, and so on have become increasingly blurred and this has created some resistance in conventional scholarship. In fact, this negative attitude can also be seen in other disciplines as well. *Second*, the classical philosophy as we know goes back to the tradition of analytical philosophy in which Greek logic is central. Derrida's stand on Greek thinking and logic is one of the main reasons for this resistance. As a result, based on the classical presumptions, deconstruction cannot unproblematically be considered philosophical. Derrida aggravates this distance by calling his thought a fundamental "questioning" of philosophy. He believes that he has always attempted to find an 'other' site or a 'non-site' in order to interrogate philosophy. Therefore, believing in an "independent language" for philosophy is the major problem of a philosophical enquiry. To Derrida, one must always ask how we are able to write on philosophy if we are writing within the language of philosophy (DO, 159). *Third*, apart from writings on the philosophical discourse of his predecessors such as Plato, Hegel, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, Derrida has also written in a prolific manner on literary discourse, law, politics, psychoanalysis, painting, architecture, and, of course, religion. This is against the conventional practice of philosophical scholarship. All these reasons have contributed greatly to problematising the relation between philosophy and deconstruction.

This thesis however is an attempt to transgress the conventional borderlines of literature, philosophy and theology. I think this interdisciplinary approach will result in a more appropriate ground upon which to read literary discourse. The title of my thesis is an attempt to demonstrate this relation and, in this introduction, I intend to expand on the terms used in the title and give a proper background for the arguments in the body of the thesis. However, as the title ends with the terms “literary discourse,” my main aim in this project is also to provide three separate yet linked criteria in studying language, and in particular literary discourse, with the help of theological and philosophical notions. I would claim that these three criteria are in fact three paradoxes that can be examined in a text – what I call a certain kind of deconstructive literary reading.

In this thesis, I introduce Walter Benjamin as decisive in the shaping of Derrida’s thought on language. Therefore, I intend to read Derrida’s texts next to Benjamin’s and create a dialogue between them. Each part deals specifically with a few key texts by Derrida and Benjamin accompanied by readings of many other texts by them and also critiques of other scholars. I would argue that Derrida’s fascination with the theological accounts of language is related to Benjamin’s ideas to a great extent. This, I think, is not acknowledged enough in Derrida’s writings. I should also add that this thesis will act as an attempt to formulate and re-examine the basic notions of Benjamin’s theory of language. As Rodolphe Gasché notes, Benjamin scholars have not paid enough attention to the notions of the “communicability” and “translatability” of language.<sup>3</sup> I have particularly examined these two notions in Parts I and II.

From a different perspective, this project is also an examination of Derrida’s thought in the realms of critical and literary theory and its relation to theology. The thesis is divided into three sections. Each section deals with a particular paradox. In other words, I will demonstrate how the two poles of an opposition are not in effect oppositional: 1) singularity / iterability, 2) representation / immediacy, and 3)

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<sup>3</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, “Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Language,” in Rainer Nägele, ed., *Benjamin’s Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 88.

negation / affirmation. These three paradoxes are not separate from one another but interrelated. The oppositions are all theological themes that are treated here in a more generic critical manner. They are oriented around the logic of paradox and all are about the notion of the name and language.

The thesis narrows its degree of focus through each chapter while being divided into three separate oppositions. The argument starts with a close reading of *Genesis* by Benjamin and Derrida in Part I, 'Babel and the Paradox of Singularity'. The notion of 'iterability' and its relation to the theories of translation is discussed which, according to Derrida, lies at the heart of the Babel story. I explain how literary language (and theological discourse) is both singular and repeatable. I will go on to explore the way the two notions of singularity and generality invoke one another in literature. In Part II, 'The Paradox of Representation,' I look more closely at the distinction between language 'before Babel' (language of immediacy) and 'after Babel' (language of representation) and explain how these two 'faces' of language can simultaneously exist in Benjamin's and Derrida's thought. I will then draw some specific formulations on the notions of signification and referentiality. In Part III, 'The Paradox of Apophatic Discourse,' I focus in more detail on the question of language in both theological and literary discourse. It is in this part that I explicate Derrida's relationship with (negative) theology and examine the way negation and affirmation interact within literary language and theological discourse. In literary discourse, one can explore the way silence (negation of language) becomes part and parcel of language. Therefore, the thesis maintains a narrative structure while exploring three separate arguments.

### ***What is deconstruction?***

Let us see first what is meant by the term 'deconstruction' in this thesis. There is a general consensus amongst scholars to refer to whatever Derrida 'does' as 'deconstruction'. Yet there is a deep disagreement when we come to the question of what in fact Derrida 'does'. For Derrida himself, the fate of the term 'deconstruction'

has been a great surprise (LJF, 270). Since deconstruction embraces a host of Derrida's ideas, I think the reader first needs to have a description of what is meant by 'deconstruction' in this thesis.

I would argue that one of the main dictums of Derrida is his statement in his first presentation of his theory in "Structure, Sign, and Play" when he contends that, "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" (SSP, 128). This "necessity," to me, is the force behind deconstruction. In short, deconstruction should be referred to what already takes place within a system – here language – in which determinate meanings become vulnerable. In other words, deconstruction takes place within the language system making us aware of its 'gaps,' or 'aporias,' or 'undecidables'. Deconstruction tells us that the centre of a system that is supposed to be the reference of the system (transcendental signified) cannot guarantee a one-to-one relation between the signs and their assigned meanings.

Therefore, it is wrong to call deconstruction a "theorem," (SST, 94) "theory," "philosophy," (SST, 85) or even a "theoretical object" (SST, 94). For Derrida, deconstruction resists theory because "it has never simply been concerned with discursive meaning or content, the thematics or the semantics of a discourse. The reason is because it isn't simply a reading or an interpretation. . ." (SST, 86). 'Theory' presupposes a 'centre' or 'decidability' in order to work and this is what deconstruction has always demonstrated to be an illusion. For the same reason, deconstruction should not be called an "analysis" or a "critique" because it does not dismantle a structure to regress to "a *simple element*, toward an *indissoluble origin*" (LJF, 273). It is not a critique because it does not grant a privileged status to a Kantian "transcendental critique" (LJF, 273). In other words, it does not provide teleological results to critical enquiry. Unlike an "analysis," deconstruction is a " 'thought' [that] requires *both* the principle of reason *and* what is beyond the principle of reason, the *arkhe* and an-archy".<sup>4</sup> Defining deconstruction as a "method" also presupposes an outside tool to examine a

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils," trans. Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, *Diacritics*, 13:3 (Fall 1983), pp. 18-19.

system while deconstruction to Derrida always happens within. Deconstruction is not a method “[e]specially if the technical and procedural significations of the words are stressed” (LJF, 273). I presume that here Derrida is objecting to an epistemological sense of the term “method,” because, as he himself says later, deconstruction cannot be reduced to “a set of rules and transpose procedures” (LJF, 273). Furthermore, the “injunctions” of texts differ from one text to another. As a result, deconstruction cannot be a method because “one cannot prescribe one general method of reading” (DO, 174).

Bearing in mind that deconstruction is not a singular act or operation – because singularity is also to be deconstructed as we will see later – Derrida confines himself to calling it an “event” in the sense that it “takes place” (LJF, 274). He writes elsewhere that it is “what happens, what is happening today in what they call society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality, and so on and so forth. Deconstruction is the case” (SST, 85). Deconstruction always already takes place in the text and in this sense instead of being an “enterprise,” it is already “a symptom” (SQR, 262). Deconstruction “is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of subject, or even of modernity. *It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed*” (LJF, 274). He correctly mentions that “it,” in this definition, is not a subject. The enigma lies in the sense of “*se*” in the verb “*se déconstruire*” in which it might be better translated “it loses its construction” (LJF, 274). In other words, Derrida wants to reiterate the fact that deconstruction is not the subjective pronoun ‘it’ that ‘does’ the act of ‘deconstructing’. That is why Derrida objects to regarding deconstruction as “a structuralist gesture”. He thinks it is in fact “an antistructuralist gesture” (LJF, 272). Deconstruction is close to the sense of the “undoing, decomposing, and desedimenting of structures” but not in a negative sense: “Rather than destroying, it was also necessary to understand how an ‘ensemble’ was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end”. Therefore deconstruction, for Derrida, becomes close to “a genealogical restoration [*remonter*]” (LJF, 272). One can see this act of “genealogical

restoration” when Derrida returns to the double binds of ‘pharmakon,’ ‘hymen,’ and so on.

Derrida believes that deconstruction itself is subject to this act of ‘undoing’ simply because it becomes a name and the name is the primary object of deconstruction. He believes that deconstruction is a questioning of “the unity ‘word’ and all the privileges with which it was credited, especially in its *nominal* form” (LJF, 274-5). In other words, the primary object of deconstruction is to deconstruct ‘the name’ including the name, ‘deconstruction’. I will return to the notion of the name later.

Therefore, to me, deconstruction is a form of ‘internal resistance’. Deconstruction negates the hierarchical values in a text - the values which give the thematic components a sense of priority. Deconstruction “resists theory, particularly literary theory” because it “doesn’t fix the text in a thematic or thetic station” (SST, 87). Paul de Man, in “The Resistance to Theory” shows his concern about the fact that literary theory, by employing a “metalanguage” to study literature, demonstrates an “insecurity about its own project”.<sup>5</sup> However, de Man does not reject literary theory as a thing in itself but rather its methods and approaches. Derrida, in “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” finally and half-heartedly suggests to his friend that he translate the term ‘deconstruction’ as ‘poem’! Deconstruction is a resistance or rather a resisting event. And is not a poem the final example of a resisting event in language? I will return to this question later in this thesis.

Derrida finally asserts that deconstruction can only mean anything when associated with the other terms in his thought: “The word ‘deconstruction’ like all other words, acquires its value only from its inscription in a chain of possible substitutions, in what is too blithely called a ‘context’” (LJF, 275). Deconstruction is not “monolithic” (SST, 88) but always “*plus d’une langue* - more than one language” (TB, 206). Deconstruction “has interest only within a certain context, where it replaces

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<sup>5</sup> Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 8, 12.

and lets itself be determined by such other words as 'écriture,' 'trace,' 'différance,' 'supplement,' 'hymen,' 'pharmakon,' 'marge,' 'entame,' 'parergon,' etc" (LJF, 275). This remark points to the fact that the paradoxical nature of deconstruction is of prime importance for Derrida. In fact, Derrida elsewhere has defined deconstruction as "a certain aporetic experience of the impossible".<sup>6</sup> The terms that he uses to describe the context of deconstruction are all double binds. Therefore, in order to explore further the 'event' of deconstruction within language and literary discourse, let us look at a few of these terms that are mentioned and explore the notion of paradox.

### *The paradoxical logic of deconstruction*<sup>7</sup>

- How can a path pass through aporias?
- What would a path do without aporias? (SN, 83)

In relation to Derrida's deconstruction of oppositional forces within metaphysical thought – that, in fact, is essentially what Derrida does – there have been two distinct misunderstandings. First, Derrida's critique of metaphysical oppositions has led many to believe that he in fact inverts the oppositions, thus privileging the undermined side. In other words, Derrida becomes an advocate of negation simply because he does not see absence and presence in opposition. At other times, he becomes sceptical of any singular and original essence because he regards the relation between singularity and generality as not oppositional. Again, he becomes a fervent advocate of 'the free play of signs' simply because he problematises the distinction between the signifier and the signified and that between immediacy and mediation. To make matters even more confusing, this kind of reading has been applied to either side of a binary opposition

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Here, I need to mention the difference between the notion of paradox as one of its senses in philosophy and the paradox in deconstruction. In short, if two equally valid points are raised that are in contradiction we face a paradox. In this sense, paradox presents the two poles of a contradiction as equally true. However, the paradox in deconstruction, as I will explain here, is about the non-oppositional yet still non-identical relation between the poles. Paradox here points to a certain relation between the oppositional poles as explored by Derrida. I will explain this relation under this sub-heading.

branding Derrida a nihilist, an apolitical thinker, or even a rabbi, to name a few examples.

The second misunderstanding has roots in the fact that many critics have argued that by granting the same value to either both sides or neither side of a problem, Derrida in fact evades critical analysis and answers. They argue that Derrida uses contradictory and illogical statements that make his rhetoric close to sophistry. Deconstruction is eventually presumed as non-philosophical simply because it evades the scientific certainties of epistemological methodology and logical positivism. Derrida faces the same objection from those who see his logic as mystical. John Ellis, in *Against Deconstruction*, claims that the use of paradox in Derrida's writings as a rhetorical device is in fact only "the standard formula of many branches of religious mysticism" that "permits complementary and apparently contradictory modes of expression".<sup>8</sup> Therefore, he states that what Derrida terms the new "other" logic is in fact what has been used already in an established tradition.

My point here is that we need to understand clearly the way the two poles of an opposition are related to one another if we want to understand deconstruction and Derrida's statements correctly. Paradox is a frequently used term by Derrida. Derrida has not only been fascinated by paradoxical statements, such as the recurrent theme of Aristotle's "O my friends, there is no friend" in *Politics of Friendship*, but also most of his writings are structurally based on paradoxical logic.<sup>9</sup> I argue that instead of inverting the opposition, Derrida in fact deconstructs them. This deconstruction of opposition is what I would call a paradox. When, in "Living On: Border Lines," Derrida writes that a text "lives on" only when it is at once translatable and untranslatable, he confesses in parenthesis to this paradoxical logic which occurs always in his writings: "always 'at once . . . and . . .'" or "at the 'same' time" (LO, 102).

<sup>8</sup> John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London & New York: Verso, 1997). With regard to the appropriate use and the centrality of the term 'paradox' in deconstruction, I can draw attention to a well-known interview with Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature". In this interview that deals with the relation between literature and deconstruction, Derrida uses the terms 'paradox' and 'paradoxical' fourteen times on pages 42, 43, 51, 56, 58, 59, 68, and 72.



Derrida constantly uses the phrases “on the one hand” and “on the other hand,” when the latter contradicts the former, leaving this contradiction open by stating that these oppositions are ‘simultaneously’ in operation.

Douglas Atkins, in “Partial Stories: Hebraic and Christian Thinking in the Wake of Deconstruction,” reminds us of this “metaphysical tendency” to always think “in terms of either/or”. The established logic is the “law of non-contradiction” which believes that “a thing cannot be both itself and the ‘opposite’”.<sup>10</sup> Deconstruction on the other hand is based on deconstructing the contradictions – on a logic of “both/and”. In Barbara Johnson’s words, this is

nothing less than a revolution in the very logic of meaning. The logic of supplement wrenches apart the neatness of the metaphysical binary oppositions. Instead of ‘A is opposed to B’ we have ‘B is both added to A and replaces A’. A and B are no longer opposed, nor are they equivalent. Indeed, they are no longer even equivalent to themselves. They are their own difference from themselves.<sup>11</sup>

According to Barbara Johnson, Derrida deconstructs “the either/or logic of noncontradiction that underlies Western metaphysics”.<sup>12</sup> Derrida himself, in *Positions*, explains that it has been necessary in his thought to “set to work” some “undecidables . . . that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition” (PO, 42-43). The logic of paradox in deconstruction is not that of Hegel’s dialectics resulting in synthesis. Instead, it is an opposition that is “resolved and yet kept open”.<sup>13</sup> To Derrida, deconstruction resists and disorganises this opposition “without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics” (PO, 43). Johnson gives this third term a name: “nonbinary logic”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> G. Douglas Atkins, “Partial Stories: Hebraic and Christian Thinking in the Wake of Deconstruction,” *Religion and Literature*, 15:3 (1983), p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Johnson, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (London: Athlone Press, 1993), p. xiii.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>13</sup> John Schad, “The End of the End of History: Graham Swift’s *Waterland*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38:4 (Winter 1992), p. 918.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Johnson, “Translator’s Introduction,” p. xvii.

My account of the notion of paradox in deconstruction is close to this “non-binary logic”. I argue that, first of all, paradox and contradiction should be discussed in the context of deconstruction. In other words, in order to explain the centrality of paradox in Derrida’s thought, it is useful to return to some basic and primary Derridean terms such as ‘supplement,’ ‘*différance*,’ and ‘hymen’. I think that these notions, among many others in deconstruction (such as *pharmakon*, signature, postcard, and the name), work as forces to overturn the established approach towards oppositions while introducing another perspective on the way we conceptualise oppositions in general. For one, they all follow the logic of *both/and* and refuse the logic of *either/or*. Therefore, the deconstructive project of Derrida does not seek to replace the privileged pole of the opposition with the undermined one. It “does not renounce . . . the ‘values’ that are dominant in this context (for example that of truth, etc.)” (LI, 137). Deconstruction is not about replacement but displacement. Derrida, in *Positions*, explains how the primary terms in his writings all evade the oppositional *either/or* logic:

the *pharmakon* is neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, neither the inside nor the outside, neither speech nor writing; the *supplement* is neither a plus nor a minus, neither an outside nor the complement of an inside, neither accident nor essence, etc.; the *hymen* is neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference, neither consummation nor virginity, neither the veil nor unveiling, neither the inside nor the outside, etc. . . . (PO, 43)

The logic of “neither/nor” leads to “*simultaneously* either *or*” (PO, 43) and not “*either/or*”. Let’s look more closely at these three terms. In “Some Questions and Responses,” Derrida asserts that a “logic of supplement” dominates all his writings:

A supplement is at the same time something you add as simply something more, another degree, *and* something which reveals a lack in the essence, in the integrity of an entity, so what I call the logic of the supplement is a principle of disorder at work in this very opposition. That’s what I’m doing all the time, and it’s not what

I am doing, it is the principle of contamination or disorder which is at work everywhere. . . . (SQR, 259)

The paradox, as the “logic of supplement,” disturbs the tradition of perceiving everything based on the binary oppositions of kind and degree. Supplement has the double meaning of necessary addition and a redundant one. Derrida argues that ‘*différance*’ is also an attempt to avoid or overcome this opposition:

Différance is *at the same time* difference of kind and difference of degree - which means that it is neither one nor the other. Différance ‘is’ a difference (discontinuity, alterity, heterogeneity) *and also* the possibility and the necessity of an economy (relay, delegation, signification, ediation, ‘supplement’, reappropriation) of the other as such: difference and in-difference with and without dialectics. (SQR, 258)

In *différance*, the relation between the opposites is not of a negative-positive (absence-presence) quality. Instead, this relation is that of differed (difference of kind) and deferred (difference of degree). *Différance*, in short, is the inscription of spatial and temporal difference in one word. It is a double inscription. It demonstrates clearly how the poles of oppositions work in a paradoxical structure: “the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time” (DF, 8). Again, as Barbara Johnson notes, deconstruction questions the “very possibility of opposing the two terms on the basis of presence versus absence or immediacy versus representation” and calls it “an illusion”. These sides of opposition are related by “difference and distance”.<sup>15</sup> As I suggested above, the danger is that one might think that deconstructing the oppositions means that the poles of the opposition become identical. Derrida argues in “*Différance*”:

one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same . . . .  
(DF, 17)

Therefore, “the intelligible” becomes “the differing-deferring” of “the sensible” instead of its opposite (DF, 17). As we see, here Derrida admits that oppositions are in operation in philosophy but thinks that their relation is more complex than hierarchical or existing/non-existing. They are caught, instead, in the paradoxical relation of *différance*. Derrida argues that this difference between “differences and oppositions” (LI, 156) is what he has always sought.

Likewise, the “paradoxical logic” (LG, 243) of ‘hymen’ situates it between “inside and outside,” “distance and non-distance” or “desire and satisfaction” (DS, 209). ‘Hymen’ simultaneously suggests sexual consummation and its absence. It is the membrane between separation and unity. For Derrida, ‘hymen’

entails within the whole series of opposites . . . [and] produces the effect of a medium (a medium as element enveloping both terms at once; a medium located between the two terms). It is an operation that *both* sows confusion *between* opposites *and* stands *between* the opposites ‘at once’. (DS, 212)

Therefore, “the logic of the hymen,” according to Derrida, is neither the inside nor the outside but *between* the two, i.e. it is a gap between, an object signifying inside and outside (DS, 212-213).

Another term for paradox is ‘aporia’. Aporia is a Greek term meaning ‘impassable path’. It is used by sceptics suggesting that there is no possibility of arriving at an ultimate truth. Aporia has been called the terminal point of thinking. In philosophy, it generally shows the impossibility of solving the problem that arises because of the existence of two equally justifiable opposing arguments. As a rhetorical figure, it signifies doubt. In deconstruction though it is a gap between the poles of oppositions. It is the middle ground of oppositional forces. Therefore, ‘aporia’ can be another word for ‘pharmakon’ as a state between medicine and poison.

Consequently, my understanding of paradox in deconstruction is the relation between the poles of an opposition in which each side demands the other side, leads to the other side, is inscribed in the other side, and finally exists simultaneously with the other side. The two poles of binary oppositions are always implicated in each other and that eventually complicates the structure of the whole opposition.<sup>16</sup> The way I examine the oppositions in this thesis is based on this relation.<sup>17</sup>

### *Theology and deconstruction*

Theology will be invoked in this thesis not only because it is significant for an understanding of Derrida's thought, but also because the three examined paradoxes are essentially theological. In other words, each paradox before being a paradox within language and literary discourse, is an integral theological notion. In Part I, the paradox of language being both singular and multiple invokes all the theological discussions about the original language, and its fall into multiplicity. In Part II, the paradox of language being both representational and self-referential again addresses the language of immanence and the way, through the human's fall from Eden, language started to become a tool to represent external sense rather than signifying itself as it did in the name. Finally, in Part III, the paradox of language being both a negative force and a positive force has deep roots in the theological discussions on the extent that language is able to express the divine name and divine experiences and the way the negation of language in theology has been part and parcel of mystical quests. The relation between the two poles of each opposition is complicated in theological discourse as well.

Derrida's relation to theology is an ambivalent one that needs to be examined in the context of the two discourses of theology and deconstruction. I would argue that the writings of Derrida, like Benjamin's, are not theological in the conventional

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> The oppositions that will be discussed in this thesis include central/marginal, negative/affirmative, copy/original, original/translation, representational/immanent, signifier/signified, speech/writing, singular/multiple (general), absence/presence, transcendental/self-referential.

manner; rather they invoke theological themes about the nature of language. Likewise, I do not enter the realm of theological questions about Derrida because this thesis bears upon theological themes only in their relation to language. However, I will give an overview of the main critical points that are raised on the relation between deconstruction and theology. I will in particular write on the misunderstandings that have occurred in reading Derrida from a theological perspective.

Within theological discourse, negative theology and mysticism become of great importance to this thesis. But what is meant by negative theology? Michel de Certeau, in *Heterologies*, calls 'theology' "a discourse of the male, of the unique, of the same: a henology" while seeing 'the mystical' as "an altered feminine discourse: a heterology".<sup>18</sup> Negative theology is not the opposite of positive theology. Michel Despland argues that negative theologies are rather "moments" or "correctives" of positive theology.<sup>19</sup> My understanding of negative theology is that it is a deconstructive force within mainstream theology. It is a kind of theology that is not comfortable with the language it uses. Negative theology is also not certain as to the *position* of the transcendental concepts such as God, divine experience, and so on. It is, in other words, a non-metaphysical strain within theology. In metaphysical theology, one can see how every sign *directly and unproblematically* refers to referents or signifieds (theological themes and notions). Stephen Moore writes:

negative theology can be said to be a self-subverting discourse that systematically showcases its own inadequacy to the theological task of enclosing God in concepts – a stuttering disruption of the confident assertions of conventional theological discourse. In short, negative theology is the deconstruction of positive theology.<sup>20</sup>

Negative theology argues that divine experiences and our definition of the divine is inscribed with other effects surrounding them. In other words, language primarily

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<sup>18</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 165.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Despland, "On Not Solving Riddles Alone," in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds., *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, p. 24.

affects our understanding of the divine and the divine experience. Since language has limits, it is also simplistic to give pre-defined answers to transcendental questions. Nothing is certain since our language is not in the realm of certainty.

Lastly, a final note on the notion of 'theological discourse' seems inevitable. In this project, I attempt to provide a generalised notion of theology and negative theology. As I explained earlier, what I am examining in theology is, in fact, the play of language in theology. Therefore, my reference is always to theological discourse rather than theological doctrines. Later, I will elaborate on the point that various theologies share many similarities linguistically. This affinity tells us a great deal about the common grounds of the theological doctrines of different religions. In fact, the words, lexicon, prayers, symbols, and experiences in theology help towards a general theory of theology and, in practice, inter-faith dialogues. Therefore, throughout this thesis the reader will encounter theological themes, some in general terms (such as the name of God or transcendental experiences) and some specifically about the play of language in a specific theology.

### *Deconstructing the name*

I have used the notion of 'the name' as a *unifying element* that all the three parts of this project can relate to. In other words, I return to the notion of 'the name' in three parts and link it later to language and literature. 'The name,' among many other terms that could share this relation, has an advantage because writing about the question of 'the name' is automatically an examination of the essence of language and its referential state. Derrida always returns to the theme of 'the name' whenever he writes about the theories of language. Furthermore, he has written specifically and extensively about 'the name' and 'the proper name'. But let us see how the name is invoked in each part.

In the first part, the name is a single and unique entity that is also the creative part of language. The story of appellation in *Genesis* points to this creative force. Language always bears a sense of uniqueness and singularity within it. My

deconstruction of the name, in the first part, is to find the 'resisting' forces within the name that result in paradoxes. In short, 'the name' becomes another term for singularity that is asked to be repeated. The second part is about the opposition between the representational (referential to the outside) and the immanent (self-referential) forces within language and the way their paradoxical relation relates to a new understanding of the signification process in literary discourse. The name is an example of self-referential language that is destined to communicate its 'naming quality' and nothing more. However, the name is also caught in the web of representation. The third section is about language as the ineffable and unspeakable. The name, especially the divine name, is caught in the paradox of being named while already prohibited from being named. In other words, name is negated while its negation is *presented* within the language system.

### ***Methodology of research***

In July 1995, when only nine months had passed from the beginning of my research programme, I attended a conference on Derrida and the notion of 'application' called "Applied Derrida" in Luton. Derrida was 'present' too. I found the courage to tell him about my research project considering the extent to which I myself knew what I was going to do at the time. I asked him hesitantly what he thought about it and if he had any advice. Derrida suggested that I take only a couple of "corpora" to start with on each argument. This simple advice was quite helpful since I was nearly drowning in reading and re-reading and not knowing where to start.

As a result, each main argument in this thesis is oriented around close readings of a few key texts by Derrida and Benjamin and a few supporting texts. In a study on deconstruction, this method of argument seems inevitable to me since deconstruction itself is in a sense a close reading practice. I believe this method also helps to examine and formulate important texts through exhaustive readings. The close readings are structured in a dialogue form through which different texts are examined in parallel in



order to create a correspondence between them. This parallel reading has also enabled me to look at texts from different discourses. Hence, literary texts, philosophical texts and theological texts are juxtaposed together in this thesis.

I need to mention the fact that this thesis is not a defence of Derrida's theory, neither is it a comprehensive examination of deconstruction in all its aspects. Obviously, I have only referred to the texts that are related to the subject of my study. I have also expressed my reservations about Derrida's theory. I think, apart from the confusion that is caused through the paradoxical logic of his thinking, Derrida has succeeded in confusing arguments even further, particularly through his use of the term 'theological'. I have also attempted to analyse the texts in an objective way as far as possible yet objective reading in itself will be questioned in this thesis. In fact this brings with it a more general problem in writing on deconstruction. The method of writing in a 'deconstructive mode' usually suggests an open-ended and non-totalising approach, but I was also confronted with the conventional structure of a doctoral thesis. Given the restrictions of such a task, I have attempted not to give totalising answers to every question that is raised in this thesis. Although I try to clarify points and answer questions, I am aware of the importance of *asking* the right questions rather than *answering* some insignificant ones. However, I object to the view that regards Derrida's theory as open-ended and with no conclusions. Derrida's arguments and this study likewise remain 'totalising' in drawing conclusions from arguments. But the difference is that these conclusions are more *implied* in Derrida's and Benjamin's text while I have attempted to *spell out* the conclusions and formulate them. As a result, I will summarise and formulate arguments frequently and draw conclusions at the end of each argument. Through a 'pyramid' structure, I have also formed three paradoxes as the pillars of the structure of my thesis.

I also see a need to write a few words on the question of literary reading. My method of literary reading is neither a Yale reading, that is only interested in impasses and aporias as an end in itself, nor does it lack "critical authority".<sup>21</sup> I do not provide a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

'teleological' reading of the texts. Instead, I explore the relation between the two poles of an opposition and this deconstructive reading liberates the text from 'logocentrism'. For instance, a logocentric reading of Beckett's *The Unnamable* can lead to the 'presence' of negation in the text and read the text as a purely nihilistic one. In contrast to this practice, my reading will explain how negation or silence is inscribed in the affirmative practice of writing of the text and, at the same time, how this discourse implies silence at every sentence. Therefore, I attempt to read the paradoxes "from the inside" (OG, 24) of the text in order to transgress any metaphysical reading. This, I believe, will grant my reading neither an authoritative nature nor an anti-authoritative one.

What remains are a few technical points to raise. All citations within the text are double quoted except the long indented ones. I use single quotations in the text not only for quotes within the double quotations but also whenever I use a term in a specific sense. I have used single quotations quite frequently simply because in deconstruction and literary theory many terms such as 'origin,' 'intention,' or 'centre,' are singularised and are meant in a certain sense and should be used in a certain way. I also use italics whenever I use a foreign word and for the sake of emphasis. Abbreviations for references to the frequently cited texts by Derrida and Benjamin are used to facilitate the reading and reduce the excessive use of footnotes. In footnotes, apart from references, I have provided secondary information and also referred the reader to other parts of the text in order to provide links.

### ***Summary of objectives***

In brief, this thesis is an attempt to achieve the following objectives:

1. To situate paradox within deconstruction as an integral logic. The thesis will give a positive description of paradoxes, aporias, and the double-binds of deconstruction.
2. To examine the developments and turns in more recent works by and on Derrida.

3. To find a more precise relation between deconstruction and theology. This thesis has taken a restrictive comparative approach but not a reductive one.
4. To focus on the notion of language and particularly on the name in deconstruction and theology in order to narrow down the arguments and reach more specific findings.
5. To argue for the significance of Walter Benjamin's postulate in the development of deconstruction.
6. To create a narrative structure out of the various and separate arguments by Derrida and Benjamin.
7. To distinguish between theology and negative theology (mysticism) and therefore clarify Derrida's critiques of theology and also the critics' approach regarding deconstruction and theology.
8. To introduce a new way of reading literary texts based on the deconstruction of paradoxes.
9. To situate deconstruction as a resisting and paradoxical force and therefore to introduce a new definition of Derrida's deconstruction.

# Part I

## Babel and the Paradox of Singularity

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### Chapter One. The 'Genesis' of Language

*Appellation*  
*Tree of knowledge*  
*Tower of Babel*

### Chapter Two. Translating Babel

*The broad sense of translation*  
*Translation and original*  
*Derrida and the paradox of decadence and survival*  
*Translation as the survival of the original*

### Chapter Three. The Singular Event of the Literary Work

*Signature: unreadable singularity*  
*Postcard: mere readability*  
*Biodegradables: survival*  
*'Living on'*  
*Sacralisation*  
*Don Quixote and Pierre Menard's Signature*

Babel is untranslatable. God weeps over his name. His text is the most sacred, the most poetic, the most originary, since he creates a name and gives it to himself, but he is left no less destitute in his force and even in his wealth; he pleads for a translator. (TB, 184).

The first part of this thesis deals with the paradox of singularity within language and particularly literary discourse. In the next three chapters, I will stage different contexts for the binary opposition of *singularity* and *repetition*. Based on my understanding of the deconstructive thought of Jacques Derrida, the function of the singular within language is impossible and, therefore, repetition of the singular text is inevitable. However, my contention does not result in a denial of any singularity and privileging of 'the copy' over 'the original'. Not surprisingly, Derrida has been read frequently on this basis. In contrast, Derrida's interest in the theme of singularity and in the text that resists repetition shows us the way deconstruction looks at the singular in an affirmative manner. In this part, I attempt to provide a formulation of Derrida's thinking of the singular through a close reading of his texts and explain the way the singular and the copy relate to one another. In order to explain this, I use a few binary oppositions that derive from the fundamental opposition of the singular and the copy.

In Chapter One, I first give a detailed account of the 'original language' in a theological context. I do this through a close reading of *Genesis* based on Walter Benjamin's and Jacques Derrida's texts. I think it is important to initiate any approach towards the notion of singularity from a theological perspective since singularity starts with the notion of the original immanent language in the religions of the Book.

Chapter One will also provide a background for the discussions in Part II and III. Through the reading of the story of Babel, I will explain how the proper name of God (the singular) is forced into a double command. God asks the human to respect his proper name while, in order to save his name within the multiplicity of languages, he simultaneously asks for its translation. This is the first example of the way the paradox of singularity works within language. In Chapter Two, I will move to a study of the relation between the original and the translation. I will explain first how Benjamin unconventionally sees a theological mission in the task of the translator in which the translation points the reader to the original 'kinship of languages'. Yet the more interesting argument lies in Derrida's view that translation is an act of the survival of language. The original dies if it is left singular. Translation, or in fact any reading of the text, becomes the only way to create meanings because meanings are only produced when the text is engaged in a struggle between different forces of intention, context, history, writer's signature, and so on. Yet again translation, in the restricted sense of the repetition of the singular, is impossible since this implies that one can re-write the text with the unique combination of meaning effects that are inherent in it. Therefore one can see a kind of 'respect' for the original or the singular in deconstruction.

Chapter Three is about another example of the paradox that is at work in literary discourse. I will argue that the literary text is caught in the paradox of readability and unreadability. Literary discourse is a 'postcard' that is open to anyone to read while it is addressed to a singular addressee; it is also a 'signature' that is supposed to be a unique mark yet it functions only when it can be repeated or countersigned. Later, I will explore this paradoxical relation through Jorge Luis Borges's "Pierre Menard, the Author of Quixote" in which the theory of the paradox of singularity is turned into literary discourse. In short, I attempt to demonstrate that based on Derrida's deconstruction, literary discourse can only 'live on' or have meaning if it can be placed in new contexts continually and only when its singularity comes under constant threat of repetition.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The 'Genesis' of Language

Language has started without us, in us and before us. (HAS, 29)

*Genesis* is indeed the story of language as well as the creation of the world. It narrates the story of the creation of the world along with the way language comes into being through naming. Appellation (or naming) in effect serves the accomplishment of God's creation. In other words, names become the final stage in the order of the creation of things, according to *Genesis*. Interestingly, throughout *Genesis*, the importance of names is reiterated. There is a rhetorical force throughout the book of *Genesis* to state names including the various names of the biblical characters. In this chapter, I will explicate three main events ('narratives') in *Genesis* in order to show how they point to three stages in the theological history of language: a) humankind's act of naming or appellation, b) the tree of knowledge and the human's fall from heaven, and c) the tower of Babel and the dispersion of humankind *and* language.

In order to contextualise the narrative of *Genesis*, I will place my reading of this text in the context of Walter Benjamin's account of the theory of language as discussed in his famous 1916 essay, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man". It is in *Genesis* that Benjamin can make the significant link between appellation and creation and follow the way the fall of humankind from paradise leads to the fall of the original language into a means of communication. Finally, *Genesis* is the text that narrates God's reaction against the building of the tower of Babel which leads to the confusion of tongues and the multiplicity of languages.

*Genesis* remains important to Benjamin throughout his life because it is in this text that he traces the essence of language. Nevertheless, Benjamin explains that the object of his reading of *Genesis* is “neither biblical interpretation, nor subjection of the Bible to objective consideration as revealed truth” (OL, 114). Instead, Benjamin is ready to confess that he is only interested in *Genesis* in order to discover what emerges from the biblical text “with regard to the nature of language” (OL, 114). He argues that he looks at *Genesis* for his theory of language because if the Bible regards itself “as a revelation” then it “must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts” (OL, 114). Yet, he is also quick to mention that “the Bible is only *initially* indispensable for this purpose because the present argument broadly follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical” (OL, 114). Benjamin insists that his reading of *Genesis* is mainly aimed towards finding parallel structures as ‘metaphors’ to explain and account for his theory of language. Yet, I would argue that Benjamin’s affair with theology does not end at this point. In fact, as I will show in this thesis, Benjamin’s linguistic theory remains deeply theological albeit in an idiosyncratic way.

I should point out here that the way I have structured this chapter – based on three chronological narratives – is not the same as Benjamin’s text. I believe since I want to give an account of the theological ‘history’ of language, it is useful to read *Genesis* in this way. I suggest that Benjamin’s views on these three stages of language are impregnated with novel ideas for contemporary critical theory – especially for our understanding of the paradox of representation in deconstruction, as I will argue in Part II. Later in this chapter, I will introduce a detailed reading of the story of Babel through Derrida’s writings. The Babel narrative leads the way both to my theoretical formulation of translation theory in the second chapter and to my argument on the paradox of singularity and multiplicity within literary discourse in the third chapter.



## ***Appellation***

The first book of *Genesis* opens with:

- 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
- 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.
- 3 And God said: "Let there be light"; and there was light.
- 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.
- 5 And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. . . .<sup>1</sup>

As we notice, according to *Genesis I*, creation starts with God pronouncing: "let there be". Indeed, the verbal announcement of "let there be" on its own is sufficient to make things into being. Later, God completes his act of creation by *naming things*. Walter Benjamin, in "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," writes about this narrative process of creating and naming in *Genesis*. Benjamin sees the rhythm of creation in three phrases repeated several times in the same order in *Genesis I*: "Let there be," "He created (named)," and "he named" (OL, 115). Creation starts with "the creative omnipotence" of the word and is completed when language names it: "Language is therefore both creative and the finished creation, it is word and name" (OL, 115). The second book of creation, however, tells us an alternative version in which the relation between human language and God's Word becomes more prevalent. In the second story of creation in *Genesis*, we read that God creates the earth and day and night, and finally animals, and then grants the gift of language to humankind and asks the human to name them:

- 2:19 So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

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<sup>1</sup> All the citations from the book of *Genesis* are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1957).

- 20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. . . .

Benjamin writes that in this version of the creation story, "God breathes his breath into the human: this is at once life and mind and language" (OL, 114). This second story is about "creation without mediation": "the making of man did not take place through the word: God spoke - and there was - but this man, who is not created from the word, is now invested with the *gift* of language and is elevated above nature" (OL, 114). Here, whilst language is creative in 'God's word,' that creation is completed in 'the human's naming,' i.e. appellation. In other words, God's creation of things is not finished until humankind names it. Benjamin writes: "In the word creation took place, and God's linguistic being is the word. All human language is only reflection of the word in name" (OL, 116). The human's naming is therefore the shadow of God's creation in the shape of the word. Hence, Benjamin sees the divine word as the original language and the act of naming by the human as a secondary level of language.

Despite regarding the naming act of the human as secondary to God's, Benjamin correctly recognises that appellation or naming in effect becomes the first 'usage' or 'function' of language. Appellation is indeed the only stage in the history of language in which the word's reference is its own being. Names signify not a concept or truth outside themselves but only the necessity to refer to their referents. They are, in short, meaningless icons. Benjamin follows this argument by stating that "Man is the namer, by this we recognize that through him pure language speaks" (OL, 111). Humankind completes the creative act of God by naming things. Here, language creates by virtue of nomination.<sup>2</sup> This is the reason why Benjamin calls the name, the innermost nature of language or the "language of language" (OL, 111, 112). Therefore, I would argue that in the act of naming, nothing beyond the name is communicated. Later, Benjamin asserts that the name "is not only the last utterance of language but also the true call of it. Thus in the name appears the essential law of language,

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<sup>2</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 56.

according to which to express oneself and to address everything else amounts to the same" (OL, 112). Therefore, the name becomes not only the immanent language that is self-referential but it is also without meaning since it only expresses itself.

In George Steiner's words, in Adamic language, which is merely naming, "the fit is perfect: all things are as Adam names them. Predication and essence coincide seamlessly."<sup>3</sup> Name becomes language without 'the signified'; it only relates 'the signifier' to 'the referent' in a state of immediacy. The transparency in Adam's naming is because the human is living in God's Word at this stage: everything around humankind is the Word of God. Naming is, then, the initial essence of the word: "the human word is the name of things" (OL, 116). Benjamin cites Hamann's<sup>4</sup> reading of divine language when he writes: "Everything that man heard in the beginning, saw with his eyes, and felt with his hands was the living word; for God was the word. With this word in his mouth and in his heart, the origin of language was as natural, as close, and as easy as a child's game. . ." (OL, 118). The genesis of language starts from God's word and moves onto the human's right to name.

Here, I would point out that the above argument is closely connected to the notion of the proper name. Since I will address the notion of proper name later, it is important that I provide here a formulation of my understanding of Benjamin's theory of the proper name. For Benjamin, the proper name is the human reflex of the divine word. Benjamin reminds us that "the human name" (i.e. the proper name) is the only name God did not name. Humankind are the only being who themselves name their own kind. In the proper name, Benjamin sees the only true connection between the human and God and the act of creation. The name becomes the translation of the mute "language of things" into that of the human; it is the translation of the nameless and mute into name and sound (OL, 117). The proper name is truly a word without any precedence. It is given to a newborn child as a unique character and it is an act of

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Georg Hamann (1730-88), a German theologian and philosopher, was influential in Benjamin's theory. Hamann believed that language as an integral part of human nature can be the key to a study of religion.

indebtedness toward God: "By giving names, parents dedicate their children to God" (OL, 116). As I mentioned above, in *Genesis* there is great emphasis on the names of the descendants of Adam and Eve. The name of the human is a "gift" of God that is even believed to determine one's fate. Benjamin refers to this point when he maintains that creation is bestowed to the human by the effect of the proper name:

By it [proper name] each man is guaranteed his creation by God, and in this sense he is himself creative, as is expressed by mythological wisdom in the idea (which doubtless not infrequently comes true) that a man's name is his fate. The proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God. (OL, 116)

Although, to Benjamin, human language is limited and analytical and will never be close to the divine word which is unlimited, infinite and creative (OL, 116), the name places language on a different level. It is the closest thing between the human and God: "The deepest images of this divine word and the point where human language participates most intimately in the divine infinity of the pure word, the point at which it cannot become finite word and knowledge, are the human name" (OL, 116). Therefore, for Benjamin, the proper name is "the frontier between finite and infinite language" (OL, 116). But what does 'knowledge' signify in the above citation and why is it associated with 'finite language'? This takes us to the next stage, and the second story, in the theological myth of language.

### *Tree of knowledge*

- 2:16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: "You may freely eat  
of every tree of the garden;  
17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for  
in the day that you eat of it you shall die."  
...  
25 And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.  
...  
3:4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die.

- 5 For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”
- 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband and he ate.
- 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.
- ...
- 9 But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”
- 10 And he said, “I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”
- 11 He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”
- ...
- 22 Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever” -

The narrative of the tree of knowledge results in the human's expulsion from the garden of Eden. This expulsion is signified as the Fall of humankind. However, this fall coincides with a 'linguistic fall' as well. When Adam and Eve eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, knowledge forces itself into language. In other words, *values* and *judgements* become new contents within language. After this incident, words start to have the burden of affirmative or negative values on their shoulders, i.e. they have the knowledge of good or evil along with them. I would argue that knowledge gives language an 'adjectival' aspect. Like an adjective, knowledge qualifies the words in a judgmental manner. At this stage, Benjamin sees a transfer from 'the name' (the side of language that is without value but close to God's word) to 'human word' (judgmental language). Therefore, for Benjamin, knowledge is not only giving language a new role to ascribe good or evil attributes to things but it also acts as an evil force that takes language away from God's word:

The knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil, is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense, and this very knowledge is itself the only evil known to the paradisiac state. Knowledge of good and evil abandons name, it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word. Name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact. . . . The word must communicate *something* (other than itself). That is really the Fall of language-mind. (OL, 119)

Therefore, 'knowledge' plays a defining role in the history of language. While it gives language the new role of partaking of negative/affirmative value judgements, it becomes in fact the *origin* of good and evil as well. It also makes language aware of a signification from "outside" that gives birth to metaphysics within language. It is from this point that language becomes a representational tool of the outside 'signifieds' and meanings. In order to explicate this aspect of Benjamin's argument in more detail, let us return to the question I raised earlier: is there any difference in the act of naming between God and the human? I would argue that 'knowledge' plays a significant role in our response. As I discussed earlier, 'name' and 'creative word' is the same in God. Yet for the human, in the aftermath of the Fall when the human learns the 'value' of good and evil, name becomes the representation of the human's knowledge put into words. It is important to notice that knowledge is inherent in God's word while in human language it always stays as an external ('metaphysical') value - in other words, a 'transcendental signified,' to borrow the term from Derrida. Benjamin writes:

In God name is creative because it is word, and God's word is cognizant because it is name. "And he saw that it was good"; that is: He had cognized it through name. The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God, only there is name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge that means: God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge. (OL, 115)

There is, therefore, a distinction between internal divine knowledge and the knowledge that the human can reach from the outside. This distinction is that which lies between God's creation and the human's naming. While God makes things and has the

knowledge of things *through* names, humans have to name God's creations *according to* a knowledge that is *external* to the name. As a result, after God left his creative power to the human, "this creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge". Benjamin then concludes that "man is the knower in the same language in which God is creator". In other words, God creates the knower in the image of the creator (OL, 115-6).

But how does 'knowledge' change the essence of language? Benjamin argues that the knowledge of things resides in name, and the knowledge of good and evil resides in judgement (OL, 119). Before the fall of humankind from Eden, there is no judgement. Judgement appears when humanity gains the knowledge of good and evil. And this gives words a new function. Words become means in the hands of humans to give things an outside value, a judgmental gesture. Even proper names acquire a meaning or value and consequently become turned into common nouns; they can then be 'disseminated,' reused, and repeated. In the Fall, "man abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete, name, and fell into the abyss of mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle" (OL, 120). This is the second phase and the first 'fall' in the story of language.

I can note an inspiring metaphor for the invasion of knowledge into human linguistic being in *Genesis III*: 'shame.' Shame is an example of the way judgement and 'transferable value' enter into human word. Only after eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge do Adam and Eve feel ashamed of their nakedness. Shame is therefore a direct consequence of knowledge. The forceful imagery of the nakedness of Adam and Eve is juxtaposed to the nakedness (or transparency, as I discussed earlier) of language in the name. This transparency (signifier-referent unity) of language is destroyed when an 'outside signified' (judgement, value) forces itself into language. I would reiterate that this is the genesis of the 'metaphysical' essence of language - a subject that I will return to repeatedly throughout this project. Therefore, 'shame' and 'fear' become the first 'values' that force their way into God's creation of humankind and language.

The objection of mystical thought against the notion of 'knowledge' seems to evolve from the same arguments I mentioned earlier. Michel de Certeau is one of the prominent scholars who worked on the theoretical side of mysticism in the context of contemporary critical theory. According to de Certeau, 'knowledge' is essentially contrary to mystical thought. As I already stated, for Benjamin, 'knowledge' takes language to a *humane communicating level* in which language *communicates values* and *passes judgement on good and evil*. Likewise, de Certeau grants knowledge a negative attribute. For him, knowledge is a negative movement against which a mystical postulate (or, as he calls it, mystic "*volo*") says an illimitable yes.<sup>5</sup> He writes: "Whereas knowledge de-limits its contents according to a procedure which is essentially that of the 'no,' a process of distinction, ('this is not that') the mystic postulate posits the boundlessness of a 'yes'" (cited in NY, 122). The basis of de Certeau's argument is the opposition he places between language in general and mystic speech. He argues that language in general is always preceded by knowledge. In other words, the content and the aim of the remark has already been defined and limited to a proper value. On the other hand, he introduces mystic speech as *language as a 'promise'*. Mystic speech says 'yes' to what is to come; it is "illocutionary"<sup>6</sup> and does not presuppose any defined criteria in the shape of knowledge. The mystical text, for de Certeau, becomes a manifestational utterance which marks the beginning (NY, 120, 132). Therefore, mystic speech is an open remark while 'knowledge' always acts as a closing device.<sup>7</sup>

To reiterate, I would suggest that Benjamin gives a threefold significance to the fall of humankind from Eden: first, the human makes language - the word and the name - a means, a *mere* mediatory sign resulting in the plurality of languages; second, the magic of judgement appears; and third, abstraction, through which external concepts enter the language, originates from this instance (OL, 120). Yet this clash

<sup>5</sup> Hent de Vries, "Anti-Babel: The 'Mystical Postulate' in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida," *MLN*, 107:3 (April 1992), p. 447.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 446.

<sup>7</sup> There is further discussion on mystic speech in Parts II and III.



between the human's word and God's Word will ultimately result in a clash of the human word with itself as well.

### ***Tower of Babel***

Structurally speaking, in *Genesis*, Babel becomes the third phase in the story of language. It marks further distance from God's Word towards human language and confusion.

- 11:1 Now the whole earth had one language and few words.
- 2 And as men migrated in the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.
- 3 And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.
- 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."
- 5 And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built.
- 6 And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.
- 7 Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."
- 8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.
- 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The story of the dissemination of language is not unique to Biblical texts. George Steiner, in *After Babel*, writes: "Almost all linguistic mythologies, from Brahmin wisdom to Celtic and North African lore, concurred in believing that original speech had shivered into seventy-two shards, or into a number which was a simple multiple of seventy-two" (George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 59).

Here I will provide an analysis of Derrida's reading of the story of Babel. In brief, for Derrida, the story of Babel points to the paradoxical logic of singularity within language. Humans want to preserve the *singular language of paradise* on the earth through building a tower "with its top in the heavens". In other words, humankind, in its endeavour to "make a name" for itself, tries to regain the lost glory in paradise. God, however, destroys the tower and humankind's aspiration towards singularity becomes frustrated. The destruction of Babel results in the multiplicity of languages and, as a result, translation becomes necessary. Within the multiplicity of languages, the external force of knowledge and judgement (that is introduced to language in the second stage) is "infinitely differentiated" (OL, 119). In other words, each new language creates more associations and meaning values that result in even more distance from the immanent language of paradise. The aftermath of Babel becomes, therefore, the multiplicity of language among humankind and creates more distance between the language of the human and God's Word.

The very act of the 'deconstruction' of Babel - enforcing irrevocable multiplicity of languages - suggests that God demands translation. God initiates this by translating - or letting it be translated - his own proper name, 'Babel,' into 'confusion' in *Genesis XI*. Interestingly, even our 'translations' or readings of 'Babel' as, for instance, "the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity *as impossibility*" (TB, 171), all account for the fact that 'Babel' has now become *a common noun* in contemporary critical theory. It is now distanced from its original singular reference as a proper name and is used in new and different contexts.

Paradoxically, while the multiplicity created by God demands translation, God, by imposing his untranslatable name, forbids the human to translate it. For one, 'Babel' remains the name of the tower and of God in any language. Furthermore, YHWH as God's name is not only an unpronounceable name, as Derrida notes (TB,

170), it is also “an evasion of the name (“I will be what I will be”).<sup>9</sup> Derrida relates the double command of God - forbidding humankind to translate his name and demanding the translation of his name by multiplying language - to the theory of translation. In brief, the movement in the two falls of language (the Fall of the human from paradise and later the fall of Babel) makes translation more and more necessary and yet impossible. For Derrida, this is the double bind of translation. I quote at length:

To translate Babel by “confusion” is already to give a confused and uncertain translation. It translates a proper name into a common noun. Thus one sees that God declares war by forcing men, if you will, to translate his proper name with a common noun. In effect, he says to them: Now you will not impose your single tongue; you will be condemned to the multiplicity of tongues; translate and, to begin with, translate my name. Translate my name, says he, but at the same time he says: You will not be able to translate my name because, first of all, it's a proper name and, secondly, my name, the one I myself have chosen for this tower, signifies ambiguity, confusion, et cetera. Thus God, in his rivalry with the tribe of the Shems, gives them, in a certain way, an absolutely double command. He imposes a double bind on them when he says: Translate me and what is more don't translate me. I desire that you translate me, that you translate the name I impose on you; and at the same time, whatever you do, don't translate it, you will not be able to translate it. (EO, 102)

‘Babel,’ in short, becomes the proper name of God imposed on humankind. ‘Shem’ (literally meaning ‘name’) and ‘Babel’ (God's name) are the two proper names that are set to impose their names and their language. The story of Babel, therefore, becomes the story of a war between two proper names (EO, 100-101; P, 142, 165). They both want to impose a universal tongue by violence. The title of Kevin Hart's book, *The Trespass of the Sign*, points to this violence of the limits of language as set by the divine. Hart writes:

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<sup>9</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Haunted House of Meaning: Tradition, or the Management of the Sacred Past in Durkheim, Habermas, Benjamin*, unpublished PhD thesis (University of California, Santa Barbara: University Microfilms International, 1985), p. 283. God's name in effect becomes an emblem of language without meaning, and also a gesture towards the unsayability of the name. I will discuss this later.

The Shemites overstep the proper limits assigned to man by God and - as with Adam - their trespass of the sign has consequences in direct opposition to their desired end: far from consolidating their self-identity, their action brings difference into their midst. Once more we have a fall, and once more the fall has linguistic ramifications.<sup>10</sup>

Derrida sees the same paradoxical and simultaneous demands of God (imposing and opposing his name) governing the proper name in general.<sup>11</sup> In *The Ear of the Other*, he argues that every proper name is caught in this 'desire': respect me as a proper name yet also preserve me within the universal language - i.e., translate me into a common noun (EO, 102):

on the one hand, a requirement of untranslatability and unreadability, as if the proper name were nothing but pure reference, lying outside of signification and language; on the other hand, a requirement of translatability and readability, as if the proper name were assimilable to the common noun, to any word that is caught up in a linguistic and genealogical network where meaning already contaminates non-meaning and where the proper name is absorbed and expropriated by the common noun. (EO, 93)

Therefore, Derrida sees 'Babel' as a proper name (the name of God) as well as a common noun (the confusion of tongues). He refers to 'Babel' as a term that is 'confusedly' translated as 'confusion': "an ambiguous proper name which meant 'confusion' only by means of a confused association within language" (P, 165). He refers to Voltaire's article, 'Babel,' in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* where Voltaire writes: "I do not know why it is said in *Genesis* that Babel signifies confusion, for *Ba* signifies father in the Oriental tongues, and *Bel* signifies God; Babel signifies the city of God, the holy city" (TB, 166; EO, 101). I should note here that 'Babel' etymologically comes from '*bab*' as 'gate' and '*El*' or '*Il*' as God. Therefore 'Babel' can mean the 'gate of God'

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 109-110.

<sup>11</sup> Proper name is caught in the three paradoxes of singularity, representation and negation, as I will explain later in this thesis.

that accords with the name of a tower that aspires to reach the heavens. However, the reason that it is associated with 'confusion' in *Genesis* is because of a play upon the word in the Hebrew word *balal* that means 'to stir up', 'to mix up', or 'to confuse'.<sup>12</sup> However, despite all the confusion over the meaning of 'Babel', whatever the meaning of 'Babel' is, the fact that it is referred to as "precisely the confusion of meaning and reference" is the important point to bear in mind.<sup>13</sup> God here eventually becomes "both a proper name and the index - the name - for the untranslatability of every proper name."<sup>14</sup>

It seems most appropriate at this point to move the discussion of the translation of the proper name into another context. In the next chapter, I will argue that the double command of God towards the translation of his name is an example of the way the proper name or singular language is caught within the act of translation. The name is the emblem of the singularity of language that resists translation yet has to be translated in order to survive the decadence of singularity.

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<sup>12</sup> See for instance these two classic commentaries of *Genesis*: Alan Richardson, *Genesis I-XI: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1953), p. 130; Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1963), p. 145. As Catherine Burgass reminds us "a similar 'confusion' operates in English between 'Babel' and 'babble'" (Catherine Burgass, "English in Transition: Translating Derrida" in C. Baschiera, J. Everson, eds., *Scenes of Change: Studies in Cultural Transition* (Pisa: EDIZIONI ETS, 1996), p. 84).

<sup>13</sup> Joseph F. Graham, ed., *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Hent de Vries, "Anti-Babel: The 'Mystical Postulate' in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida," p. 459.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Translating Babel

There is no pure singularity which affirms itself as such without instantly dividing itself, and so exiling itself. (TSI, 66)

My discussion of the three narratives in *Genesis* results in three major conclusions: a) the importance of naming in the act of creation, b) the distancing of the human word from God's word in three stages, and finally c) the unique proper name of God asking for repetitions in the form of a common noun. I would argue that all three conclusions point us to the act of translation: God's creation being translated into human naming, God's immanent word being translated into the human word with knowledge and values, and finally God's proper name being translated into a common noun. Therefore, I can argue that in *Genesis*, translation plays a role as important as language.

It is for the same reason that the question of translation, in its broad sense, is of prime importance in the readings of Benjamin and Derrida. Benjamin's arguments on translation relate strongly to his views on the notion of the original language. It seems inevitable that whenever one writes about the essence or origin of language, the next thing one must comment on is the way language is 'translated' on different levels. And quite deservedly, one's position on the theory of translation determines the way one thinks on the notion of 'the original' and its theological implications. In addition, a theory of translation is closely related to the way we perceive the concepts of singularity and multiplicity simply because translation is the name of the game in making language singular and plural. Our understanding of the notion of translation

also determines what we think of interpretation in its general sense and in literary interpretation and criticism in particular.

Here, I intend to take my account of the story of the tower of Babel further in relation to the context of translation. I would argue that through Derrida's reading of the story, one can relate the story to 1) the notion of translation in general and deconstruction as a kind of translation, 2) the notion of the proper name and its repetition or translation as a kind of deconstruction, and 3) what it tells us about the meaning of 'singularity' in general terms in deconstruction. These are the main points I will raise in this chapter. But first let us have a brief account of the significance of translation in modern critical theory.

### *The broad sense of translation*

What is 'translation' in contemporary critical theory? I would argue that the current usage of the term 'translation' is made ambitiously broad even beyond the linguistic classifications of Jakobson, in which he identifies three kinds of translation: a) into other signs of the same language (intralingual), b) into another language (interlingual), and c) into another nonverbal system of symbols (intersemiotic).<sup>1</sup> Translation broadly signifies all the readings, reproductions and interpretations of a text. This mainly goes back to the seminal 1975 work of George Steiner, *After Babel*, in which he places translation on a more general and interpretative level including all acts of verbal understanding. Steiner writes, "inside or between languages, human communication equals translation".<sup>2</sup> Translation after *After Babel* becomes what every reader does while reading and understanding a text. It is interpretative in its very etymology, as Steiner reminds us elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> An act of translation is simultaneously an act of interpreting the text. Steiner, in his "Foreword" to *Translating Religious Texts*, repeats the same

<sup>1</sup> Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, eds., *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 47

<sup>3</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 15.

argument and states that “translation *between* languages is, formally and substantively, a special case of translation *within* the same language. To attempt understanding is to attempt translation”.<sup>4</sup>

If we believe that Steiner is going too far in making ‘translating’ equal to ‘understanding,’ we would be surprised to find out that, in *After Babel*, he relates translation to an even broader context. Nancy S. Struever, in her review of *After Babel*, cites Steiner in claiming that, “all procedures of expressive articulation and interpretative reception are translational (279).”<sup>5</sup> Then she identifies the points in *After Babel* that establish, in her words, a “totalizing” view of translation: “A theory of translation, then, is a theory of language (414), is a theory of meaning (414, 279), is a theory of literature (273), is a theory of culture (415, 436), is a religious reformation (245)”.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas equates ‘critical reading’ to translating. He argues that “criticism performs a translating activity of a unique kind. It brings the experiential content of the work of art into normal language . . . .”<sup>7</sup>

In contemporary critical theory, translation is considered as a creative interpretative act in different contexts such as literature, religion, arts, culture, and finally criticism. Translation is always accompanied by the notion of interpretation when discussed. This can lead us to conclude that translation is, in effect, a kind of reading. A translator is in fact first a reader and then a translator. He or she *decodes* the text according to various sets of systems. Since the interpretative act of reading is similar to the act of translation, the arguments regarding interpretation and reading are similarly valid for translation. For instance, let us take the notion of ‘misreading’. One can also argue that there is no ‘correct’ translation and every translation is a ‘mistranslation’. Translation, in its liberating sense, is a kind of ‘misreading’ that is

<sup>4</sup> George Steiner, “Foreword,” in David Jasper, ed., *Translating Religious Texts: Translation, Transgression and Interpretation* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1993), p. xi.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy S. Struever, “Reviews,” *MLN*, 90 (1975), p. 983. The parenthetical references are to the 1975 edition of *After Babel*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 208.



engaged in the labyrinth of 'intertextuality'.<sup>8</sup> No text is an autonomous entity on its own. Each text is always surrounded by the preceding texts and the texts around it. On this trail, one never reaches a "primordial moment of 'origin'," as Terry Eagleton points out.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, a reader and/or a translator always reads a text according to other texts. Therefore all texts become "translations of translations of translations," as Octavio Paz puts it:

On the one hand, the world is presented to us as a collection of similarities; on the other, as a growing heap of texts, each slightly different from the one that came before it: translations of translations of translations. Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation - first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase. However, the inverse of this reasoning is also entirely valid. All texts are originals because each translation has its own distinctive character. Up to a point, each translation is a creation and thus constitutes a unique text.<sup>10</sup>

Another example of the recontextualisation of translation can be seen in the way translation is related to the definition of deconstruction. Derrida claims that the act of translation is an example of what deconstruction is all about: "an unfinished edifice whose half-completed structures are visible, letting one guess at the scaffolding behind them" (EO, 102). In "Des Tours de Babel," Derrida returns to the way the "tower of Babel" represents the "translation of a system in deconstruction" (TB, 166). For him, the story of Babel is "an epigraph for all discussions of translation" (EO, 100); it hints at the internal limits and aporias of translation, and more generally of language. For Derrida, God is the 'deconstructor' of the tower of Babel: "He interrupts a construction" (EO, 102). Translation, just like deconstruction, exposes language to its

<sup>8</sup> See Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, Revised Edition (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 79, 104.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Translation and Transformation," *Stand*, 19:3 (1977), p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> Octavio Paz, "Translation: Literature and Letters," trans. Irene del Corral, in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, eds., *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 154.

incompleteness: “it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics” (TB, 165). That is why, for Derrida, Babel becomes “the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on” (TB, 165). Deconstruction situates translation at the heart of its theory because it points to the inevitable deconstructive operation within the linguistic system.

In this chapter, my theoretical formulations are based on this broad definition of translation in which ‘transference of meaning between two human languages’ is only an example. I am interested in the interpretative aspect of translation as a kind of ‘reading’ in a broad sense. My conclusions in Chapter Three on the readability and unreadability of a text also relies on this approach to the notion of translation.

### *Translation and Original*

Having established an overview of the significations of the term ‘translation,’ I intend to do a comparative study of the ideas of translation and of the original text in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida in order to explicate the curious relation of *the Ur-text (original)* to *the transferred text (translation)* and ask the following question: does translation help towards developing the ‘kinship of languages,’ giving the original an after-life and enabling it to survive, *or* does it instead ‘kill’ the original and substitute it with a decayed text? I would argue that through examining this relation I can elaborate more on the notion of singularity in deconstruction. Because translating the original is simply the repetition of the singular.

Traditionally, there are distinct views on translation, its possibility, and its effect. In brief, as George Steiner in *After Babel* identifies, there are two main views on the general possibility of translation: universalist and monadist.<sup>11</sup> The universalists believe that all meanings and emotions are universal and in fact we speak only one

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<sup>11</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel*, pp. 73-4.

language. Therefore, for them, translation is possible. Octavio Paz, for instance, quite unconventionally for a poet, subscribes to this view.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the monadist view suggests that language is so unique and individual that its translation is impossible. Yet, regardless of this distinction, the traditional view of language generally contends that translation is a decadent act since it corrupts the pure innocence of the original language.<sup>13</sup> This widely-accepted thought has its roots in Greek thought and religious traditions. For instance, Herder believed that when a text guards itself from all translations, it will retain its vital 'innocence'.<sup>14</sup> This exemplifies the long-standing religious and mystical perspective George Steiner refers to as "seeking to protect the holy texts from traduction."<sup>15</sup> In mystical and theological thought, the sacredness of language is thought to be lost after the Babel incident, and both translation and literature not only never regain that state but they also corrupt its idea. Michel de Certeau writes, "Mysticism is the anti-Babel. It is the search for a common language, after language has been shattered. It is the invention of a 'language of the angels' because that of man has been disseminated."<sup>16</sup> The mystical text seeks to protect itself from translation by inscribing itself as irreducibly singular. Like Rousseau's account of the 'origin of languages,' the mystical is situated in an essentially undivided point of linguistic 'innocence'.

I would argue that we need to re-read the traditional views on translation in the light of Walter Benjamin's theory of language and translation. Benjamin's theory of translation is not only a continuation of his views on language (as illustrated in Chapter One), but it has also remained seminal to any discussion of translation theory.

<sup>12</sup> Octavio Paz, "Translation: Literature and Letters," pp. 155-57.

<sup>13</sup> In answer to the Italian epigram that "*Traduttore, traditore*" (the translator is a betrayer), Roman Jakobson asks: "translator of what messages? betrayer of what values" (Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," p. 151)? The questions that will be raised later in this chapter are closely related to this challenge. While this has been the normal reaction against translation through ages, I should also mention the fact that for instance during the Renaissance period, translation gained a central and revolutionary role in contrast to its generally subordinated position.

<sup>14</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) contends that thought and language are inseparable in that a study of culture and thought should always return to language. He also argues that all languages have a common root. 'Innocence' is a term Steiner uses to suggest the original uncorrupted status of language.

<sup>15</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, p. 88.

Benjamin's text grants a new status to the act of translation and Derrida's theory of translation and meaning is greatly indebted to the thought of Benjamin. In fact, this chapter is the first attempt to examine a stronger correspondence between Benjamin's and Derrida's ideas on the notion of translation.

Benjamin's emphasis on the "task" of the translator gives a new credit to the translating act and Derrida takes this idea further to the fresh grounds of deconstruction. Benjamin, and consequently Derrida, re-read the concept of translation and give it a new theological understanding as well. For Benjamin, translation paradoxically helps humankind in their quest for the original tongue. It hints at "the kinship of languages," as I will explain later. Derrida, however, essentially objects to the notion of the 'innocence' of the 'pure language' as a naive concept. Yet, he eventually argues that translation as an act of re-reading survives the original. In brief, Derrida places translation in a paradoxical position. My conclusion from this is that language is caught in the paradox of being both singular and multiple - a notion that will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Benjamin, in his 1923 essay "The Task of the Translator," argues that the translator's task can be even more significant than the role of the writer of the original text. It is significant to note that this essay is written as a preface to Benjamin's own translation of Baudelaire's poetry. Benjamin believes that the translator, through "the decayed barriers of his own language," releases 'the pure language'. The translator, in his view, liberates "the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work" (TOT, 80). Benjamin compares the process of translation and poetic writing when he writes: "The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language is at work" (TOT, 76-7). For him, the 'task' of the translator is far more important than, and different from, that of the poet. Benjamin, as a result, overturns the hierarchy and views the original text as a decaying one and the translation as its revival: "In translation the original rises into a higher and purer air, as it were" (TOT, 75). Before I go any further, I shall put forward an outline of

Benjamin's general understanding of translation theory. In order to do this, we need to return to the story of *Genesis*.

I elaborated on the story of language in *Genesis* and pointed to three main 'narratives' in *Genesis* that consequently reveal three stages in the theological history of language: a) the human act of naming or appellation, b) the tree of knowledge and humanity's Fall from Eden, and c) the tower of Babel and the dispersion of humankind *and* language. It is through re-reading *Genesis* that Benjamin gives the term 'translation' other significations of transference (apart from its immediate meanings such as translation among multiple languages and translation within a single language in its different stages). Benjamin sees a process of translation in the way things created by God enter into the human vocabulary in the shape of naming (appellation). Language at its genesis "has no human addressee, no object and no means" and, as a result, it is "in the giving of the names, in the necessary translation of one language into the other(s), that language comes into its own."<sup>17</sup> Benjamin calls 'naming' the first stage in the story of language and regards 'the name' as the "original language" or "pure language". Yet, "this original language" itself is a translation of God's Word. Benjamin then sees a second stage of transference from the realm of names into the realm of knowledge through his reading of the story of the 'tree of knowledge'. 'Knowledge' gives the language a representational value that in turn creates translatable and repeatable human language. As we can see, in *Genesis* translation effectively acts as the movement and the link between languages. It is through translation that God's Word, the language of things, and human naming all become connected. And all this is before we even encounter the story of Babel.

Benjamin, in "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," argues that language starts to *mediate* after the fall. It becomes a means of communication, a mere sign. This in turn lays the foundation for the plurality of languages reflected in the story of Babel. Humans having "injured the purity of name" (OL, 120) turn away from

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<sup>17</sup> Hent de Vries, "Anti-Babel: The 'Mystical Postulate' in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida," p. 456.

the contemplation of 'things' that are the basic concepts and natural objects created by God in *Genesis* and named by humankind:

*Signs* must become confused where things are entangled. The enslavement of language in prattle is joined by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence. In this turning away from things, which was enslavement, the plan for the tower of Babel came into being, and linguistic confusion with it. (OL, 121)

Benjamin's notion of the multiplicity of language and language as a means or a sign are important background ideas for a study of his theory of translation. For Benjamin, the loss of the original is the very emblem of decadence, which translation, in a sense, resists and reverses. Here, I use Jacques Derrida's outline of Benjamin's views towards translation, because later I shall place Benjamin's theory in the context of Derrida's postulate concerning translation. According to Derrida, Benjamin believes that in translation neither *reception*, nor *communication*, nor *representation* or *reproduction* is intended (TB, 180). Here, Derrida points to and challenges three widely accepted criteria of translation - reception, communication, and representation - that I will now go on to clarify in more detail.

Benjamin, at the very beginning of "The Task of the Translator," claims that a work of art is not intended for the reader: "In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. . . . No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener" (TOT, 69). Thus, he initially problematises both notions of *reception* and *communication*. Benjamin, in the same paragraph, also states that even the concept of an 'ideal' receiver is detrimental (TOT, 69). For this reason, I would argue that what Benjamin criticises about the concept of reception is the *singularity* of intention and communication. In other words, if a work of art is intended to create a single communicating relationship with its audience, its horizon of meanings and interpretations will be channelled and

therefore it dies. In Benjamin's view, the original text is, therefore, beyond communication.

Now, if we accept that a literary text is not geared towards reception and therefore communication, what happens when it is translated? Benjamin claims that both reception and communication are not happening in the translating process, either. In translation, while we see a struggle to channel the meaning process of the original, what remains is a 'complementary' process between the two languages. In other words, the two languages affect one another. The first language intrudes upon the second one and the second language rephrases the language of the original text. This reciprocal relation points towards 'kinship' or the 'complementary' characteristic of languages. This is part of the process whereby translation counteracts the decadence of pure language because of the Fall. I will return to this later in more detail.

The final point about Benjamin's thought on translation is that *representation* or *reproduction* is not intended in translation. To understand this point, we need to return to the notion of *mimesis*. Benjamin believes that likeness should not be the final goal of the translator. It has been argued repeatedly in the history of translation theory that translation cannot achieve likeness simply because it is impossible, even in one single language.<sup>18</sup> Benjamin is not interested in the *possibility* of this act; rather he is interested in the idea that the translator should achieve something much higher. Benjamin's postulates concerning the notion of *mimesis* in relation to the original and the act of translation seem to be contradictory. While Benjamin argues for *mimesis* in some places, he stages a critique of *mimesis* in his other writings. For instance, in his 1933 essay, "On the Mimetic Faculty," Benjamin argues that "language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behaviour".<sup>19</sup> Andrew Benjamin, in his "Walter Benjamin and the Translator's Task," distinguishes the relation between the word and the representation with that of the translation and the original:

<sup>18</sup> As an example Shelley argues that the "curse of Babel" makes the translation act impossible (Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, p. 67). See *Translation Studies*, Susan Bassnett, p. 29 for more examples.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), p. 163.

For Benjamin mimesis refers to what he calls 'non-sensuous similarity' between language and what is signified. It is not however the case that the relationship posited between language and the signified is the same as the relationship between the translation and the original. The difference between the 'mode of intention' and the 'intended object' can be understood in mimetic terms, the relationship between the translation and the original cannot.<sup>20</sup>

In the mimetic representation of things, Benjamin postulates a "non-sensuous" relationship between the word and the representation. By contrast, the relationship between a translation and its original operates on the basis of the intimate and reciprocal exchange of self and other. This relation is not that of 'likeness'; it is analogous to the relation of 'kinship'.

But what is the process of 'kinship' and how does translation achieve it? In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin argues that there is a complementary process in operation between the translation and the original text. In other words, he claims that translation instead of rendering meaning, communicating something, or resembling the meaning of the original, should make the original and the translation recognizable as 'fragments' of a greater language (TOT, 78). Each individual language remains incomplete in itself. Translation, through its *redeeming* power, not only expresses the intimate relation among languages but it also is an attempt to recover the 'pure language'. Translation "reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation" (TOT, 79). A good translator "touches lightly" (TOT, 80) on the poetic elements of the original text and "promises a kingdom to the reconciliation of languages" towards the "language of the truth" (TB, 200). A good translation is a transference of language so that the original can be kept alive. The original, if sealed off, will effectively die, since its language cannot act in an interplay with the broad realm of 'original language'. Benjamin thus believes that "languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew Benjamin, "Walter Benjamin and the Translator's Task," in *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 186.



priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express" (TOT, 72).

Translation, in Benjamin's view, unfolds the inexplicable essence of language and brings that essence back to language.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, as Benjamin contends, to say that a translation reads as if it had originally been written in the second ('target') language is not a high praise: "A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully" (TOT, 79). In other words, Benjamin says that the original should not and could not affect the translation in a *mimetic* gesture. It is the translation that should be affected by the original (TOT, 80-81). For Benjamin, a good translation, instead of 'domesticating' the original language into the second language, in fact gives a 'foreign' sense to the second language. Octavio Paz writes that despite the fact that translation has been considered as a decadence of the original, this has not stopped new translations. This, he thinks, is due to the paradoxical nature of translation, "because, while translation overcomes the differences between one language and another, it also reveals them more fully".<sup>22</sup> In other words, translation reveals the foreignness of the *Ur-text*. Benjamin cites Rudolf Pannwitz to support his argument:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a false grounding: they wish to germanize Hindi, Greek, and English instead of hindicizing, grecizing and anglicizing German. They have a much more significant respect for their own linguistic usage than for the spirit of the foreign work . . . the fundamental error of the translator is that he holds fast to the incidental state of his own language instead of letting it be violently moved by the foreign.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Hent de Vries, "Anti-Babel: The 'Mystical Postulate' in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida," p. 456.

<sup>22</sup> Octavio Paz, "Translation: Literature and Letters," p. 154

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Carol Jacobs, "The Monstrosity of Translation," *MLN* 90 (1975), p. 756. Here, I use Carol Jacobs's translation instead of Zohn's (TOT, 80-81) since it gives a more precise understanding of the argument. For instance, in Zohn's translation we read "they want to turn Hindi . . . into German instead of turning German into Hindi. . ." (TOT, 80).

When we read a text that is translated into our own language, the text should still bear the marks of the original language rather than giving us the impression that the translated text before us has been originally written in our own language. José Ortega Y Gasset, in "The Misery and the Splendor of Translation," explains that for the theologian Schleiermacher, "[i]t is only when we force the reader from his linguistic habits and oblige him to move within those of the author that there is actually translation".<sup>24</sup> He then concludes that a translated text that keeps the foreignness of the original takes our language to its limits and "for a while" makes us "amused at being another".<sup>25</sup> The most important exponent of this view is F. W. Newman who argues that "[t]ranslation as a means of helping the TL [Target Language] reader become the equal of what Schleiermacher called the better reader of the original, through a deliberately contrived foreignness in the TL text".<sup>26</sup> This idea is fairly close to what Benjamin argues. This presence of the 'foreign' in the translated text is another support for Benjamin's theory of 'kinship' of languages. I will follow this later when I argue for a 'theory of survival' in Derrida's thought.

### *Derrida and the paradox of the proper name*

As I discussed above, Benjamin sees a reconciling force in the act of translation. The original language affects the translated language and this helps towards 'the kinship of languages'. The notion of 'kinship' is the concluding point in Benjamin's theory and the starting point in my argument. In the rest of this chapter and also next, I will explore the notion of the singular – the original – from different perspectives. I believe that a discussion of singularity is closely related to the relation between the original and the translation, the proper name and the common noun, and the text and its reading. I will first return to the proper name of Babel and Derrida's reading. Later, I

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<sup>24</sup> José Ortega Y Gasset, in "The Misery and the Splendor of Translation," trans. Elizabeth Gamble Miller, in Rainer Schulte, and John Biguenet, eds., *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 108

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 112

<sup>26</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, p. 71

will relate this to a more generalised understanding of the name in deconstruction. Then I will take the discussion on the translation of the original further arguing that Derrida regards translation as an inevitable and impossible act that survives the singular text. What is common to all these relations is the act of repetition of something that is supposed to be singular. In short, I attempt to explore the possibility of singularity and its inevitable repetition through reading Derrida's theory. Then, in Chapter Three I will move to a discussion on the notion of singularity and reading in literary discourse.

In order to clarify the relation between the translation and the original according to Derrida, I believe we need to go back to the account of the relation between the proper name and the common noun. As I suggested, 'Babel' as both a proper name and a common noun oscillates between translatability and untranslatability. Derrida raises this question in "Living On": "how can a proper name be translated" (LO, 143-4)? He gives a response to this in "Des Tours de Babel": the proper name, an outcast of language, *cannot be translated* but *should only be translated* in order to survive and this consequently makes the proper name a common noun. Translation therefore becomes a *necessity* and an *impossibility* (TB, 170-172). The singularity of language resists translation yet at the same time this singularity can only be communicated if it becomes translated.

Let us look at "The Battle of Proper Names" in *Of Grammatology* where Derrida elaborates on his understanding of the proper name. Derrida stages a detailed critique of Lévi-Strauss's ideas on the place of the proper name in an exemplary primitive community - the Nambikwara. Lévi-Strauss contends that the people of Nambikwara "are not allowed . . . to use proper names" (OG, 109). He explains later how he plans to find out people's names by putting them against one another. Lévi-Strauss inveigles the little girls of the tribe to tell him the name of another member of the group that they had a fight with. This great secret is told as a form of reprisal and the enemy does the same. Through this, he finds out the name of everyone in the village. Regarding this report, Derrida argues that what Lévi-Strauss in fact finds out is not a proper

name. Instead, “[w]hat the interdict is laid upon is the uttering of what *functions* as the proper name” (OG, 111). In other words, proper names are not singular any longer when they are repeated “because their production is their obliteration” (OG, 109). The moment that a name is called ‘proper,’ it becomes classified and obliterated: “It is already no more than a *so-called* proper name” (OG, 109). Derrida adds that

the proper name has never been, as the unique appellation reserved for the presence of a unique being, anything but the original myth of a transparent legibility present under obliteration; it is because the proper name was never possible except through its functioning within a classification and therefore within a system of differences, within a writing retaining the traces of difference. . . . (OG, 109)

Therefore, the proper name - and for that matter the singular - is *always already* in the “play of difference” (OG, 109). While Derrida sees the proper name as outside the ‘system’ of language, he does see a ‘trace’ (of *différance*) in proper names. For him, the proper name or the signature has a paradoxical significance: “It’s always the same thing, but each time it’s different” (EO, 84-85). Derrida is therefore sceptical towards the emblem of singularity as an “original myth of a transparent legibility” (OG, 109). Later on he places this argument on a paradoxical level giving credit to *singularity* but still demanding *repetition*. He writes: “The death of absolutely proper naming, recognizing in a language the other as pure other, invoking it as what it is, is the death of the pure idiom reserved for the unique” (OG, 110). I should note here that Derrida is not saying that pronouncing every proper name turns it into a common noun - something which could hastily be concluded from the remarks above. What Derrida is arguing against is the fact that proper name in this particular context is classified as an ‘unspoken’ entity. Therefore, if we try to ‘speak out’ the proper name, it will no longer belong to the classification it used to belong to. Yet the main point that remains is how the proper name can exist if it cannot be spoken. In deconstruction, the singular proper name when repeated is called a common noun. But this also means that there

was no proper name in the first place. In order to explain this point further let us compare Benjamin's and Derrida's arguments on the proper name.

The departure point between Derrida and Benjamin is that Derrida criticises this logocentric notion of divine language and "leaves no doubt that there cannot be one unique, secret or sacred - divine - name or language of names".<sup>27</sup> For him, there has never been a single name and, if there were, this name "would name nothing and nobody."<sup>28</sup> The aspect in Derrida's thinking which is very important in this respect is the spreading effect of 'iterability.' Language repeats itself and that is why it is living. This in itself might seem a trivial hypothesis. But what Derrida is more interested in is the relation between singularity and plurality. This relation can be explored in the way Derrida reads the term 'Babel'. For Benjamin the untranslatable sacred character of the proper name is ultimate whereas Derrida always uses the terms 'Babel' and 'Babelisation' in double meanings. "The Babelian narrative," for Derrida, is "construction and deconstruction at once" (SN, 80). In other words, it connotes the aim of *unifying the language* in building a tower towards heaven yet at the same time it suggests the inevitable result of *multiplication and dispersal of meaning*. For this reason, Derrida sees *a force towards singularity* in the attempt to build the tower - Babelisation - while acknowledging the fact that *the creation of multiple languages* is its inevitable result. For Benjamin, however, only one side of this double bind is seen. He views Babelisation solely as an act towards multiplicity and places his arguments on this basis.

Derrida always returns to the texts which are written in more than one single language or texts in which more than one language is implicated (TB, 171). Derrida has repeatedly pointed to this fact that there is always more than one language. His texts are full of words with different meanings, which highlights this concept of differentiality. There is always "more than one language, no more of one language" (MPDM, 14-15). And that is why Derrida has an affirmative approach to the notion of

<sup>27</sup> Hent de Vries, "Anti-Babel: The 'Mystical Postulate' in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida," p. 462.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

translation after Babel and does not place translation on a secondary level. Derrida, in "Letter to a Japanese Friend," encourages a Japanese translation of 'deconstruction' stating that he does not give any higher value to the original term in French: "I do not believe that translation is a secondary and derived event in relation to an original language or text. And as 'deconstruction' is a word, as I have just said, that is *essentially replaceable* in a chain of substitution, then that can also be done from one language to another" (LJF, 275, my emphasis). Derrida does not subscribe to the idea of original language as the Idea, either. There is no pure form of language in the Platonic sense of the word. The original form of language implies that it is the beholder of truth, an idea which Derrida challenges.

Therefore, the basic distinction between Benjamin's and Derrida's reading of Babel still lies in the fact that Benjamin sees one "unique, secret or sacred-divine-name or language of names," whereas Derrida is always insisting that there is always already "*plus d'une langue* - more than one language" (MPDM, 14-15) and that the 'pure language' is even multiple. Furthermore, Derrida acknowledges Benjamin's views towards God's name (as pure language) and its untranslatability yet he takes Benjamin's theory to a paradoxical level. Derrida maintains that Babel as a metaphor for the proper name is caught in a double bind of translatability and untranslatability.

### ***Translation as the survival of the original***

Having examined the notions of the proper name and the singular and the possibility of their translation, I can return to my argument on the relation between the translation and the original according to deconstruction. Derrida in fact takes two main themes from Benjamin's essay and gives these terms a more generalised interest: Derrida examines the notions of the 'kinship of languages' and 'survival' in the act of translation and then situates them within his new definition of the 'text'. Whereas Benjamin regards translation as a univocal performance, one that reveals true meaning (remember that Benjamin sees the kinship and relation of languages "in what they

mean" (TB, 187)), Derrida is critical precisely of this aspect of translation as a 'metaphysical' attempt. In his view, a metaphysical way of thinking first *distinguishes* and *privileges* the 'signified' over the 'signifier' in a text assuming the signifier as the *vehicle* for the signified. For him, translation is impossible if we want to transfer the 'sense' of the original text, simply because there is no single 'sense' ('signified') in the text. If translation stabilises the text, then the text will die. And it is here that we find a connection between Benjamin's theories and Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysics.

As we saw, for Benjamin, translations create a reciprocal relationship among languages towards the "greater language". Derrida's challenge to this theory stems from the fact that he does not subscribe to the notion of totality in language. For instance, in *Dissemination*, he argues that translators, through their adherence to the notion of linguistic totality, have missed one 'sense' of the double bind of *pharmakon*.<sup>29</sup> On a more general level, they have also ignored one aspect of the paradox of 'writing' as *pharmakon*:

All translations into languages that are the heirs and depositories of western metaphysics thus produce on the *pharmakon* an *effect of analysis* that violently destroys it, reduces it to one of its simple elements by interpreting it, paradoxically, in the light of the ulterior developments that it itself has made possible. (DS, 99)

In other words, translations of 'pharmakon' have permitted and encouraged an analysis of the original use of the term and, as a result, have reduced it to some simple message or possible meaning that it seemed to contain. Derrida, on the other hand, has tried in his texts to include both contradictory meanings of this term among many other double meanings. But the paradox of the term 'pharmakon' can lead us to a more general paradox in deconstruction in its view on translation. Translation, despite

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<sup>29</sup> '*Pharmakon*' is a Greek term used in Plato's *Phaedrus* that means both 'poison' and 'remedy' or 'cure'. Derrida argues that both these senses of the word are in operation in the text. Therefore, writing becomes both poison and cure, "on the one hand, a threat to the living presence of authentic (spoken) language, on the other an indispensable means for anyone who wants to record, transmit or somehow commemorate that presence" (Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana Press, 1987), pp. 37-8).

producing single references to the original, still has a liberating effect simply because each translation becomes 'another' meaning of the original. Translations in effect make meanings multiple. Derrida takes this opposite turn and states that every *inevitable* translation always helps a text to "live on," provoking new 'senses' within the original text. I would argue that deconstruction, then, becomes a *destabilising force* within the text that views the text as a multiplying phenomenon. As a result, translation is no longer a failure.

Yet Derrida's critique does not simply overturn a conventional hierarchy. Susan Bassnett, in her *Translation Studies*, argues that Derrida is saying that it is not the original that creates the translation but it is "the translation process [that] *creates* an original text".<sup>30</sup> I would argue, however, that Derrida is claiming that the translation *saves the 'original'*. And this is the point at which Benjamin's thought becomes translated into the deconstructive thought. Though not believing in the notion of an 'origin' or a 'true' language in the 'beginning,' Derrida sees a mutual indebtedness between the translation and the original text. The original demands translations and the translation is an 'origin' for re-translations: "the structure of the original is marked by the requirement to be translated. . . . The original is the first debtor, the first practitioner; it begins by lacking and by pleading for translation" (TB, 184). Derrida relates this to the position of God and the Shem - the builders of the tower of Babel. There, it is not only the 'translators' - the builders - who strive to "found a universal tongue translating itself by itself; it also constrains the deconstructor of the tower: in giving his name, God also appealed to translation" (TB, 184).<sup>31</sup> And this is why Derrida argues that, for Benjamin, translation is guaranteed in "the thought of God" as a debt (TB, 182).

<sup>30</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, p. xv. My emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to see how critics read Derrida's position towards translation in negative terms. For instance, Bernard Zelechow in "The Myth of Translatability: Translation as Interpretation" argues that deconstruction "denies translation as well as translatability" (in David Jasper, ed., *Translating Religious Texts: Translation, Transgression and Interpretation* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1993), p. 129). Zelechow's argument has roots in the assumption that Derrida "asserts that communication is untranslatable" (ibid). This shows the degree that Derrida has been misunderstood.



Paul de Man does not hold the same view as Derrida on translation. While Derrida argues that translation survives the text, de Man sees translation as an act of killing and a failure. In his lecture, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'," de Man reads Benjamin as saying that translation, by *canonizing* and *freezing* the original, reveals a mobility or instability in the original which could not be noticed at first.<sup>32</sup> Through creating an illusion of intention and meaning, translation proves that this meaning or intention has not been present in the first place. But what does de Man mean by arguing that the original is already dead? I suggest that the original for de Man is dead because it is an emblem of singularity and uniqueness. In other words, the impossibility of the singular leaves no ground for the possibility of the original text. De Man's deconstruction stops at the point of negating the singular while Derrida, as I show in this chapter, sees a redemption for the singular. De Man takes the translation to be a failure, a 'giving up'.<sup>33</sup> He believes that the translator could never achieve what the original text does. Any translation is always secondary in relation to the original and the translator has lost the game from the very beginning. In fact, de Man, by taking the 'translation' as a kind of 'reading,' reiterates his understanding of deconstruction as a form of reading of the text which is found to be *always already* disarticulated and alienated.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast, Derrida does not subscribe to the possibility or impossibility of translation. Translation is both possible and impossible in different senses. If translation becomes an attempt to transfer a supposed single sense of the original into the 'target' language (unifying the senses of the original), it is an impossible task for the reason that there is no single sense to the original. Yet, if translation is an attempt to multiply the already multiple possibilities of meaning of the text, it becomes possible and liberating. Translation is only an attempt to add more meanings to the original. A translation that grants a unitary original sense to the text as if it has a

<sup>32</sup> Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

single meaning deep inside is a contradiction in terms. It declares the untranslatability of the original while it pretends to be a translation itself. If a unique single meaning in fact exists within the text, how can the translator claim that it can be repeated?

I would argue, therefore, that Derrida sees *translation as inevitable* because it preserves the multiple meanings of the original text and, in turn, demands more translations to create more double meanings. Translation as interpretation makes every text prone to multiple translations none more authoritative than any other, but the texts demand translation as it is the secret to their survival. Single authoritative translation is like non-translation. This totalising approach which claims to protect the text from 'misreadings' will, in effect, kill the text.

But do Benjamin and Derrida agree on the possibility of re-translations? The answer to this question will reveal further differences between their views. De Man reminds us that for Benjamin while the original asks for translation, the translation of the translation is impossible:

That the original was not purely canonical is clear from the fact that it demands translation; it cannot be definitive since it can be translated. But you cannot, says Benjamin, translate the translation; once you have a translation you cannot translate it any more. You can translate only an original.<sup>35</sup>

Benjamin maintains that "translation, ironically, transplants the original into a more definitive realm since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering" (TOT, 75). In other words, a good translation does not fix or restore the 'original' meaning (if there is any) but it strives to preserve the ambivalent nature of the meaning of the original in the translated text. In translation, "meaning is only touched by the wind of language . . ." (TB, 189). For Benjamin, therefore, translations themselves are untranslatable "because of the all too fleeting manner in which meaning [*Sinn*] attaches to them"<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Carol Jacobs, "The Monstrosity of Translation," p. 758. Zohn's translation can be found in TOT, 81. Again I chose Jacobs's translation here.

Derrida, in contrast to Benjamin, thinks that re-translations are *possible* and even *necessary*. As Catherine Burgass notes, “[p]art of the project of deconstruction is to reveal, and indeed to revel in, double meanings where they have been concealed beneath unitary or unified translations”<sup>37</sup>. The notion of ‘iterability’ which is repeated in different forms in Derrida’s texts points to the same theory. For instance, ‘the proper name,’ ‘the signature,’ and ‘the postcard’ are all caught in the same paradox of the necessary repetition of a singular event. For Derrida, translation as a form of reading and interpretation (and indeed repetition) needs to be repeated since every reading is a signifier for later readings. I will return to this when I discuss Derrida’s theory of the ‘text’ in Chapter Three. I would like to point out that this position is justified even in the light of de Man’s theory. As I already discussed, de Man argues that translation kills and stabilises the original. I would argue that stabilising the original will make the re-translation even more possible simply because it is much easier to interpret (or translate) based on a definitive ‘stabilised’ (‘paralysed’) text with a single meaning. On the other hand, if every translation is only one of the many readings of the original, any single reading can result in re-readings. To Benjamin and Derrida, this is the secret to ‘the survival’ of the text.

As I demonstrated earlier, Benjamin believes that translation is not a *mimetic* copy of the original. Instead, the original can have an afterlife only if it becomes translated:

no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife - which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living - the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process. (TOT, 73)

For Benjamin, translation instead helps the decaying original to survive. The original undergoes “a maturing process,” “a transformation,” and “a renewal” when being

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<sup>37</sup> Catherine Burgass, “English in Transition: Translating Derrida,” p. 84.

translated (TOT, 73). In “Des Tours de Babel,” Derrida writes that Benjamin sees the task of the translator as one “to redeem in his own tongue that pure language exiled in the foreign tongue, to liberate by transposing this pure language captive in the work . . .” (TB, 188). Derrida concludes from this remark that, for Benjamin, translation is a poetic transposition that liberates the ‘pure language’. It does not render the meaning of the original but extends the body of languages and puts languages into symbolic expression. Eventually, the translation and the original complement each other to form a larger tongue in the course of a “sur-vival” that changes them both. Translation, like a child, is not simply a reproduction; it becomes bigger and complements its original (TB, 189-191).

The relationship of the original to the translation is like the relation of life to survival (TB, 182). Derrida says that, for Benjamin, “the structure of the original text is survival,” what he calls “*überleben*” (EO, 121). The word “*überleben*” means “to live beyond your own death in a sense.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore translation seeks to exhibit its own possibility, and not just communicate meaning which “is subjected to a permanent ‘drifting’.”<sup>39</sup> Since the original “lives on and transforms itself” (TB, 188) and engages in an act of “postmaturation” (TB, 183), the translation does not and should not copy or reconstitute an original but becomes a moment in “the holy growth of the original” (TB, 183).

Translation, as a way of losing the singularity of the name, turns it into a common noun. In other words, it destroys the original. But Derrida argues that this losing “saves the name”. In his “*Sauf le nom*,” Derrida explains how, by losing the name of God, we “save” it. He points out that negative theology as a “linguistic event” remains “at once *in* and *on* language” (SN, 58). The reason why he sees negative theology at the threshold of language is because in negative theology they “name God, speak of him, speak *him*, speak to *him*, let *him* speak in *them*” while at the same time they negate the name of God. Derrida writes

<sup>38</sup> Paul de Man, “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” p. 85.

<sup>39</sup> Hent de Vries, “Anti-Babel: The ‘Mystical Postulate’ in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida,” p. 474.

[a]s if it was necessary both to save the name and to save everything except the name, *save the name* [sauf le nom], as if it was necessary to lose the name in order to save what bears the name, or that toward which one goes through the name. But to lose the name is not to attack it, to destroy it or wound it. On the contrary, to lose the name is quite simply to respect it: as name. (SN, 58)

Translation remains an impossible task if it attempts to singularise the name of God. It can only save the name through multiplying the significations of the name of God. I confine myself to this account on the saving of the name and refer the reader to Part III in which I explain in detail Derrida's thought about the name of God and the way negative theology becomes an attempt to save the name through ineffability.

In a roundtable on the question of translation and Benjamin, Derrida recapitulates his reading of Benjamin's theory of language. He speaks of a 'mutual contract' between the translation and the original in general terms. The translation and the original not only demand one another and suspend each other's decay but they also enable language to survive through this symbiotic relationship. Derrida, in short, recovers Benjamin's theory out of a discourse of metaphysics whilst keeping a distance from de Man's negative deconstruction:

Translation augments and modifies the original, which, insofar as it is living on, never ceases to be transformed and to grow. It modifies the original even as it also modifies the translating language. This process - transforming the original as well as the translation - is the translation contract between the original and the translating text. In this contract it is a question of neither representation nor communication; rather, the contract is destined to assure a survival, not only of a corpus or a text or an author but of language. (EO, 122)

Translation for Derrida becomes a messianic act in the restrictive sense of leaving the text open to future meanings and significations. Derrida is not interested in doing a study of the origin of language. He is instead concerned with the way the original moves constantly into new realms. Benjamin on the other hand is not only messianic in the sense that he sees the act of translation as a future reconciliation of languages

but is also nostalgic for the original immanent language of the past. Translation brings 'the past' to 'life'. Derrida's messianic emphasis is on 'what is yet to come': the survival of the text. However, for Derrida, translation *remains* a "promise." The story of translation is the story of that "kingdom" which is at once "promised and forbidden where the languages will be reconciled and fulfilled" (TB, 191).

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Singular Event of the Literary Work

the untranslatable remains – should remain as my law tells me – the poetic economy of the idiom, the one that is important to me, for I would die even more quickly without it. . . . (MO, 56)

I discussed the double bind of *necessity and impossibility* in translation in the last chapter. In a reading of *Genesis*, I gave a detailed account of the story of the tower of Babel in which God orders simultaneously “translate me” *and* “don’t translate me”. The pledge of the proper name (and again God’s name as the first proper name) was also discussed. I wrote how the proper name asks us to respect its singularity and uniqueness while it also demands to be multiplied and repeated in order to be presented. Translation manifests the kinship of languages and the survival of the original text. It neither grants life nor kills the original; it liberates and gives the original an after-life, i.e. survival. In this chapter, I will locate the same paradox within a new context. Having explored the paradox of singularity in the *translating act* of two texts, I will now examine this paradox within the *reading act* of a single text – the literary text. I will explain how, in my view, this paradox gives the text a ‘certain’ status. The notion of translation here becomes a kind of *reading*. My argument here is based on the presumption that when we read a text we are constantly translating or repeating it in new contexts which bear new meanings and significations. As I argued earlier, reading is translating; therefore, to read a literary text has the same limits and merits as translating it. The act of reading literature is a continuous act of translating the text in its ever-shifting context and history. Reading, like translation, works “from within” language “to revise its origins, its future horizons, and consequently the inner

structure of the moving body which constitutes its history".<sup>1</sup> Every act of reading is a kind of translation of the text which attempts to rewrite the text.

Therefore, my discussion here is not about the transference or the translating of the original into the translation. Instead, it is the literary text which is perceived as simultaneously *unreadable* and *readable* (singular and general). I would argue that *the resistance to readability (repetition)* is a quality that is prevalent in literary discourse. I intend to juxtapose the way a literary text is *untranslatable while demanding translation* with the way it is *unreadable while being read endlessly, repeatedly and each time differently*. In this way, literary discourse becomes a proper name with the deconstructive forces of both singularity and multiplicity.

It is generally believed that Derridean (and more generally post-structuralist) views on the notion of meaning and the possibility of signification are in some way negative and nihilistic. Throughout this thesis I return to this assumption repeatedly and address it in different contexts. In this part, I believe that clarifying Derrida's position regarding the readability and the unreadability of the text can shed light on his position on the notion of non-meaning. Therefore, I would like to ask here whether Derrida maintains that a text is completely unreadable (no meaning communicated) or absolutely readable (no particular meaning can be ascribed to a particular text and therefore it does not hold any centre or essence). In order to answer these questions, it seems appropriate to begin with an analysis of the notions of readability and unreadability.

I take three important motifs or metaphors in Derridean philosophy to explore the paradox of singularity - the relation between readability and unreadability - in deconstruction. 'Signature' in Derrida's texts is an example of the singularity and unreadability of the text. It generally connotes a mark that is not repeatable and is unique. 'Postcard,' on the other hand, signifies absolute readability and therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Will, "Dead Stones in Our Mouths: A Review of Two New Books on Translation," *MLN*, 90 (1975), p. 981



'iterability'<sup>2</sup> of the text. My discussion of these two motifs will give a proper background to see the argument of this chapter from two separate sides. Then, I take the 'biodegradable' as the synthesis to these two ends of the spectrum. Derrida argues that the secret to the survival of literary discourse is its 'biodegradability,' that is in its simultaneous readability and unreadability. I believe the argument in the previous chapter about the survival of the text as translatable and untranslatable ties in with the present argument that a text 'lives on' when it is both readable *and* unreadable. Later, I will take my conclusions to a literary ground to examine the effect of this paradox in Jorge Luis Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote".

### ***Signature: unreadable singularity***

'Signature' is the unique 'mark' of the writer that cannot be repeated exactly anymore. It is the singular mark. Yet, Derrida correctly argues that in order that a signature *functions as a signature*, it has to have the capability to be repeated or 'countersigned'. Derrida, in the interview "Some Questions and Responses," talks about the concept of the 'singular event' in language that is "at the juncture of *langue* and *parole*, competence and performance" (SQR, 253). He believes that the event of a *mark* is not simply a sign that is "something occurring once, but in its uniqueness it is iterable" (SQR, 253). Derrida takes 'signature' as another metaphor in this act of 'iterability,' and calls the proper name and language in general the "iterable mark".

I use the term 'signature' as a touchstone in order to explain Derrida's position regarding singularity and unreadability. Derrida defines 'reading' as "making accessible a meaning that can be transmitted as such, in its own unequivocal, translatable identity" (LO, 116). He is sceptical towards the possibility of this act of reading in particular texts. In fact, he is not interested in texts that are absolutely readable in this sense. Instead, Derrida is in favour of the power of singularity as a positive force in the

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<sup>2</sup> 'Iterability' is a kind of repeatability that is 'differential'. In other words, it is repetition with a difference. Derrida coins this word to explain how an 'iterable' text is repeated while retaining a unique 'signature' within it. '*Iter*' means "once again" from *itara* that in Sanskrit means "other". I will explain this term in more detail later on in this chapter.

text. Signature, for him, is so singular that “in spite of what is thereby named, [it] no longer signifies” (G, 31). This can make signature an outcast of language - what Derrida is prepared to argue for: “In *no longer* signifying, the signature . . . no longer belongs to or comes from the order of signification, of the signified or the signifier” (G, 31-2). Yet, this unreadability is not negation. Derrida writes elsewhere:

unreadability does not arrest reading, does not leave it paralyzed in the face of an opaque surface: rather, it starts reading and writing and translation moving again. The untranslatable is not the opposite of the readable but rather the ridge {*arête*} that also gives it momentum, movement, sets it in motion. [Paul de Man writes,] “The impossibility of reading should not be taken too lightly.” (LO, 116)

The unreadability of the text for Derrida is another term for “the very impossibility of totalizing reading”. Through negating the singular reading, deconstruction invites new readings of the text that sets it free from the singularity of reference. While for de Man the unreadability is the finality of deconstructive enterprise, Derrida always sees the ‘positive’ promise of readability in the future.<sup>3</sup> In short, ‘signature’ becomes an example of the unreadable text the very unreadability of which enables it to survive and “sets it in motion”.

### *Postcard: mere readability*

In contrast, the postcard is an open letter crypted. It is a “‘wandering exile’, a message most often casually inscribed and promiscuously open for all to read”.<sup>4</sup> It is a text which is absolutely readable yet addressed and understood by only one single addressee. The postcard is firmly tied down to specific singular concepts while capable of being loosely read by everyone. This could lead us to the relation between *absolute readability* and *the possibility of meaning*. Derrida writes: “As soon as, in a second, the first stroke of a letter divides itself, and must indeed support partition in order to identify itself,

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Norris, *Derrida*, p. 186.

there are nothing but postcards, anonymous morsels without fixed domiciles, without legitimate addressee, letters open, but like crypts”.<sup>5</sup> Here, Derrida is writing on the general notion of writing as the scene of absence. The moment of marking is the moment of separation between the signifier and the signified. The signifiers in the text act as “crypts” that do not refer to any signifieds. Likewise, the postcard signifies an act of “readability without a signified” (DS, 253). This open letter is ultimately written for a particular person. The signs while being open for everyone to interpret are in fact crypts that are left out of context. The signs are crypts in two senses: they are pinned down to a particular time and space while they are left loose without any attachments. The state of the postcard, therefore, vouches for two different positions: *the specificity of signs* and *their arbitrary function*. When signs are so firmly linked to a particular context (or, in other words, they become so close to a singular status), they could mean anything and as a result nothing. This pure readability eventually leads to unreadability.<sup>6</sup> The open text paradoxically stops any process of signification.

As a result, I would argue that for Derrida, the postcard in itself is an example of ‘writing’ in general. In his argument on speech and writing, Derrida explains how writing can be prone to recontextualization and as a result is always already readable. Writing becomes, therefore, an ‘iterable’ text. A literary text, in this sense, is a mere readable text. Norris argues that Derrida, in his response to Searle’s essay,<sup>7</sup> postulates that “language is subject to a generalized ‘iterability’ - or readiness to be grafted into new and unforeseeable contexts - such that no appeal to performative intent can serve to delimit the range of possible meaning”.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, language is said to have this potential of being repeatedly read in new contexts. Habermas traces this idea in the thought of Heidegger and Derrida’s forbidding “any thought about a supreme entity”.<sup>9</sup> Habermas points out that for Derrida the “solid permanence of the written” is not of

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida’s Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> John R. Searle, “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida,” *Glyph*, 2 (1977), pp. 198-208.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Norris, *Derrida*, p. 178.

<sup>9</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 165.

prime importance. Instead, Derrida is fascinated with “an *absolute readability*” of writing in which “the written form detaches any given text from the context in which it arose”.<sup>10</sup> He adds:

Writing makes what is said independent from the mind of the author, from the breath of the audience, as well as from the presence of the objects under discussion. The medium of writing lends the text a stony autonomy in relation to all living contexts. It extinguishes the concrete connections with individual subjects and determinate situations, and yet the text still retains its readability. Writing guarantees that a text can always repeatedly be read in arbitrarily changing contexts. What fascinates Derrida is this thought of an *absolute readability*.<sup>11</sup>

Habermas is, then, quick to give writing the status of the testimony to the eternal. He reads Derrida as saying that writing in the absence of everything “holds in heroic abstraction the possibility of a repeatable readability that transcends everything in this world”. He concludes that writing “promises salvation for its semantic content” even beyond the death of everything.<sup>12</sup> To support this argument, he quotes Derrida saying, “[a]ll graphemes are of a testamentary essence” (OG, 69). Steiner seems to subscribe to the same point when he writes that the act of writing is stabilising the past in the present letter.<sup>13</sup> I will return to the notion of writing in Part II, yet I need to argue here that Habermas’s reading of Derrida gives writing a transcendental status even higher than that which theology gives to speech. My contention is that writing, for Derrida, is epitomised by the figure of the postcard and its “absolute readability” points to the absence of metaphysical presence. It is true that writing remains for the future in deconstruction but it remains as an open letter that is the testimony of the instant that signs were separated from meanings.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 165-6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>13</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 87.

***Biodegradables: survival***

Like the postcard, for Derrida, literature is involved in “a ‘logic’ of signature, a paradoxology of the singular mark, and thus of the exceptional and the counter-example” (TSI, 58). There is always a simultaneous two-fold force in operation in a ‘text.’ Literary discourse tries to achieve a sense of singularity yet its very existence depends on repetition - its readability - in different contexts. Literature ‘survives’ because it is situated somewhere in between. If it is totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language, and if totally untranslatable, it dies immediately. Timothy Clark correctly situates Derrida’s thought in the middle of these two oppositions when he writes:

Derrida can be read as placing the event of signature within a textual economy characterised by two extremes: (a) complete singularity and untranslatability, in which a text exceeds received notions of meaning *simply by having none* and so becomes unintelligible; (b) complete translatability, the text’s meaning being so simple as to be indisputable. . . .<sup>14</sup>

I would argue that each *reading event* of a literary text is a force aimed at generality while each *writing event* points to singularity. The writing of the literary text is made possible because of the author’s urge for singularity. Yet the reading of it is made possible through the reader’s drive for generality. When Steiner argues that literature is “the maximalization of semantic incommensurability” and that its “surplus value” - excess of the signified - is always evident, he certainly refers to this *reading event*.<sup>15</sup> This argument links closely to what I pointed out in the previous chapter regarding the act of translation. The translator acts as both the reader and the writer. We should acknowledge two existing movements in two opposite directions when translating a text. First, the original, a text which can be engaged in the infinite process of ‘reading,’ is being univocalised through translation into a closed form (the translated text). Yet, when reading the translation, the reader can turn this closed form into further possible

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, pp. 186-7.

<sup>15</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences*, pp. 83, 84.

'readings'. The translator reads the original text (multiplying meanings) and then writes the translation (placing one meaning over others). In short, to adapt Barthes, the act of writing "closes on a signified" while the act of reading "accomplishes the very plural of meaning".<sup>16</sup>

As a result, one might be tempted to say that a literary text should not have a unique 'identity'. Instead, I would suggest that it has a unique identity that is constantly repeated. Its 'iterable singular event' makes the text always aware of the 'other' which is "the other of the text" and "its own otherness": "My law, the one to which I try to devote myself or to respond, is *the text of the other*, its very singularity, its idiom, its appeal which precedes me" (TSI, 66). This 'otherness' is the countersignature of the text. No signature can 'function' as signature and be called a signature without the possibility of being repeated, i.e. being countersigned:

Countersignature signs by confirming the signature of the other, but also by signing in an absolutely new and inaugural way, both at once, like each time I confirm my own signature by signing once more: each time in the same way and each time differently, one more time, at another date. (TSI, 66-7)

Therefore, the singularity of signature can exist only if there is a counter-signature. In other words, it survives if it can be repeated. In the text, the force towards one direction leads to the other one: singularity ends in generality and vice versa. If the singularity of the signature is taken away from it, its repetition (countersignature) becomes redundant as well.

Through literary history, it has been claimed that great literature survives and 'functions' beyond death. In "Biodegradables," Derrida asks this question: "what is it in a 'great' work, let's say of Plato, Shakespeare, Hugo, Mallarmé, James, Joyce, Kafka, Heidegger, Benjamin, Blanchot, Celan, that resists erosion" (B, 845)? Derrida examines the secret of the survival of "great" texts, and his answer to this question goes back to the same paradoxical point within a text: "in the most general and novel sense of this

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<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," trans. Stephen Heath, in *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 158-159.

term, a *text* must be '(bio)degradable' in order to nourish the 'living' culture, memory, tradition" (B, 845). And for him, this can be achieved if the text "irrigates the milieu of this tradition" and ultimately "its 'formal' identity" (including all its signifiers) becomes dissolved. Yet, to "enrich this 'organic' soil of the said culture, it must also resist it, contest it, question and criticize it enough" (B, 845). And therefore it must be "assimilated as inassimilable, kept in reserve, unforgettable because irreceivable, capable of inducing meaning without being exhausted by meaning, incomprehensibly elliptical, secret" (B, 845). Literary discourse is a biodegradable text that keeps a secret always "in reserve". It is a text that gives a double command. It asks for readings (translations) while keep something inassimilable in reserve. Therefore, the term '(bio)degradable' becomes the third motif which directly refers to the survival of the text.

Based on the argument above, one can conclude that for Derrida the key to the survival of the text is unintelligibility. In other words, unintelligibility seems to be a key notion that operates in both readable and unreadable texts. The text that moves more and more towards singularity strives towards unintelligibility. The text which is always out of context is also unintelligible or 'beyond' intelligibility (or excessive intelligibility) since it lacks the particularity of a context to focus it. The excess of meaning or to mean everything is equal to meaning nothing. However, Derrida objects to the view that a text simply requires to be inassimilable, irreceivable, or to exceed meaning in order to survive. This might mean that

absurdities, logical errors, bad readings, the worst ineptitudes, symptoms of confusion or of belatedness are, by that very fact, assumed of survival. That which has no meaning, purely and simply, is almost immediately "(bio)degradable". That which has little meaning does not last long. What is "bad" resists (this is at least what one would like to believe, the story I tell myself when I wake up tired, but in a good mood.) So, in order to "remain" a little while, the meaning has to link up *in a certain way* with that which exceeds it. Sign itself in a certain way. (B, 846)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In "Biodegradables," Derrida takes music as another text in which this paradox is in play. The way meaning operates in a musical text is an example of this "event of signature": "Not that music does not

Therefore, the potential of the text to mean more and more becomes the key to its survival. While the text needs to be kept singular to survive, this singularity is achieved through placing it in various contexts.

### *'Living on'*

Now that I have discussed the role of readability and unreadability and their relation to the survival of the text, I will return to the notion of the 'survival' of the original as outlined in the previous chapter. As I argued earlier, translation is effectively an act of interpretation. Here, I intend to demonstrate how the continuous acts of interpretation of a single text can help towards its survival.

In order to do this, I take Derrida's essay, "Living On / Border Lines," in which the idea of the 'survival' is named as 'living on'. The essay opens with an account of the signification of the term 'text' in Derrida's thought. It is widely claimed that deconstruction argues that the 'text' is a piece of writing in which the process of signification does not take place. In contrast, as I will demonstrate in various parts of this thesis, the text is a space with multiplying significations. Derrida argues that a text is not a closed entity. He therefore problematises the boundaries of the text - boundaries such as "the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signature, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth" (LO, 83-84). The text multiplies and 'overruns' all the limits. It is no longer

a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines). . . . (LO, 83-84)

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have meaning, but I am interested in what is in music that surpasses discursive meaning, exceeds a certain kind of translatable intelligibility into 'good sense' sentences" (B, 846).



The text is not totally absent or present. It is caught in a life-in-death state. It is simultaneously translatable and untranslatable, and this is how Derrida relates the concept of translation to the notion of 'survival':

A text lives only if it lives *on* {*sur-vit*}, and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable . . . . Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language {*langue*}. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately. Thus triumphant translation is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already its living *on*, its life after life, its life after death. . . . (LO, 102-103)

The next step is to relate the notion of 'survival' to 'living on'. Derrida asserts that the term "*survivre*" or "living on" does not mean maintaining oneself in a "life-less" state. For him, it is rather a case of arresting the dying and the decaying process (LO, 107). What is happening in a text to make it 'live on' is that "one text reads another" or, in other words, a text translates another one (or in Freudian terms, one text loves another) (LO, 147). For "each 'text' is a machine with multiple reading heads for other texts" (LO, 107).<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, Derrida presents the same paradoxical argument elsewhere but replaces 'survival' with 'meaning'. In his view, the process of signification is only possible when we face a text in which language is acting in a two-way movement from translatability to untranslatability. For him, "understanding is no longer possible when there are only proper names, and understanding is no longer possible when there are no longer proper names" (TB, 167). Derrida, in *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, writes on an unpublished sentence in Nietzsche's diary (SNS, 123-143). The sentence reads, "*I have forgotten my umbrella*". Derrida gives a detailed reading of the meaning of this 'left-out' separate sentence. He argues that in fact this sentence does not have any meaning and at the same time can mean anything. The sentence is "impoverished" (LO, 90) semantically since it cannot be pinned down to a content yet this also liberates it to

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<sup>18</sup> Therefore, for Derrida 'living on' is closely related to *différance*: " 'Living, living on' differs and defers, like 'différance,' beyond identity and difference. Its domain is indeed in a narrative formed out of traces, writing, distance, teleo-graphy" (LO, 136).

mean many things. "*I have forgotten my umbrella*" is therefore situated between the two poles of readability and unreadability. This relation between the multiplicity and the singularity of the text is what I would like to call the paradox of singularity.

Derrida argues then that both the apparently contradictory features of readability and unreadability should exist simultaneously to give a text a 'certain' status. The signature and the countersignature are in need of one another. He asserts that if either of these features are excluded, the text will be denied its 'survival'. Singularization (unreadability) 'kills' the text since the text cannot be repeated. Surprisingly enough, singularization also gives the text an after-life. It gives it a power to exist beyond the readable. For Derrida, unreadability is almost impossible. Its presence creates its absence and it is 'recycled' in a chain of readability. Yet he acknowledges that in some texts - literary and sacred - a kind of resistance ('force') against readability exists and he believes that this can shake the limits of language. Thus, survival is not achieved merely on the basis of repetition; it depends instead on 'iterability': that is, *differential repetition*. In other words, a 'singular mark' must be a part of this repeatable readability. Yet, this "singular event" that enriches the meaning "has no meaning" in itself. It "resists immediate degradation" which makes us compare two separate things: "Enigmatic kinship between waste, for example nuclear waste, and the 'masterpiece'" (B, 845).

### ***Sacralisation***

It is the unwritten which is sacred.<sup>19</sup>

The 'survival' or 'living on' of a text turns the text into a 'sacred space' or as Derrida coins the word, 'sacralises' it. Derrida states that every time a text gets caught in a play between the impossibility and the necessity to be translated, or in other words there is a proper name, 'sacralisation' happens (EO, 148):

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<sup>19</sup> George Steiner, "Foreword," p. xii.

There is Babel everywhere. Every time someone says his or her own name or creates a literary work or imposes a signature, even though it is translatable and untranslatable, he or she produces something sacred. . . . when one does something poetic, one makes for sacredness and in that sense one produces the untranslatable. (EO, 149)

Derrida here juxtaposes the signature with the literary text and the sacred text. He explains that poetry is an example of a text that is beginning to be sacralized:

This is why Benjamin refers literature or poetry to a religious or sacred model, because he thinks that if there is something untranslatable in literature (and, in a certain way, literature is the untranslatable) then it is sacred. If there is any literature, it is sacred; it entails sacralisation. (EO, 148)

Benjamin creates the same bond between the literary text and the sacred text at the very beginning of "The Task of the Translator" when he refers to poetry as a text not directed towards the reader. As Derrida explains, for Benjamin the 'intralinear version' of the poetic text or the sacred text is the ideal or the model of all translation (TB, 180, 205). By the 'intralinear version,' Derrida means that 'between the lines' of the great writings - such as poetic or sacred writings - their 'virtual translation' dwells. As a result, the pure transferability of the sacred text gives the ideal measure for all translation.

Language, when it moves towards unreadability, is closely related to the function of the proper name, while readability is typically associated with meaning or description. Particularly in a literary or sacred text, we see that the text "thickens itself" with particular references and figurative devices. While at the same time the text needs to be read and therefore a degree of description and opening up occurs.<sup>20</sup> The sacred text is therefore the signature that has to be countersigned or the cryptic postcard that is openly read. It seems that in literary discourse, the text oscillates between the two opposites of readability and unreadability making it difficult for the reader to distinguish between them. The writer and the reader of the text are constantly moving

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<sup>20</sup> Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, pp. 160-1.

inside and outside of the text. To Derrida, maintaining such a paradoxical state sacralises the act of writing and the reading event. Derrida writes about Ponge:

he distinguishes every proper name as a description and every description as a proper name, showing, by way of this ruse, that such a possibility, always an open one, was constitutive of writing, to the extent that literature works it over on all sides. You never know whether he names or describes, nor whether the thing he describes-names is the thing or the name, the common or proper name. (S, 118)

Benjamin makes the same comparison in his essay, "The Storyteller," when he sees a distinction between 'story' and 'information'. He argues that a piece of story does not say 'something'. The story is left to the reader to be interpreted in different ways and thus gains a sense of after-life. This is not seen in a text intending to communicate information. In a piece of information, the text has a 'life' because it is an attempt to univocalise the sense and context of the text.<sup>21</sup>

I should point out here that the fact that the text is ultimately readable or not – whether the proper name is eventually turned into common noun or not – is not so important for Derrida. Instead, it is the 'resistance' of the text to translation, communication, representation, and reception that makes 'sacralisation' possible. In other words, if the literary text as the untranslatable "aspires to the idiomatic,"<sup>22</sup> the literary language needs to shake the limits that restrict it: "To get across the idiom of my proper name, to impose my law by shouting my name, I must thus ruse with the language which just is not proper to me. . . ."<sup>23</sup> A text – such as a literary text – becomes sacralised when it gives a double command to the reader: 'constantly read and translate me, yet preserve and respect me as a singular text. Moreover, you read and translate me only because I have strived to be singular.'

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1982), p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, "Derridabase," in Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 180.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

### Don Quixote and Pierre Menard's Signature

It is not a question of presenting works . . . in correlation to their own times, but rather, within the framework of the time of their birth, to present the time that knows them, that is, our own.<sup>24</sup>

"Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" by Jorge Luis Borges is a short story about a French twentieth-century writer who sets out to 're-write' Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Pierre Menard does not intend "to compose *another* Quixote, which surely is easy enough - he wanted to compose *the* Quixote". His intention is "to produce a number of pages which coincided - word for word and line for line - with those of Miguel de Cervantes" without *copying* the original *Don Quixote*.<sup>25</sup> Menard first assumes that he can achieve this through becoming as close as possible to Cervantes: "Learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918 - *be* Miguel de Cervantes".<sup>26</sup> He later discards this method because it is, first of all, impossible but, more importantly, it is not interesting to him. Instead, he decides to remain Pierre Menard, the twentieth-century popular novelist and reach "the Quixote *through the experiences of Pierre Menard*".<sup>27</sup> Menard does not want to change the time or language of the story to the twentieth-century France but attempts to *re-write* and *sign* *Don Quixote* without changing a single word.

I see this short story as an example of a literary discourse that displays the questions I posed in this part of my thesis. There are a few theoretical points that can be examined when reading "Pierre Menard". The signature of the author (name and intention), the effect of context, and the genre or style of the language are among the forces that in effect 'singularise' the text. A new signature and, as a result, re-contextualisation, on the other hand, are the forces behind the translation or the repetition of the text that change the original without changing the words on the page.

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, cited in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon Roudiez (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 233-34

<sup>25</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999), p. 91.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Borges' story is about the imposition of a new signature on an original text. Pierre Menard in effect signs Cervantes's text with his name. This new signature has the power to change the meaning and reading of the text. "Pierre Menard" is about this force of singularity within the text. Yet, at the same time, it is a narrative of the way the forceful singularity is constantly under the threat of repetition and multiplicity. In this battle between singularity and multiplicity, there is no winner. Borges correctly does not turn the opposition between singularity and multiplicity into a logocentric opposition in which one side is secondary to the privileged other. Menard's text and Cervantes's text demand one another.

### *Signature as property*

Let us start with the question of signature. The literary text comes to life within the struggle between the singular and the repetition. 'The event of signature' or the resistance of the 'original' text (Cervantes's *Don Quixote*) to be re-read is demonstrated forcefully in "Pierre Menard". The text stages a battle between the two proper names of Menard and Cervantes. The proper name or signature of each bears with it the intention and authorship of the writer. Above all, the impossibility of changing the words of the original text reiterates the resistance of literary discourse towards generality. Cervantes's text is not changed in the written form but only transformed into a new text through our reading of it with its new signature.

Menard claims that his task of re-writing *Don Quixote* is "much more difficult than Cervantes's".<sup>28</sup> First of all, Cervantes could rely on "chance" and "spontaneity"<sup>29</sup> in his writing yet he - Menard - is constantly *obliged to* the 'original' text. But more importantly: "Comparing the *Quixote* in the early seventeenth century was a reasonable, necessary, perhaps even inevitable undertaking; in the early twentieth, it is virtually impossible".<sup>30</sup> Borges reminds us that after all any kind of re-writing still owes a debt

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 91-92.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

to the original text. More importantly, he argues that re-writing a text in a different context needs new 'intentions' and motivations. I will return to this later.

Signature is automatically related to the notions of the singularity and the 'property' of the text. In other words, proper name or signature takes the role of the 'proprietor' of the text. The text becomes a property signed by the signature of a proper name. Let us first examine this relation in deconstruction. Despite the common understanding of deconstruction, that it advocates multiplicity and pluralism with no respect for the 'centre' or signature, I would argue that deconstruction reinforces the relation between the text and its signature to a great degree. Derrida's *Signsponge* is about the French poet Francis Ponge. The book, in Derrida's words, is an enquiry into the link "between a given text, a given so-called author, and his name designated as proper" (S, 24). Derrida agrees, for instance, that in textual criticism there may be a question between a text and its so-called author but never a question between an author and "his name designated as proper". To Derrida, the force of the proper name is especially powerful in a literary text. Timothy Clark writes: "A text should not only properly represent a thing in its (impossible) idiom, it should also, at the same time, bear the unique idiom of its author."<sup>31</sup> A text can be read based on these particulars. The postcard has to be addressed and signed. However, deconstruction is also about the way the 'centre' can not hold the 'play' of signifiers (SSP, 123-24).

"Pierre Menard" demonstrates this double bind effectively. On the one hand, the text is oriented toward its signature and, on the other hand, the signature is not totally in control of the text. Signature is part of the effects that produce meanings in the text but it is also arbitrary since it can easily be replaced. As a result, *Don Quixote* surprisingly, is no longer Cervantes's property. And when a text escapes the notion of belonging, its 'genre-designations' become arbitrary. Derrida, in "The Law of Genre," writes: "In marking itself generically, a text unmarks itself [*se démarque*]. If remarks of belonging belong without belonging, participate without belonging, then genre-

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<sup>31</sup> Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 161. But Derrida does not see this idiomatic feature in a philosophical text: "Every philosopher denies the idiom of his name, of his language, of his circumstance, speaking in concepts and generalities that are necessarily improper" (S, 32).

designations cannot be simply part of the corpus" (LG, 230). Thus genre becomes an external force that still is there but not as a property: "a text would not *belong* to any genre. Every text *participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (LG, 230). *Don Quixote* becomes the absolutely readable postcard that is open for everyone to read. Menard's re-writing of *Don Quixote* is a drastic change in the style and genre restrictions of the time. Menard's text belongs to a new genre now: "In his work, there are no gypsy goings-on or conquistadors or mystics or Philip IIs or *auto da f *. He ignores, overlooks – or banishes – local color. That disdain posits a new meaning for the 'historical novel'".<sup>32</sup> The historical novel of early twentieth-century France becomes affected by its counterpart three hundred years ago in Spain. This mere readability, as Clark writes, "renders the literary a kind of genreless genre (or 'not a genre but all genres' (P, 48)), standing in a quasi-transcendental relation to other genres and denying them their closure".<sup>33</sup> Genre, as a force that limits the text's claim for generical singularity, has been changed in Menard's text since the significance of epic or romance is different in 1918 from that of the seventeenth century.

### *Intention*

The story also challenges the notions of originality and intentionality. Borges points us to the fact that the author's and the reader's intentions are subject to other contextual forces. He reminds us that every text is a supplement to other texts that surround it. There is no originality in the strictest sense of the word: Menard's text is as original as Cervantes's. They both translate other texts into their own worlds. Derrida in an interview tells us about the way meaning is produced regardless of the subjective intentions of the writer or the reader:

Meaning is determined by a system of forces which is not personal. It does not depend on the subjective identity but on the field of different forces, the conflict

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<sup>32</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 124.



of forces, which produce interpretations. . . . I would not say that there is no interest in referring to the intentional purpose. There are authors, there are intentionalities, there are conscious purposes. We must analyse them, take them seriously. But the effects of what we call the author's intentions are dependent on something which is not the individual intention, which is not intentional. (AIJD, 21)

The new text is written with new intentions, yet between the lines, there are other forces that determine the production of meanings: such as the signature of the text, temporal and spatial contexts, other texts, linguistic limitations and differences, and so on.

If the intention of the author is placed in a differential relation to other forces within the text, then the intentional forces within the original text will not affect the new repeated text. In fact, even if it does, the new text always betrays that intention and reminds us that perhaps the original text did not 'hold' an intention after all. Borges gives the notion of 'repetition' two different meanings in his story. Initially, Menard tries to repeat the text through repeating the author's intention by "being" Cervantes's. Menard, in fact, wants to repeat the act of writing the text. He wants to repeat *the author's intention*. The aim is to repeat the word and the supposed meaning. This proves to be impossible not only because every word through each usage turns into a new word but also because the story itself problematises an original intention in the first place. I argued earlier that the possibility of writing the literary text is a condition of the author's desire for singularity. Borges's story challenges the conventional understanding of the notion of intention. Authorial intention is in itself a text that is constrained by the contextual forces around it and can be arbitrary. Therefore, Menard's attempt to repeat the original is impossible in terms of creating the same text.

The second sense of 'repetition' seems more possible to Menard. Menard repeats the text "in a certain way". His task is not even to place the original story in a new context, like the works that "set Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Cannabière,

or don Quixote on Wall Street".<sup>34</sup> He reminds us that these books are meant to trick us "with the elementary notion that all times and places are the same, or are different".<sup>35</sup> Borges's story creates a new relation between singularity and repetition. All texts are singular texts that have to be repeated. *Don Quixote* becomes re-contextualised while its singularity remains within it. The text remains literally the same, yet the new reading of Menard's story through re-contextualization not only recovers the multiple meanings of the text but imposes new readings based on the new context. Repetition here is achieved without changing a single word yet it is accompanied by difference through and through. In fact, Pierre Menard is the crossing point between the writer and the reader. In other words, Menard is that translator that is first the reader of the original. His signature is sufficient to invoke new readings and new meanings. Menard's intention is to replace Cervantes as the author of the text. The new text signed by Menard communicates nothing more to us than the signature of a new writer. We are not told about the 'intentions' of Menard and we do not need to know them. The text is set free not only from Cervantes's intentions but also from Menard's. The new signature is sufficient to impose new contexts upon the story which, in turn, shifts our reading to "richer"<sup>36</sup> grounds of signification.

Another question arises here. What is the difference between reading Menard's text and re-reading Cervantes's at the beginning of the twentieth century? Will we have the same result? I would say not. The new text is pinned down to the signature of Menard and that is the place where the importance of singularity becomes important. We can always read Cervantes's text at any period and, to be correct, none of these new readings of the original text is the same. The only difference between these two readings is that, when reading Cervantes's, we are always aware of the contextual limits of the text. Our reading still relates itself to seventeenth-century Spain and the signature of its author. I think the difference between *reading* Menard's text and *re-reading* Cervantes's points, in simple terms, to the role of singularity in deconstruction.

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<sup>34</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," p. 90.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 90-91.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

Deconstruction has been misunderstood as acceding the free play of meanings in the text based on the reader's subjectivity. Deconstruction, in fact, claims the opposite of this view. Deconstruction is to make us aware of all the contextual, linguistic, historical, and the signature effects and limitations that produce meanings. It tells us that meaning is in fact more imprisoned than we thought. Derrida in an interview says, "No-one is free to read as he or she wants. The reader does not interpret freely, taking into account only his own reading, excluding the author, the historical period in which the text appeared and so on" (AIJD, 22). In other words, deconstruction not only negates single teleological meanings based on the author's intention but also subscribes to the fact that the text is still entangled in contextual effects, including the author's signature and intention. Yet, this singularity is always deferred in re-readings as I now move on to explain.

*Re-contextualisation is necessary*

The story argues for the hypothesis that the text must be re-contextualised to open up new horizons of meaning. While the story gives a clear picture of how a literary text as a 'singular event' cannot be repeated, it is also about a successful attempt to repeat the text. The new text is a repeated text with a difference: it is an 'iterated' text. In the story, at the very instant that the text is ascribed to another author, it is read in a different manner. Since the work is also taken out of its other idiomatic features (space and time), it creates new interpretations. But to what extent is the same text in another context a different text?

As I discussed above, Borges devises a fictional context to argue that a literary text is impossible to repeat and is deeply rooted in its own 'contexts'. It demonstrates the way the singular forces within the text resist repetition. Yet at the same time the text seems to yield to the urge to be re-read and, in fact, the text itself imposes new translations, readings, and re-readings in order to enable it to survive. Borges's story is about the extent to which literary discourse is vulnerable to re-readings and misreadings. It supports the argument that every reading is a misreading. The words in

the original text that are the signifiers of the text under a new signature seem to revolt against their assigned signifieds. Signs overrun the limits of their signification and take on new meanings. "Pierre Menard" narrates effectively the paradox that was discussed from various perspectives in this part. The original text attempts to prevent its own repetition and constrain its own context while it encourages new readings and re-contextualisations.

Borges examines a short extract from Menard's *Quixote* to compare the style and concludes that "[t]he Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer".<sup>37</sup> How can a copy text with literally the same words be "richer"? Menard does not live in the Spanish Golden Age. He is a Frenchman unfamiliar with the locality of the events of the text and the language of the original text always remains foreign for him. The new text tells us continually that its language is foreign to its author. Borges argues that the style of the two texts is different: "The contrast in style is equally striking. The archaic style of Menard – who is, in addition, not a native speaker of the language in which he writes – is somewhat affected. Not so the style of his precursor, who employs the Spanish of his time with complete naturalness".<sup>38</sup> *Quixote* becomes *another* unique text in which the Spanish language itself acts as a signifying point since Menard, the Frenchman, writes it. The words are exactly the same but their sense has changed in Menard's text.

The ideas within the text are also constantly juxtaposed to the context of the early twentieth century. The new text is liberated from its assigned context, it can now be read as a new text with the signature of a new author. Let us look at the text that Borges discusses in order to compare the versions:

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counsellor.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

What does this extract tell us, knowing it is written by the seventeenth-century Spanish writer? "This catalog of attributes, written in the seventeenth century, and written by the 'ingenious layman' Miguel de Cervantes, is more rhetorical praise of history."<sup>40</sup> The scope of the author's intellectual understanding of history and time restricts us in reading the text in this way. The narrator repeats the text *word for word* as Menard's text. He writes: "Menard, on the other hand writes:

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counsellor."<sup>41</sup>

The new text is the same but with a different signature. It is now Pierre Menard who tells us these words: a new signature is a new context. The narrator comments on both of these seemingly identical texts:

History, the *mother* of truth! - the idea is staggering. Menard, a contemporary of William James, defines history not as a *delving into* reality but as the very *fount* of reality. Historical truth, for Menard, is not 'what happened'; it is what we *believe* happened. The final phrases - *exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counsellor* - are brazenly pragmatic.<sup>42</sup>

The significance of the term 'history' has certainly changed through the three centuries that part these two texts. Menard's text is "richer" in its ability to place a different understanding of 'history' in the context of the definition of history in the year 1918. More importantly, it tells us that neither the old nor the new significations of history are confined to the notion of authorial intention. Instead, Menard's text urges us to take account of such extra-authorial effects as context. Menard's *Don Quixote* is written in 1918 by a Frenchman. The meaning of 'history' in Menard's text is juxtaposed against many other surrounding texts, and let us not forget that we read based on the intertextuality of the texts that surround us. Therefore, the new text, in an automatic,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

inevitable and necessary way, links with all the texts before, around and even after it. The fact that "William James" is contemporary to Menard is only one example among many contextual effects. In fact, the new *Don Quixote* is contextualised by all the events that have happened during the three hundred years that span between the two texts, including Cervantes' *Don Quixote* itself: "Among those events, to mention but one, is the *Quixote* itself".<sup>43</sup>

Our reading of Borges's story can lead us to an earlier discussion of the readability and unreadability of the text. Interestingly, this will reinforce the significance of context and, as a result, its re-contextualisation. In other words, context as the 'history' of the text is important in the reading of the 'original' text or its 'copy'. Derrida claims that both sides of this paradox are historicist readings of the text and he subscribes to these readings. When a text is repeatedly yielded to re-contextualisations, it is still the context or the history of the text which determines the meaning of the text (TSI, 63-4). On the other hand, the force of singularity in a text is also not simply the negation of history. Instead, it is about the 'faithfulness' of the text towards its own 'history'. The contextual forces of history, genre, and so on constitute the signature of the text. This signature is constantly countersigned by history. Derrida elsewhere acknowledges the fact that history has a strong contextual effect on the text. Deconstruction only challenges the authoritative effect of history as in "the hegelian and the marxist concepts" (AIJD, 22). Otherwise, Derrida maintains that, "I think that one cannot read without trying to reconstruct the historical context but history is not the last word, the final key, of reading" (AIJD, 22). However, eventually one should not forget that the history of the text is vulnerable to multiple significations just as the term 'history' is in *Don Quixote*. Derrida writes:

a work is always singular and is of interest only from this point of view. . . . A work takes place just once, and far from going against history, this uniqueness of the institution, which is in no way natural and will never be replaced, seems to me historical through and through. It must be referred to as a proper name and

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

whatever irreplaceable reference a proper name bears within it. Attention to history, context, and genre is necessitated, and not contradicted, by this singularity, by the date and the signature of the work: not the date and signature which might be inscribed on the *external* border of the work or *around* it, but the ones which constitute or institute the very body of the work, on the edge between the "inside" and the "outside." (TSI, 67-8)

Derrida reminds us that the inevitability of the signature can lead to a metaphysical thinking which places it *outside the text* as a transcendental signified. The signature can act as the reference of the text and this is the danger of metaphysical reading. The reader will then be obliged to read strictly based on the singular forces of the text. This is, in short, what deconstruction attempts to avoid. Although one is restricted by the singular forces of the text, one has to situate the signature *inside and outside of the text*. The signature has to play constantly not only as a *reference* but also as a *sign* in play with all the other signs (effects) that are within the text.

### Conclusion

Hans Robert Jauss in "The Theory of Reception" mentions "Pierre Menard" as a story in which one can see the way in which 'modern reception theory' works. He explains how Borges demonstrates the fact that there is no atemporal absolute meaning and reminds us that the literary text creates a dialogue between the past and the present in the reader's mind.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Jauss situates 'the reader' as the determining force of meaning. Silvia G. Dapía in "Pierre Menard in Context" reiterates the significance of the reader while reminding us that the reader is situated in a context: "the meaning of a text is the result of its reconstruction carried out by a reader positioned in her own historically, socially, and culturally conditioned frame of perception".<sup>45</sup> Although these readings are correct, the 'force' in the story that in fact *makes* meanings is the relation between the singularity and multiplicity in the text. In other words, it is the

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<sup>44</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, "The Theory of Reception: A Retrospective of Its Unrecognized Prehistory," trans. John Whitlam, in Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 67-68.

<sup>45</sup> Silvia G. Dapía, "Pierre Menard in Context," *Variaciones Borges*, 2 (1996), p. 106.

constant play of these forces that makes the meaning. When the narrator of the story compares the style of writing between Menard's text and Cervantes's, one can see the determining effect of the signature:

Menard's fragmentary Quixote is more subtle than Cervantes'. Cervantes crudely juxtaposes the humble provincial reality of his country against the fantasies of the romance, while Menard chooses as his 'reality' the land of Carmen during the century that saw the Battle of Lepanto and the plays of Lope de Vega.<sup>46</sup>

Menard's text has let the original language – the foreign language – into the text.

As I have shown, for Derrida, absolute singularization is not possible, yet the singular text is inevitably repeated in a differential manner: "The 'power' that language is capable of, the power that there is, as language or as writing, is that a singular mark should also be repeatable, iterable, as mark. It then begins to differ from itself sufficiently to become exemplary and thus involves a certain generality" (TSI, 42-3). As we see, Derrida here suggests a paradox: the untranslatable singularity of the unique is iterable (TSI, 43). To make the singular text readable there is no choice but to recontextualise it:

it has to be *divided*, to *participate* and *belong*. Then it is divided and takes *its part* in the genre, the type, the context, meaning, the conceptual generality of meaning, etc. It loses itself to offer itself. Singularity is never one-off [*ponctuelle*], never closed like a point or a fist [*poing*]. It is a mark [*trait*], a differential mark, and different from itself: different *with itself*. Singularity differs from itself, it is differed [*se diffère*] so as to be what it is and to be repeated in its very singularity. (TSI, 68)

This repetition "in its very singularity" or in other words this 'iterability' is inherent in "the structure of the text." It "both puts down roots in the unity of a context and immediately opens this non-saturable context onto a recontextualization" (TSI, 63). Thus, iterability becomes a positive force for Derrida. He believes that texts, without a

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<sup>46</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," p. 93.



pure originality, “divide and repeat themselves immediately. They thus become capable of being rooted out at the very place of their roots. Transplantable into a different context, they continue to have meaning and effectiveness” (TSI, 64). As a result, the signature of the text as an *outside* (staying as a referent) and *inside* (being repeated and affected by the context) becomes the power of the text to survive. It survives after the death of its assumed origin. And as long as it keeps re-contextualising, it lives on.

This brings us to the argument Steven Connor presents in his *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, in which he argues that ‘repetition’ has a “double nature” in Derrida’s thought.<sup>47</sup> He explains that repetition has always been considered as a secondary act in Western thought because it is supposed to be dependent on a pre-existing origin. He argues that the traditional notion of repetition is based on the Platonic model of the origin and the copy that is undermining it. The copy has always been considered as a secondary “inessential” “parasitic, threatening and negative” act in which the whole point is to copy what is already “autonomous and self-identical”.<sup>48</sup> However, Connor reminds us that Derrida finds another side to this argument that shows the extent to which the original is in fact dependent on its repetition. The original text, in other words, asks for repetition. Repetition as a “certain way” of translation makes it possible for the original text to ‘function,’ ‘survive’ and exist. The copy becomes in other words the precedent for the original, like Borges placing Joyce’s *Ulysses* before *The Odyssey*.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, Connor reminds us that while we ask “[h]ow can you have a repetition without an original?,” we need also to ask “[h]ow can you have an original which it would be impossible to represent or duplicate”?<sup>50</sup>

Borges’s story provides us with a new understanding of what translation is. In translation, we are under the illusion that through changing the words from one language to another based on a single meaning (that is the *alleged* author’s intention and the translator’s interpretation), we can ‘interpret’ the text in its general sense. What

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<sup>47</sup> Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 13

<sup>50</sup> Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, p. 3.

happens in Menard's re-writing is, in fact, what *really* happens in the act of translation. Menard does not change the words; he only changes their significations. Yet this 'simple' act demonstrates the way the original and the translation are both unstable texts. This kind of translation accords with Derrida's understanding of translation as I explained earlier. Translation inevitably and necessarily changes the signification of the text and, more importantly, it proves that the text did not have any single meaning or intention after all. Moreover, Borges reminds us of an even more significant idea: that even the same signs will not bear the same meanings and senses. Signifieds are constantly shifting as a result of contextual factors. 'Translation' becomes inevitable and necessary for this text.

Menard, in other words, enables Cervantes's text to survive. This necessity lies not just in the fact that the text is re-written in another age but it gestures towards a more crucial point: the text can be read only if it is re-contextualised. Reading is possible if one is constantly re-contextualising the original. "Pierre Menard" is a journey from the *particularity of language* to its *potentially universal character*. It shows how language resists in order to remain finite and how it finally destroys its own boundaries. Borges's recontextualisation of the 'original' *Don Quixote* or Pierre Menard's attempt at a 'translation' (an exact re-writing) of *Don Quixote* is in fact a 'sacralising' attempt to enforce a new source of uniqueness to an original text after its 'maturation' (in Benjamin's sense). Menard's *Don Quixote* is the translation of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* based on a deconstructive reading. Pierre Menard's story shows us to what extent literature imposes translations, re-readings, misreadings and recontextualizations. Literature in effect survives because of this process.<sup>51</sup>

Part I has been an attempt to explore the binary opposition of singularity and repetition. Through situating this opposition in various contexts, I have shown that in

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<sup>51</sup> At my viva session, I became aware of a reading of Borges's "Pierre Menard" in Susan Bassnett, André Lefevre, *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998) that is said to have a similar approach to the story. I should point out that my account in this chapter has been solely based on my own conclusions in chapters one and two.

deconstruction singularity is only possible if repeated. The original and the translation, the proper name and the common noun, and finally the unreadable and the readable were the main guises for this opposition. I also explained that this does not mean that in deconstruction singularity is negated. The singularity of the text is a 'biodegradable' quality that is 'kept in reserve'. Two examples of the way singularity is related to repetition are 'the signature' and 'the postcard'. Literary discourse is a signature that only functions if it can be repeated, yet it is a postcard that, while open for everyone to read, is addressed to a singular destination and constrained by its context. In other words, the process of signification (translation, repetition) eventually overruns the name. Derrida believes that the text always already stages this relation between singularity and repetition and it is our reading that should deconstruct this opposition.

## Part III

# The Paradox of Apophatic Discourse

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### Chapter Six. Apophasis in Theological Discourse

*Benjamin's notion of negation and nonexpression*

*Paradox of negation in theological discourse*

*The aporias of transcendence*

*God as 'referent'*

*Transcendental experience*

*The affirmative force of language in theological discourse*

### Chapter Seven. Derrida and Apophatic Discourse

*Derrida's critique of negative theology*

*Derridean paradoxes of negation*

*'The impossible'*

*Deconstruction and theology as 'promise'*

*Negative theology as (a discourse on) 'language'*

### Chapter Eight. Apophasis in Literary Discourse

*The Unnamable: The story of that impossible place named silence*

*Aporias and paradoxes of the Unnamable*

*Self and language as counterparts*

*The impossible space named silence*

*Conclusion*

Does the essence of language consist in signs, considered as *means* of communication as re-presentation, or in a manifestation that no longer arises, or not yet, from communication through signs, that is, from the means/end structure? (FL, 49)

The notion of representation is inscribed in the arguments of Part I. Representation is not only discussed in relation to *Genesis* in Chapter One but is also strongly linked to the main themes of Part I: multiplicity, repetition and translation. For one thing, the themes of multiplicity and representation are characteristics of post-Lapsarian language.<sup>1</sup> But multiplicity (repetition, translation) and representation are also strongly related in a more theoretical way. Derrida in “Sending: On Representation” initiates his argument with a meditation on the relation between translation and representation. He asks: “Is translation of the same order as representation? Does it consist in representing a sense, the same semantic content, by a different word of a different language? If so, is it a question of the substitution of one representative structure for another” (SOR, 297)? Derrida’s response to this question is that “the concept of translation and of language . . . is so often dominated by the concept of representation” (SOR, 302). Derrida also establishes a relation between the concept of ‘repetition’ and representation later in the essay when he acknowledges that “the idea of repetition and return . . . resides in the very meaning of representation” (SOR, 308). One can also argue that the drive towards singularity in the shape of Babelisation is

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<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the themes of singularity (Part I), immanence (Part II), and silence (Part III) are the main qualities of the name in pre-Lapsarian language.

also an attempt at 'immediacy,' i.e. the closeness of the word to its referent through unifying language in a single form.<sup>2</sup>

Part II is a study of the relation between the immanent nature of language (non-representational) and its representational (mediating) role. This distinction goes back as far as the distinction between language before and after the Fall. In theological discourse, in the description of language before the Fall, we witness the presence of names in Eden through which the humankind communicated with God. The meaning of words at this stage were the words themselves. In other words, words and meaning were equal, language was immanent. After the Fall, through knowledge of good and evil and later through multiplicity, language lost its transparency and became a tool with which to communicate ideas. The immanent nature of language emphasises the *being* of language in the text. Therefore, words replace meanings and in themselves become important. It is at this point that literary discourse and theological discourse enter the scene. In short, poetic language has always been eager to grant a higher status to 'the words on the page'. Words have had the authority of being non-replaceable and became the initial concern of the poet leaving the intended meanings as secondary. In some periods of literary history, Romanticism for instance, language becomes a sort of revelation to the writer in which the revelatory words become emblematically related to their transcendent meanings. The way Coleridge, for instance, has put his words on the page tells us about this revelatory experience.

My contention is that the whole discussion on the relation between representation and immanence is also automatically about the possibility of meaning, the notion of reference and signification in the text. I would ask, is meaning a kind of transcendental 'revelation' or does meaning come to being in a relational and differential manner? Do words in the text represent an outside ultimate meaning, do they look for a centre, or do they mean only differentially and in relation with other texts? I attempt to answer these in this part of the thesis.

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<sup>2</sup> Derrida, in *The Post Card*, writes: "At the limit, I would like to erase all the traits of language, coming back to the most simple. . ." (P, 114).

My answer to these questions is, in fact, a formulation of Derrida's thinking on this subject. I will argue that Derrida has seen a new relation between representation and immanence other than opposition. I will explain how deconstruction argues that in the text these two notions are inscribed within one another. However, to substantiate this notion, I start with a few background readings. In Chapter Four, I will first give a brief account on what the position of theological discourse is regarding representation. Not surprisingly sacred discourse has always been occupied with the notion of immanence. I will examine briefly the nature of the duality of immanence and representation within theological discourse. In order to do this, I will give a brief overview of how language is perceived as sacred and immanent on the one hand and as inadequate due to its representational role on the other.

Then I will move on to a close reading of Benjamin's texts in order to establish Benjamin's position regarding representation. Through an examination of the notions of "linguistic being" and "mental being," I will argue that these two entities are not equal but that "mental being" is communicable as long as it can communicate itself in language. This enigmatic postulate will be discussed in detail. In order to develop this point in full I will also explain the distinction between the "bourgeois" and "mystical" viewpoints for Benjamin. I will ask if Benjamin is in favour of seeing language *only* as a means to an end ('bourgeois view') or if he is in favour of an *absolute* unity of word and thing ('mystical view'). This will address the question of whether or not Benjamin departs from a pure theological reading of immanent language. Later, I will consider two exemplary readings of Benjamin that represent an anti-theological reading (Paul de Man) and a theological one (Susan Handelman). Finally in this chapter, I will explain the way Derrida reads Benjamin in this respect. This is the point at which Derrida takes over the argument from Benjamin. I will explain how Derrida sees a paradoxical relation between immanence and representation in Benjamin's texts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This part is also intended to show that Benjamin's thought is not a metaphysical answer to the anti-theological stance of poststructuralism. For instance, Brian Britt concludes his book *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* with: "Benjamin's notion of pure language, however, suggests that language is not necessarily the arbitrary free play of signifiers. If poststructuralism claims there is nothing outside the text, Benjamin's philosophy maintains that there may be, despite the degraded condition of language" (Brian Britt, *Walter*

In Chapter Five, first I will give a close reading of Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign. I will explain how 'the signifier' and 'the signified' are not in a completely oppositional but rather in a differential relation. In fact, this conclusion coupled with Derrida's reading of Benjamin will equip us to enter the difficult realm of representation according to deconstruction. I attempt to formulate Derrida's views regarding the sign and meaning and provide a few main theses in this regard. In brief, I argue that, for Derrida, there is no escape from the metaphysical system of representation yet the sign system itself loosens this closure through the deferring and differing of meanings and references (*différance*). Later, I will examine Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* in order to show how these deconstructive forces work in the text. I will explain how this novel presents its narrative structure in the shape of a labyrinth. I would suggest that the labyrinthine structure points to the way language is enclosed in the representative system yet showing infinite possibilities of meaning and revelation. I will argue that, like Derrida's understanding of reference, in a literary text the final point of reference defers endlessly. We seek closure in literary texts but the text ends incompletely at the point of granting this satisfaction. It also shows how texts both narrate the absence of and separation from meanings, and always promise revelations and escape-routes. Therefore, literature becomes the ground for the tension between immanent and representational language.

This part is an attempt to present the second paradox in deconstruction. I will argue that the paradox of representation to Derrida is always already at work in a text, pointing the text to the inside and the outside at the same time.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### 's Critique of Representation Benjamin's Critique of Representation

"What does language communicate?" . . . "All language communicates itself". (OL, 109)

In Chapter One, I divided the story of language into three stages according to *Genesis*: 'appellation' as the first stage and the consequent two falls of language (the fall from Eden and the fall of Babel). I elaborated on Benjamin's reading of *Genesis* in order to explain his theory of language and name. To recapitulate, Benjamin argues that in Eden there was only one language in which the 'origin' and the 'addressee' was God - i.e. the immanent name. Benjamin emphasises that God created the world through 'naming'. Yet, as a result of the 'originary sin,' the human is deprived of divine language and, as a consequence, human language emerges. Ultimately, language moves from its immanent and manifestational state to becoming a representational means to an end. This language of representation is equipped with 'knowledge' and, after Babel, becomes caught in multiplicity.

In this chapter, I will return to Benjamin's theory of language and show to what extent Benjamin's reading of *Genesis* has problematised the notion of representation. Benjamin, through arguing for a new relation between the 'linguistic being' and the 'mental being' of language, objects to both the 'bourgeois' view of language (representationalist) and the 'mystical' view (immanent). I will then introduce two readings of Benjamin that attempt to ascribe his theory to one of these extremes. Finally, Derrida's paradoxical reading of Benjamin creates a proper ground for my next chapter that deals with the notion of representation in deconstruction.

### *Theological discourse and representation*

In a discussion on the place of immanence and representation in language, one has to see first what is meant by the notion of representation in theological discourse and what are the prominent attitudes towards it. This is because these two notions are deeply inscribed in theology. The main difference between representation and immanence lies in the relation between the signifier and the signified. According to a representationalist view, the signifier is only a vehicle for the signified and therefore it is secondary. Yet, the immediacy of language is a view on the unity of word and meaning in which both are present in the pure language, as in the language before the Fall.

In theological discourse, we are faced with these two contradictory relations regarding the opposition of 'words' and 'meaning'. *On one level*, the signified (the concept or meaning) is hierarchically higher than the signifier (the physical image of the concept). Language effectively exists because of meaning: when the meaning is captured, language can be forgotten. This is the 'representational function' of language - its 'metaphysical' significance. One can conclude from this that the aspect of representation which is acknowledged and accepted in mysticism and theology is its function as a mere carrier (signifier) of meaning or truth. Words become essential because of their function. According to this view, language should remain as simple and to the point as possible. And when there is no direct correspondence between words and the facts they communicate, theological discourse tells us to go back to facts and part with words. Chuang Tzu writes:

The fish-trap exists because of the fish; once you have gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of the meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Bernard Faure, "Fair and Unfair Language Games in Chan/Zen," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 177.

In the context of mystical experience, when the transcendental experience is achieved there is no point in hanging onto the language. In theological discourse, it is not only the expression of the meaning that is usually considered as inadequate, but the language is also looked upon as a further 'veiling' of the delicacy of meaning. Carl W. Ernst writes about the Sufi tradition in which "verbalization conceals reality," therefore making esotericism inevitable. He argues that the term 'indication' is "primarily the inner communication with God, and only derivatively is it the mystic's account of the experience to others". Therefore, 'indication' is always left hidden "because of the subtlety of its meaning".<sup>2</sup> Charles Morris, in "Comments on Mysticism and Its Language," explains how in Zen Buddhism one is constantly warned about the inadequacies of language and advised to master language instead of letting language become the master.<sup>3</sup>

*On another level*, theological discourse takes an opposite stand and forgets the strong distinction it has placed between the sign and the meaning. This is mainly when it describes the state of language before the Fall or when it addresses the sacred texts in which this immanent language reappears. Hence, pre-Lapsarian language and sacred text is generally hailed in various religions as 'the truth'. Language is not secondary anymore. In 'the religions of the Book' - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - the Book is the most sacred manifestation of divine truth. The words in these texts should be pronounced in the correct way with the most respect. They cannot be replaced with any other words and are mostly read in the 'original' language. The emphasis on the loud reading - recitation - of these texts indicates this sacredness.<sup>4</sup> Most of these traditions claim that the Scripture is "the very language of God or Being - and as such possesses an ontic status altogether different from merely immanent conventional

<sup>2</sup> Carl W. Ernst, "Mystical Language and the Teaching Context in the Early Lexicon of Sufism," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Morris, "Comments on Mysticism and Its Language," *Et cetera: A Review of General Semantics*, 9:1 (Fall 1983), p. 305.

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Idel, "Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 72.

languages, making it capable of expressing transcendental *realia* in various ways, with a particular competence".<sup>5</sup> In some traditions, this is more evident than others. For instance, Judaism looks at language as *the* element of creation, therefore the letters in the sacred Book become most significant: "To mutilate a single word in the Torah, to set it in the wrong order, might be to imperil the tenuous link between fallen man and the Divine presence".<sup>6</sup> This is not limited to scriptural traditions. In Buddhism, for example, the text is of prime importance. *Mantras* (translated in Chinese as "true words") and *dharanis* are the ultimate state of language.<sup>7</sup>

My concluding point regarding the relation between theological discourse and the representative faculty of language is that, based on both of the main approaches towards representation, theological discourse eventually becomes deeply nostalgic towards the immanent language. The theme of separation and absence of immanent language is a current theme in this discourse. George Steiner writes of a Kabbalistic speculation on "the day of redemption" when translation will not only be "unnecessary but inconceivable" and "words will shake off 'the burden of having to mean' and will be only themselves, blank and replete as stone".<sup>8</sup> On this day

[a]ll human tongues will have re-entered the translucent immediacy of that primal, lost speech shared by God and Adam. . . . Words will rebel against man. They will shake off the servitude of meaning. They will 'become only themselves, and as dead stones in our mouths'. In either case, men and women will have been freed forever from the burden and the splendour of the ruin at Babel.<sup>9</sup>

Theological discourse is primarily a lamentation on the original state of language in which words were only names without the burden of external signification. This state of language is idealised as the closest form to God's word in which the utterance of words are synonymous with and simultaneous to the presence of concepts and ideas.

<sup>5</sup> Steven T. Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," in *Mysticism and Language* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Faure, "Fair and Unfair Language Games in Chan/Zen," p. 164.

<sup>8</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 297.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 297, 474.

As a result, this kind of discourse ultimately becomes a metaphysical tool to express the transcendent or the separation from it. This makes theological discourse in most cases an affirmation of the representative faculty of language. Later in the next chapter, I will argue how literary language is also a discourse on separation and absence while attempting to escape the metaphysics of representation. In the next part, I will also look at apophatic language as part of a theological discourse in which the possibility of expressing the transcendental is put under question.

Now I turn to a close reading of Walter Benjamin's understanding of representation in language.

### *Name as the pure language*

. . . by the way, is the name, the proper name or the name par excellence *in* language and what would this inclusion mean? (SN, 58)

The course of argument in Benjamin's theory of language always starts with his reflections on "pure language". Since I elaborated extensively on Benjamin's reading of the "originary" language based on *Genesis* in Part I, I will not repeat myself here. Instead, I will take the argument of Chapter One to new grounds. Here, I intend first to explain the relation between *language in general* and the "*pure language*" (*the name*) in order to examine the the notion of *representation* for Benjamin. In other words, I will investigate the communicating faculty of "pure language" and the name. For Benjamin, "pure language" has a particular relation with "communication". Benjamin maintains that originary language does not refer to an outside signified; instead, it "communicates itself" (OL, 109). One can hastily conclude that Benjamin is advocating non-communicability as an original characteristic of language.<sup>10</sup> However, I would argue, and I wish to demonstrate here, that for Benjamin pure language does communicate and has a meaning albeit in a certain sense. Benjamin discusses this

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, Brian Britt writes: "This 'pure language' of naming has nothing to do with meanings; it communicates only itself" (Brian Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible*, p. 37). Among Benjamin's critics, to ascribe a non-communicative quality to pre-Lapsarian language is quite common as I will show later.

point on the basis of the terms he coins: "mental being"<sup>11</sup> and "linguistic being". "Language communicates itself" because, in Benjamin's words, in the originary language, "the linguistic being" equates *intrinsically* with "the mental being". As we can see, the basis of Benjamin's theory of language depends on the distinction between the "linguistic being" and the "mental being". Benjamin himself acknowledges this when he writes: "the distinction between a mental entity and the linguistic entity in which it communicates is the first stage of any study of linguistic theory" (OL, 108). Benjamin asks "What does language communicate?"<sup>12</sup> to which he answers at length:

It communicates the mental being corresponding to it. It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language. Languages therefore have no speaker, if this means someone who communicates *through* these languages. Mental being communicates itself *in*, not *through*, which means: it is not outwardly identical with linguistic being. Mental is identical with linguistic being only insofar as it is capable of communication. What is communicable in a mental entity is its linguistic entity. Language therefore communicates the particular linguistic being of things, but their mental being only insofar as this is directly included in their linguistic being, insofar as it is capable of being communicated. (OL, 108-109)

As we notice, Benjamin is at pains to stress the distinction between *in* and *through*: mental being communicates *in* (not *through*) linguistic being. Mental being only signifies in its beingness as language. In other words, the relation between the mental and the linguistic entity is intrinsic.<sup>13</sup> Benjamin gives an example which can help us in understanding this intrinsic relation: "the German language, for example, is by no means the expression of everything that we could - theoretically - express *through* it, but is the direct expression of that which communicates *itself* in it. This 'itself' is a mental entity" (OL, 108). In other words, language is not an expression of outside independent

<sup>11</sup> "*Geistige Inhalte*" is also translated as "spiritual content" in some critical texts on Benjamin.

<sup>12</sup> I stress again the fact that language here is referred to as its 'originary' stage, i.e. the name.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, of course, acknowledges an ambiguity in the identity between 'mental' and 'linguistic being' reflected in the word *logos* (OL, 108).

concepts but the expression of the concepts that are inherent within each language and quite distinct from any another language.

Brian Britt, in *Walter Benjamin and the Bible*, reminds us that Benjamin's distinctive theory of the 'communicating' and 'magical' faculty of language appears to be a response to Humboldt's view on the mere communicating feature of language.<sup>14</sup> In a short piece on Humboldt in 1925, Benjamin criticises the fact that Humboldt has "overlooked" the 'magical' side of language.<sup>15</sup> This makes it clearer how Benjamin reinterprets the communicating faculty of language through a magical sense as I will explain later.

Let us return to the two integral terms in Benjamin's theory. "Mental being" and "linguistic being" are elusive terms. I suggest that if we place these two terms in the context of modern Saussurean semiology, we can clarify this hypothesis to a great degree. Saussure takes "the word" as "the sign" and calls "the concept" and "the graphic/phonic sign" respectively "the signified" and "the signifier". He says: "I propose to retain the word *sign* [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* [*signifié*] and *signifier* [*signifiant*]"<sup>16</sup> As Derrida reminds us, Saussure follows the tradition of Western thought by presenting the same opposition of "concept" and "image". It seems to me that Benjamin's reference to 'mental' and 'linguistic being' derives from the same distinction as that of the signified and the signifier. The point of departure, however, is that Saussure sees this opposition as inherent in the sign (the word) while Benjamin seems to be proposing an alternative relation between them. In the 'originary' pre-Lapsarian language, for Benjamin, the signified communicates itself *in* the signifier, offering a close link but not an identical one. The signified *in effect* exists as long as it can be inscribed in the signifier. In other words, the signified does not contain an autonomous existence for which the signifier

<sup>14</sup> Brian Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible*, p. 37

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 424.

<sup>16</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics" trans. Wade Baskin, in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 150.

acts as a mere representation. To put it crudely, only that 'portion' of the 'content' of language can *exist* which in the end can fill the 'container' of linguistic being. As we can see, this postulate of Benjamin's becomes distinct from the representationalist view of language and is very close to the notion of immanence. It is also in contrast with Saussurean semiology in which the signified and the signifier represent the image of the two sides of a sheet of paper.<sup>17</sup>

Now the next question arises: what is the relation of the name to "pure language"? In brief, Benjamin places the name as the emblem of the pure language. This is not surprising as in theological discourse the name equals the creative force of language, i.e. the pure language. Benjamin believes that the name is not only both "the last utterance" (OL, 112) and "the originary destination" (FL, 64) of language but it is also "the true call of it" (OL, 112). In other words, for Benjamin, the totality of language is represented in the name: "Name . . . is not only the last utterance of language but also the true call of it. Thus in name appears the essential law of language, according to which to express oneself and to address everything else amounts to the same" (OL, 112). I think this short statement helps us to understand why Benjamin calls the name "the true call of language". The name creates a "magical" link – yet not a 'unity' – between the word and the thing. Since, for Benjamin, the immediacy of language is its original essence, the name is called "the language of language" (OL, 111, 112) and eventually the pure absolute language. Therefore, it is no surprise to see that Benjamin refers to 'language' repeatedly as 'the name' when he writes on the first stage in the history of language simply because 'the name,' for Benjamin, is the true symbol of language.

Since, for Benjamin, the name and language in its ideal form are identical, he follows the same relation between the signifier (linguistic being) and the signified (mental being) in the name:

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<sup>17</sup> Saussure declares that the "linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image" (Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics," p. 149). Here, I confine myself to this brief account and will give a detailed reading of Saussure in the next chapter.



Naming, in the realm of language, has as its sole purpose and its incomparably high meaning that it is the innermost nature of language itself. Naming is that by which nothing beyond it is communicated, and *in* which language itself communicates absolutely. In naming the mental entity that communicates itself is *language*. Where mental being in its communication is language itself in its absolute wholeness, only there is the name, and only the name is there. (OL, 111)

Meaning or signification points to the name itself. The name signifies itself as a thing. It communicates nothing except itself. It is the finished creation and its reference is to its own being. In other words, it is the immanent nature of language. Language at this stage is not engaged in a 'metaphysical' process to give an outside signification to a transferable sign. It only communicates the communicable part of a mental entity which is language itself: it "communicates the linguistic being of things" (OL, 109). And the "clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question '*What* does language communicate?' is therefore 'All language communicates itself'" (OL, 109).

The 'communicability' of language is its linguistic being and is important in itself. Language communicates *itself* or, in other words, language communicates communicability and not a higher external truth. Benjamin here tries to give a higher value to language and its linguistic being. We can conclude that Benjamin redefines the meaning of language: "*There is no such thing as a meaning of language; as communication, language communicates a mental entity, i.e., something communicable per se*" (OL, 112).

But it is wrong to conclude that Benjamin is against the possibility of 'meaning' as the outcome of representation. The process of signification is independent of outside meanings at this stage. The fact that the content is communicated is not important. Benjamin, in this way, gives the content an *infinite* status (rather than a negative one) in which signification becomes possible.<sup>18</sup> As Gillian Rose correctly argues, for Benjamin there are two separate routes towards 'meaning' in

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<sup>18</sup> Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 65. I will explicate the process of signification in the next chapter.

its general sense: "Meaning' assumes a problematic relationship between the inexpressible and unexpressed mental entity and language, while the thesis of the communicability of names defines *revelation*".<sup>19</sup> This hypothesis justifies the negative view towards meaning. It postulates the presumption that since the Fall, language has lacked its communicating faculty in the shape of a certain direct relationship with God, i.e. revelation. The notion of revelation is indeed the ultimate state of expression in its purest sense for Benjamin: "The highest mental region of religion is (in the concept of revelation) at the same time the only one that does not know the inexpressible. For it is addressed in name and expresses itself as revelation" (OL, 113). The revelatory function of language accords precisely with the postulate that language only communicates its mental being.

Another point of convergence between the name and pure language in Benjamin's argument is the 'originary' faculty of both. In Chapter One, I wrote about the creative force of the original language and explained how Benjamin reiterates the biblical fact that the name acts as the tool of creation. For Benjamin, the ability to name (as the first 'act' of language in the story of creation) is the distinction between the human language and the language of things: "*It is therefore the linguistic being of man to name things*" (OL, 110). Hence, for Benjamin, language (in its stage before the Fall) communicates not the thought (intention) of the speaker but the 'thought' of the language itself. This unique relation between sign and meaning, I would argue, is very significant for an understanding of the notion of representation in Benjamin's thought. Name and pure language are immanent in the sense that their meaning is communicated in their linguistic sign. Their meaning exists to the extent that it communicates. As a result, to argue that Benjamin believes in an immanent faculty of language or a representative one at this stage is simplistic. To clarify this postulate further, I will turn now to consider Benjamin's investigation of the "mystical" and "bourgeois".

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<sup>19</sup> Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 184.

***Benjamin's coinage of 'bourgeois' and 'mystical' views***

Now that I have examined Benjamin's points regarding the name as the true language with its unique 'self-communicating' quality, it is important to grasp Benjamin's argument in relation to two alternative viewpoints. In "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin argues that there are two main attitudes towards the representational faculties of language: firstly, the "bourgeois linguistic theory" in which the human word is taken as a *mere* sign for something (the thing) by convention, and secondly the "mystical view" in which the word and the referent are the same.

For Benjamin, "the bourgeois linguistic theory" suggests that the human communicates "his mental being *by* the names that he gives things" (OL, 110). Benjamin goes on to say that an advocate of this group cannot

assume that it is his mental being that he communicates, for this does not happen through the names of things, that is, through the words by which he denotes a thing. And, equally, the advocate of such a view can only assume that man is communicating factual subject matter to other men, for that does happen through the word by which he denotes a thing. This view is the bourgeois conception of language. . . . It holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, its addressee a human being. (OL, 110-111)

Benjamin's opposition to this idea is based on its merely referential understanding of language. Benjamin condemns this "bourgeois" theory because it advocates a separate outside semantic content that is supposed to be conveyed by language. And this kind of communication is in direct contrast with Benjamin's hypothesis that language "as such" communicates itself.

The critique of the "bourgeois" theory of language goes back to the way Benjamin describes "the first fall". Therefore, it is helpful here to have a recapitulation of what I discussed in Chapter One on how, for Benjamin, the signification of communication and representation changes "after the fall". Benjamin stresses that the knowledge of good and evil promised by the snake is the reason behind Adam and Eve's fall. He maintains that this knowledge is "nameless," "vain in the deepest sense"

and "the only evil known to the paradisiac state" (OL, 119). In de Vries's words, knowledge creates an "emergence of a general use of language in which the name can no longer live without being 'affected' or 'hurt'."<sup>20</sup> Benjamin sees a 'fall' in language as a 'disseminated' entity when it is used as a *common tool*. This is clearly evident in his adoption of a nostalgic and romantic tone whenever he describes the state of language 'before the fall'. Following my argument in Chapter One, I suggest that Benjamin creates a strong opposition between 'knowledge' and 'name'. In his view, knowledge causes language to start to 'communicate' something outside itself:

Knowledge of good and evil abandons name, it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word. Name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact. . . . The word must communicate *something* (other than itself). That is really the Fall of language-mind. (OL, 119)

In other words, the mental being starts communicating through the linguistic being, thus pointing to some outside referent. Benjamin clearly identifies "the word after the promise of the snake" with "the communicating word" (OL, 119). Therefore, I suggest that Benjamin's study of 'knowledge' and its effect on language is at the heart of Benjamin's critique of the "bourgeois view".<sup>21</sup>

On the opposite side, Benjamin places the "mystical view of language" in which "the word is simply the essence of the thing" (OL, 116-7). He critiques this view by suggesting that the thing is being *created* from God's word and then *known* in its name by a human word. The thing has been given the human language but it "in itself has no word" (OL, 117). Benjamin's argument here is based on the distinction he

<sup>20</sup> Hent de Vries, "Anti-Babel: The 'Mystical Postulate' in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida," p. 458.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin's objection to the "bourgeois" linguistic view can also be interpreted in political terms. Susan Handelman, in *Fragments of Redemption*, contends that the "bourgeois" view is resented by Benjamin not only because it is about the fall of the divine name into the human word but also because instrumental language is the first step towards the fetish of the sign as a bourgeois obsession (Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, pp. 69-71). In other words, Benjamin seems to anticipate a post-Marxism that critiques the modern commodity of the sign. As Irving Wohlfarth writes, "[m]odern semiology would have the same status for Benjamin as the classical bourgeois theories of political economy had for Marx. In each case a double reification would be at work" (Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, p. 69).

places between God's Word and human language. In other words, contrary to most readings of his text, Benjamin argues that the limited word of humankind that is based on knowledge is on no account equivalent to the limitless creative word of God. In his view, if we say that the word is the essence of the thing, this means that the human word is the same as the creative word of God whereas it is only in God's creative force that the thing and the word are the same. Therefore, the thing is created from God's word but only *known* through the human word.<sup>22</sup> Benjamin's point becomes clearer when we recall my earlier discussion on the role of knowledge in language according to *Genesis*.

In the first paragraphs of "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin explains that when he says language communicates itself, this 'itself' is a 'mental entity' not 'language'. Benjamin thinks it is obvious that

the mental entity that communicates itself in language is not language itself but something to be distinguished from it. The view that the mental essence of a thing consists precisely in its language - this view, taken as a hypothesis, is the great abyss into which all linguistic theory threatens to fall, and to survive suspended precisely over this abyss is its task. (OL, 108)

I suggest that Benjamin, here, foreshadows his critique of the "mystical view" that he proposes later in the essay. I believe that if we acknowledge this distinction between Benjamin's views and the so-called "mystical" position, we shall be able to uncover many misreadings of Benjamin. Despite similarities, Benjamin's hypothesis that mental being is communicated *in* the name is an *alternative* to the "mystical" viewpoint. Benjamin defines his alternative view when he says humans communicate by naming (OL, 110). In other words, there is a process of communication, an addressee (human being), and the medium of naming. These three elements seem to be missing in the so-called "mystical view".

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<sup>22</sup> Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, p. 68.

I can conclude from the above that the way Benjamin distances himself from both the “mystical” and the “bourgeois” views brings more strength to my earlier contention that Benjamin’s postulate is not merely an immanent or a representationalist view of language. However, Benjamin’s relation to the two viewpoints of “bourgeois” and “mystical” has been read in different ways. I believe that this is due to the fact that when Benjamin examines the notion of language and the two “bourgeois” and “mystical” views, he does not always signal to his reader that he is confining his study to one of the three stages of languages (appellation, knowledge, and dispersion). For instance, when Benjamin opposes the “bourgeois” thinking that language is a mere sign, it has been understood wrongly that Benjamin sees language only in a non-representational capacity, when he is in fact referring to human language before the first Fall (the tree of knowledge and the Fall from Eden). At this stage, the human word, as only a reflex of God’s Word, is still not caught in an instrumentative game. Benjamin recognises the point that language after the original sin creates more distance between the human’s and God’s word. He clearly accepts that language at this stage starts acting as an instrumentational tool. Yet, numerous readings of Benjamin’s work still continue to present conflicting results due to his elusive statements.

### *De Manian deconstructive criticism of Benjamin and representation*

Here, I shall formulate three different viewpoints regarding Benjamin and the question of representation and pure language. I place Paul de Man on one side of the spectrum and Susan Handelman on the other side. My intention is to show that both of these two exemplary and contradictory readings are limited in their scope regarding Benjamin and representation. Based on this, I shall later argue that Derrida’s reading is more subtle and closer to Benjamin’s ‘intentions’.

De Manian criticism of Benjamin strongly suggests that Benjamin never in fact advocated the possibility of a manifestational or immanent level to language. I have

mentioned de Man's "Conclusions"<sup>23</sup> regarding translation theory in Part I. Here I shall return to this text to trace de Man's 'deconstructive' reading of Benjamin regarding the origin of language and its representative faculty. De Man's main aim is to dismiss any religious readings of Benjamin's "fundamental unity of language".<sup>24</sup> He argues that Benjamin has never exactly acknowledged the existence of a pure and unified language and criticises Benjamin's friend, Gershom Scholem, for imposing his understanding of Benjamin's thought after his death. In de Man's account, Scholem "bears the strong responsibility in this unhappy misinterpretation of Benjamin . . . [Scholem] deliberately tried to make Benjamin say the opposite of what he said for ends of his own".<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, it seems that de Man in his "Conclusions" embarks on the same task. De Man wishes to convince us that Benjamin's idea of language is an inhuman one which is part and parcel of de Man's theory, as I will explain later. If he could do this, Benjamin's theory of language and representation would be clearly de Manian. In sum, de Man points to two questions in his speech: firstly the inhuman characteristic of language, and secondly fragmentation as the essence of language and therefore the absence of an original pure language (*reine Sprache*). To begin with, de Man reminds us that Benjamin, at the beginning of "The Task of the Translator," writes that no poetic language is *intended* for the reader. De Man adds,

whereas the meaning-function is certainly intentional, it is not *a priori* certain at all that the mode of meaning, the way in which I mean, is intentional in any way. The way in which I can try to mean is dependent upon linguistic properties that are not only [not] made by me, because I depend on the language as it exists for the devices which I will be using, it is as such not made by us as historical beings, it is perhaps not even made by humans at all. Benjamin says, from the beginning, that it is not at all certain that language is in any sense human.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'" in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

The above citation is in fact a good demonstration of what de Man means by his theory of inhuman language. For de Man, language produces meaning-effects in a machine-like and impersonal manner without the intention of the producer whether conscious or unconscious.<sup>27</sup> My contention is that Benjamin's argument regarding intention is about the state of language in its pure form, before the Fall. To Benjamin, true language does not need intention. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin writes: "Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. . . . Truth is the death of intention. . . . The structure of truth, then demands a mode of being which in its lack of intentionality resembles the simple existence of things, but which is superior in its permanence" (OGTD, 36). In other words, Benjamin perceives the invasion of intention as soon as language becomes a tool for communication. De Man, on the other hand, theorises a general theory of language as nonintentional and inhuman. These two views are not compatible.

Regarding the inhuman language, one has to see how Benjamin characterises the name as pure language in this regard. As I argued earlier, Benjamin considers the act of 'naming' as the particular faculty of *human* language. He believes that "human language is nominative".<sup>28</sup> Name for Benjamin is "the heritage of human language" and "*language as such* is the mental being of man" (OL, 111). In short, Benjamin places the name as 'the ultimate language' on a *human scale*: "Man is the namer, by this we recognize that through him language speaks" (OL, 111). The human communicates itself in its name to God. The stress Benjamin places on naming as the pure human communication shows to what extent he takes language as a human act: "*Man alone has a language that is complete both in its universality and in its intensiveness*" (OL, 112).

Ultimately, as the immanent essence of language, name is "the intensive totality of language, as the absolutely communicable mental entity, and extensive totality of language, as the universally communicating (naming) entity" (OL, 112). As I explained earlier, one could conclude that Benjamin stresses the communicable characteristic of

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1988), p. 176.

<sup>28</sup> Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 18.



language as essential and at the heart of his thought. As Howard Caygill puts it, for Benjamin "communication is the expression of language".<sup>29</sup> However, I need to point out that 'communication' is used in a certain sense. If we think of 'communication' as between humans, then the original language does not need it at all. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin writes about the "state of paradise" as "a state in which there is as yet no need to struggle with the *communicative significance of words*. Ideas are displayed, *without intention*, in the act of naming, and they have to be renewed in philosophical contemplation" (OGTD, 37, my emphasis). This, of course, still does not account for regarding language as a machine-like and inhuman system of rhetoric.

However, I need to point out that one can look at de Man's critique as a deconstructive reading of Benjamin. De Man's point regarding Benjamin's 'inhuman' language can be read based on de Man's own conviction against 'intentionality'. It seems to me that de Man argues that the whole thesis on the human quality of naming and the communicative faculty of language can be read differently if we do not take into account the intentions of the author (Benjamin). This goes back to de Man's rigorous readings of the text in which the 'rhetoric' of language tells us more than the 'reasonings' behind it. In *Allegories of Reading*, he writes: "The machine is like the grammar of the text when it is isolated from its rhetoric, the merely formal element without which no text can be generated. There can be no use of language which is not . . . mechanical. . .".<sup>30</sup> De Man's readings contend that so called 'mechanical' language subverts the notion of authorial intention. The text is thus negatively placed in a non-signifying circle. De Man ends *Allegories of Reading* by suggesting that:

*Irony* is no longer a *trope* but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all the tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off the *tropological* system, *irony* enforces the *repetition* of its aberration.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 294.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 301. My emphasis.

By way of contrast, Derrida is not against authorial intention and places it among many other traces within the text. Therefore, the negative "repetition" of de Man can be turned into the positive "dissemination" in Derrida's deconstruction. One can re-write the above citation as if it is written by Derrida:

*Differance* is no longer a *concept* but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all the tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off the *conceptual* system, *differance* enforces the *dissemination* of its aberration.

My understanding of Derrida's readings, as I elaborate in this thesis, is that Derrida's paradoxes 'solicit' the logocentric basis of language. Derrida argues that the internal inscription of oppositions will eventually liberate the text from closure. 'Intention,' for Derrida, acts like any other force within the text. Derrida is not against 'intention'; he is against the tendency to singularise the text in terms of the intention of the author. Furthermore, he does not negate signification as de Man does with his notion of 'mechanical repetition'. In contrast, he advocates the 'unending dissemination' of meanings. These, to my view, are the essential differences between Derrida's deconstruction and de Man's. My account of Derrida's reading of Benjamin later in this chapter will elaborate on the difference between Derridean and de Manian deconstruction in more detail.

The second point in de Man's argument needs some background. While de Man examines the actual problems of the translation of "The Task of the Translator" by Harry Zohn (the English translator of the text) and Maurice de Gandillac (the French translator), he points to a mistake in Harry Zohn's translation of "The Task of the Translator". Having shown his indebtedness to Carol Jacobs's argument in her article "The Monstrosity of Translation,"<sup>32</sup> de Man reminds us that in Zohn's text, the translation makes "both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel" (TOT, 78) whereas the German

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<sup>32</sup> Carol Jacobs, "The Monstrosity of Translation," pp. 755-766.

text in fact clearly states "broken parts" instead of "fragments".<sup>33</sup> De Man concludes that for Benjamin these fragments are "broken" and they remain essentially fragmentary while Zohn's text implies a sense of totality as if there has been an original vessel and the fragments reconstitute it. De Man concludes that there has never been a pure unitary language.<sup>34</sup> Thus, original language becomes "an initial fragmentation":

any work is totally fragmented in relation to this *reine Sprache*, with which it has nothing in common, and every translation is totally fragmented in relation to the original. The translation is the fragment of a fragment, is breaking the fragment - so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly - and never reconstitutes it; there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of this vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there has never been one.<sup>35</sup>

As we can see, de Man's idea that language has been originally fragmented leads us to his 'conclusion' that there has never been an original language in the first place. And this will deprive Benjamin's text of any kind of theological implication. I would argue that although Benjamin asserts the concept of fragmentation in language in many places in his writings, he still believes in a 'wholeness' in language. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, he maintains that fragmentation does not deprive a structure of its wholeness. He writes:

Just as mosaics *preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation* into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum. Both are made up of the distinct and the disparate; and nothing could bear more powerful *testimony to the transcendent force of the sacred image and the truth itself*. The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea. . . . (OGTD, 29, my emphasis)

<sup>33</sup> Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'," p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> Jacobs's analysis of Benjamin's text goes too far and states that in fact what Benjamin means by "pure" (in the term "pure language") is "purely" or "nothing but". She writes that Benjamin by "pure language" does not mean "the apotheosis of an ultimate language but signifies rather that which is purely language - nothing but language" (Carol Jacobs, "The Monstrosity of Translation," p. 761). Whereas, as I explained earlier, the meaning of "pure language" for Benjamin has roots in the notions of originary naming and his understanding of 'communication'.

<sup>35</sup> Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'," p. 91.

Benjamin here clearly argues that all these fragments eventually contribute to a wholeness which make his mode of thought very close to the modernist thinking of fragmentation within totality.

To conclude, my contention is that Benjamin's position on 'intention' relates specifically to pre-Lapsarian language. Moreover, his modernist view on the wholeness of language, his nostalgic view towards the past and his messianism of the pure language in the future, provide convincing evidence that the notion of language for Benjamin is not inscribed within total or initial fragmentation. Fragmentation is an important motif in Benjamin's thought as long as it can be romanticised in its past wholeness or redeemed for its future totality.

### *Rabbinic readings of Benjamin and representation*

Let us examine another example of a limited interpretation of Benjamin. The 'pure' theological readings with certain Judaical interpretations of Susan Handelman's tend to take Benjamin's views towards an advocacy of mystical viewpoints. In her recent book, *Fragments of Redemption* (1991), Handelman is more cautious and less radical than the exclusively Hebraic conclusions she proclaims in *The Slayers of Moses* (1982). Yet her reading remains essentially theological. She particularly attacks the de Manian critique of Benjamin and suggests that de Man has missed many points in Benjamin's texts. She provides another picture of Benjamin's concept of language as non-informative yet "a superior mode of knowledge".<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly, Handelman's points mainly draw from Scholem's writings on Benjamin and mystical language. Therefore, Scholem's reading of Benjamin seems to remain the essential point of difference between de Manian deconstruction (and also Marxist criticism) and such theological readings of Benjamin.

Here I shall outline the main points of Handelman's argument. Firstly, Handelman's view is radical in the way that she distinguishes and isolates Hebraism

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<sup>36</sup> Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, p. 22.

within the whole history of philosophy and religion. In *The Slayers of Moses*, she gives Hebraism a distinctive faculty. In her view, it is only in Judaic thought that the word and the thing have an intimate interconnection - a metonymical link in which there is "contiguity" instead of "substitution". She repeats the Derridean remark that the communicating process is that of "contiguity" rather than "substitution".<sup>37</sup> I think that Handelman is correct in finding these traits in Hebrew thought. What problematises this assumption, I would argue, is that we see the same path in Christianity, Islam and Far Eastern religions. It is correct that Christianity and Islam are influenced greatly by Greek thought but the mystical interpretations of these traditions make them very close to these assumptions.<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, Handelman believes that in Rabbinic thought the relation between the meaning and the letter is immanent and their connection is an "unmediated vision" which relates to the revelatory characteristic of the sacred languages.<sup>39</sup> In other words, words and things are intimately interconnected while in Western thought (including Christianity) words and things are separated or rather substituted, as in metaphor.<sup>40</sup> Handelman argues that name, as an example, is intrinsically connected to the referent.<sup>41</sup> I think what Benjamin contends is very close to this view. As I elaborated earlier, for Benjamin, language intrinsically communicates its mental being. Yet the "unmediated vision" hypothesis is close to what Benjamin objects to as the "mystical view" on language. In other words, Benjamin does not accede to the point that the word and the meaning are the same. As I argued, Benjamin sees the linguistic being and the mental being as equal in the sense that the 'communicable' part of the mental being can enter the language system in the linguistic being.

<sup>37</sup> Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p. 62.

<sup>38</sup> Two exemplary texts in this respect are worth mentioning. In the field of Christianity, see Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and for an Islamic study see Ian Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

In short, I believe Rabbinic readings of Benjamin are reductive in their analysis of Benjamin's position on representation. Benjamin, as he argues clearly, is not an advocate of "mystical" views on the unity between words and meanings. He sees a new relation, the relation that I will explain through Derrida's reading of Benjamin.

### ***Derrida and the paradox of representation in Benjamin***

Although de Man is considered as Derrida's disciple, his views can be distinguished from Derrida's in many respects. I shall place Derrida's views in relation to de Man's and Handelman's in order to argue that Derrida places these two apparently "un-compromising" views next to each other and creates a paradox. Derrida insists on a more subtle and all-encompassing view against the dominant views that pull Benjamin's views to one side or the other. Although Derrida's reading of Benjamin regarding the name and its communicating aspect is very scarce and sketch-like and therefore difficult to formulate, I believe that this formulation will help us in identifying Derrida's general views regarding representation and the signification process in language. This will be discussed later in the next chapter.

In his lecture, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," Derrida provides a few notes regarding Benjamin's notion of language as representation and manifestation. He asserts that Benjamin in both "The Task of the Translator" (1923) and especially the famous "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916) puts "into question the notion that the essence of language is originally communicative, that is to say semiological, informative, representative, conventional, hence *mediatory*" (FL, 50). Derrida argues that for Benjamin language "is not a means with an end in view - a thing or signified content - to which it would have to adequate itself correctly" (FL, 50). Therefore, Derrida appears to accede to the presumption that Benjamin's views are critical about representation in its broadest sense. This, as we noted, is not acknowledged by de Man. Derrida then correctly relates this view to Benjamin's biblical readings:

The 1916 text ["On Language as Such and on the Language of Man"] defined original sin as that fall into a language of mediate communication where words, having become means, incite babbling (*geschwatz*). The question of good and evil after the creation arises from this babbling. The tree of knowledge was not there to provide knowledge of good and evil but as the "*Wahrzeichen*," the sign betokening judgment (*gericht*) borne by he who questions. (FL, 50-1)

In this excerpt, we see how Derrida interestingly interweaves two biblical narratives. Firstly, the name (signature) of God as the only language (name) declines into a state of "babbling" which clearly alludes to the Babel incident. Secondly, the critique of 'knowledge' corresponds to this judgmental and communicative characteristic of language. Derrida in the introduction to the second part of the same lecture explains why Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (1921) is also a supporting evidence in which language after appellation falls into a mediatory function:

The profound logic of this essay ["Critique of Violence"] puts to work an interpretation of language - of the origin and the experience of language - according to which evil, that is to say lethal power, comes to language by way of, precisely, representation, in other words, by that dimension of language as means of communication that is re-presentative, mediating, thus technical, utilitarian, semiotic, informational - all of those powers that uproot language and cause it to decline, to fall far from or outside of its originary destination which was appellation, nomination, the giving or the appeal of presence in the name. (FL, 64)

Here Derrida clearly acknowledges and subscribes to the point that Benjamin regards the representational side of language as the "decline" or "fall" of language into a "mediatory function". As we see above, Derrida states that for Benjamin the "originary destination" of language is "appellation, nomination, the giving or the appeal of presence in the name" (FL, 64). Again, this view is in direct contrast to de Man's position. In other words, Derrida acknowledges that Benjamin's view tends towards the metaphysics of presence in language whereas de Man attempts to demonstrate that Benjamin's view has never had any place for presence or origin. Derrida adds that the

process of naming is in contrast with the strategy of representation in which language is *used* as a mode of communication:

man insofar as he is the only being who, not having received his name from God, has received from God the power and the mission to name, to give a name to his own kind and to give a name to things. To name is not to represent, it is not to communicate by signs, that is, by means of means in view of an end, etc. (FL, 61)

Names do not mean anything yet they still have a communicating characteristic. But as my reading of Benjamin's text elaborates, this communication is intrinsic. In other words, names communicate their content *in* the word rather than *through* it. What names signify is the fact that they are names.<sup>42</sup> The important point, though, is that Derrida does not confine himself to saying that Benjamin is critical about the notion of language as means and sign. Derrida correctly points to a double bind in language. He claims that Benjamin, while stressing his continuous re-valuation of representation and manifestation in language, is in fact in favour of a "compromise" between these two levels of discourse. Derrida explains that while Benjamin suggests an immanent quality to his ideal language, this notion is still non-conclusive. Thus, Benjamin's critique of the representative and communicative qualities of language,

does not mean that one must simply renounce Enlightenment and the language of communication or of representation in favor of the language of expression. In his *Moscow Diary* in 1926-27, Benjamin specifies that the polarity between the two languages and all that they command cannot be maintained and deployed in a pure state, but that "compromise" is necessary or inevitable between them. Yet this remains a compromise between two incommensurable and radically heterogeneous dimensions. (FL, 61-2)<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Proper name can have meaning but when addressing a person one does not see the meaning of the name. The name has no meaning in effect. This character of name can become problematic when one finds out the meaning of proper names in a foreign language.

<sup>43</sup> Clearly, Derrida tries to see his logic of 'paradox' - here "the compromise between heterogeneous orders" - between Benjamin's lines. Later on in the same lecture, he relates the concept of representation to 'multiplicity,' and immediacy to 'uniqueness':

It is perhaps one of the lessons that we could draw here: the fatal nature of the compromise between heterogeneous orders, which is a compromise, moreover, in the name of the justice that would command one to obey at the same time the law of representation (*Aufklärung*,



Derrida argues that this double bind should remain as it is and that a hierarchical value-judgement approach towards this duality is inaccurate. Thus, Benjamin and subsequently Derrida, by not resolving this paradox, attempt to see a positive driving force behind it.

Another interesting excerpt from "On Language as Such" helps effectively as a support for Derrida's argument. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Benjamin argues for the significance of the distinction between a "mental entity" and the "linguistic entity". He believes that recognising this distinction is "the first stage of any study of linguistic theory". I would like to draw attention to the remaining part of this sentence. Benjamin writes:

this distinction seems so unquestionable that it is, rather, the frequently asserted identity between mental and linguistic being that constitutes a deep and incomprehensible paradox, the expression of which is found in the ambiguity of the word *logos*. Nevertheless, this paradox has a place, as a solution, at the centre of linguistic theory, but remains a paradox, and insoluble, if placed at the beginning. (OL, 108)

Benjamin here argues that the *distinction* between mental and linguistic entity should only be our *starting* point in the theory of language yet the paradox of the *identity* of these two is placed at the *centre* of the theory. My understanding of this is that Benjamin accedes to the fact that we start from the representative or mediatory feature of language but the identity/distinction between the linguistic and mental being creates a paradox that has a place "at the centre of linguistic theory" "as a solution".

I conclude therefore that, for Benjamin and Derrida, representation and manifestation are 'paradoxically' inherent in the nature of language - a conclusion that

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reason, objectification, comparison, explication, the taking into account of multiplicity and therefore the serialization of the unique) and the law that transcends representation and withholds the unique, all uniqueness, from its reinscription in an order of generality or of comparison. (FL, 61-2)

Derrida's conclusions here can act as a strong link between the subject of Part I with Part II of this project.

is significantly missed in both de Man's and Handelman's readings. By distancing himself from the "mystical" or "bourgeois" views on language and by problematising the relation between the "linguistic being" and the "mental being," Benjamin argues that language is a system in which both these qualities are inscribed. My next chapter will base its arguments on these points and will examine the role of representation in deconstruction and deconstructive reading of literary discourse.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Derrida and Representation in Literary Language*

it is difficult to conceive anything at all beyond representation, but [this] commits us perhaps to thinking altogether differently. (SOR, 326)

Derrida is deeply indebted to Benjamin's postulates on the notion of representation and signification. As a result, the previous chapter gives a suitable background for the formulation of Derrida's position regarding the representational role of language in this chapter. First, I will explore this through Derrida's readings of Saussure. Then, I will argue that Derrida deconstructs the duality of representation and immediacy by problematising their relation. I will explain the deconstruction of this relation by examining Derrida's understanding of the notion of the 'sign' and his deconstruction of speech and writing. This examination will pave the way for an investigation of what Derrida means by referentiality in the text and the possibility of signification. Indeed, this chapter is an attempt to give answers to very basic questions regarding the notions of sign and representation in deconstruction. In order not to risk oversimplification, I will maintain and demonstrate the contradictions in Derrida's thought throughout.

Finally, I will focus on the meaning process in literary language and explain how the meaning oscillates between the two poles of representation and immediacy. Through reading *The Crying of Lot 49* I shall demonstrate the way referentiality oscillates between immanence and representation. This novel not only demonstrates how ultimate meaning constantly 'defers' but it also shows how the text is forced to point to internal signs and remain on a self-referential level.

### *Saussure and the nature of linguistic sign*

Saussurean terminology has dominated the discussion of language since the early years of this century. Derrida's formulations on language are no exception to this rule. It is useful, I believe, to begin a discussion of the 'representative' role of language with an account of the relevant arguments in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. As I will explain later, Derrida's discussion on the notion of the sign also starts with a reading of Saussure.

Although Saussurean 'semiology' covers a broad field,<sup>1</sup> here I shall focus only on Saussure's argument on the notion of sign because it has bearings on the thesis of this chapter. Interestingly, Saussure's formulation of "the nature of the linguistic sign" starts with a critique of the theory of the name: "Some people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only - a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names".<sup>2</sup> Saussure criticises this conception on the following grounds. He argues that regarding language as a "naming-process only"

assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words . . . ; it does not tell us whether a name is vocal or psychological in nature . . . ; finally, it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation - an assumption that is anything but true.<sup>3</sup>

Saussure instead proposes another explanation for the linguistic sign: "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image".<sup>4</sup> To him, within the sign there is a *form that signifies* which he proposes to be called the *signifier*, and a *concept that is signified* what he calls the *signified*. These 'two faces' of the sign

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one of the great achievements of Saussure's semiology is its implications for most of the human sciences. This, of course, can be seen in positive and negative terms. On the one hand, it has opened up a new perspective to various disciplines. The study of politics, theology, sociology, and psychology among others are approached semiologically, i.e. based on the significance of the sign system in their representation and interpretation. On the other hand, Saussurean semiology has had a totalising attitude towards human sciences. In other words, the semiology of human sciences has been claimed as an encompassing approach that can explain the representation and hermeneutics of all human sciences in a 'genuine' way.

<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics," p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

become united to create 'the sign' which in itself refers to an outside "referent" or what one calls the world, reality or things. Saussure thus tries to include the concept or idea within the linguistic system and refuses the assumption that the concept exists autonomously.

Saussure then proposes his *Principle I* suggesting that the sign has an 'arbitrary nature'. According to this principle, there is no natural bond between the signifier and the signified.<sup>5</sup> Saussure is quick to mention that the term 'arbitrary' does not imply that "the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker". He is aware that there are many elements involved and that a sign cannot be changed without resistance. What he means by the term 'arbitrary' is that the signifier "is unmotivated, i.e., arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified".<sup>6</sup> In other words, the sound-image of the word is incidentally associated with the concept or the idea. It is important to point out here that this formulation, being Saussure's first principle of the structural theory of language, points to the fact that still the "(formal) reciprocity is maintained" in the relation between the signifier and the signified.<sup>7</sup>

The argument that the nature of the sign is arbitrary in the sense that is described above might not seem a novel idea. Saussure is not the first to suggest this. He acknowledges this by saying that "[n]o one disputes the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign, but it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign to it its proper place".<sup>8</sup> And this is precisely what Saussure does in his *Course*. The importance of Saussure's theory lies in the fact that he places this hypothesis in a more complex theoretical framework in which, as a result, "consequences are numberless".<sup>9</sup> These 'consequences' are what I am concerned with in this chapter.

In a defence of his theory of the arbitrary nature of the sign, Saussure starts by arguing against the idea that concepts are pre-existent. He contends that the signifieds

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> Herman Parret, "Grammatology and Linguistics: A Note on Derrida's Interpretation of Linguistic Theories," *Poetics*, 4:1(13) (March 1975), p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics," p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

are not the same in different languages. He cites various examples for this. He then argues that “[i]f words stood for preexisting concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true”.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the theory of the arbitrariness of the sign leads us to the fact that we not only choose arbitrary signifiers for the signifieds but also the selection of the signifieds is arbitrary. Hence, we are not faced with pre-existent primary fixed concepts. We create and use new concepts in relation to the other concepts. This is one of the most important findings of Saussurean semiology. This argument paves the way for the idea that was further developed proclaiming, in Jonathan Culler’s words, that “[e]ach language articulates or organizes the world differently. Languages do not simply name existing categories, they articulate their own”.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Saussure’s theory suggests that the signifiers and the signifieds are *arbitrary* themselves and that they are *relational* or *differential*. The signifieds and the signifiers start to get used merely because “they are what the others are not”.<sup>12</sup> They are chosen and used only due to their difference from the adjoining signifieds and signifiers. Thus, language has an “‘arbitrary’ way of organising the world into concepts or categories”.<sup>13</sup>

Before moving to critiques of Saussure, the final point that needs to be mentioned here is the fact that, although Saussure argues that “both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately,” he eventually suggests that “their combination is a positive fact”.<sup>14</sup> This goes back to the idea that, for Saussure, the signifier and the signified, while being arbitrary, when joined within the sign make a unity and a strong bond. They are two sides of “a sheet of paper” that is language.<sup>15</sup> Let us leave this last point aside and return to it later in readings of Saussure.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Saussure* (London: Fontana, 1976), p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, “Course in General Linguistics,” p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

*Benveniste and the nature of linguistic sign*

Before moving to Derrida's reading of Saussure and my conclusions, I would like to mention another early reading of the *Course* by Emile Benveniste. Benveniste in his short article "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign" (the same title as the subtitle in Saussure's *Course*), published in 1939 in Copenhagen, offers an interesting reading.

I have a few reservations about Benveniste's reading of Saussure. I believe that elaborating these points will help to clarify Saussure's theory even more. Benveniste starts his critique by reiterating that the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name but a concept and a sound image. He adds that despite this, "immediately afterwards he [Saussure] stated that the nature of the sign is arbitrary because 'it actually has no natural connection with the signified'".<sup>16</sup> To Benveniste, this is not possible because he takes "it" as the referent which has not been included in Saussure's primary theory: "It is clear that the argument is falsified by an unconscious and surreptitious recourse to a third term which was not included in the initial definition. This third term is the thing itself, the reality".<sup>17</sup> I would argue that here Saussure is simply saying that *the signifier and the signified* have no natural connection. In other words, "it" refers to "the signifier" and not "the thing". Saussure is dealing with the linguistic structure and he correctly does not invoke *the referent* (or "the thing" or "the reality" as Benveniste says) within this structure.

Benveniste's other objection is to the presumption that the signifier or the signified are arbitrary *on their own* as much as *in relation to one another*. He brings an example: "To decide that the linguistic sign is arbitrary because the same animal is called *bauf* in one country and *Ochs* elsewhere, is equivalent to saying that the notion of mourning is arbitrary because in Europe it is symbolized by black, in China by white".<sup>18</sup> I believe the process of reasoning behind this objection is flawed. Although

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<sup>16</sup> Emile Benveniste, "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign," trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, in Rick Rylance, ed., *Debating Texts: A Reader in 20th. Century Literary Theory and Method* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987), p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77-8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Saussure believes that the signifier and the signified are arbitrary on their own, he does not argue that the reason for the arbitrariness of the signifieds is the arbitrariness of the sound-image (signifier). Signifiers and signifieds are selected not only in an arbitrary manner but also in a separate way. The relation between the arbitrariness of the signifier and the signified is not that of a *causal effect*. Benveniste's contention that in Saussure's theory signifieds are arbitrary is not the whole story. Saussure does not say that the signifieds are arbitrary but rather that they are situated in the linguistic structure of each language in a *relational and differential* manner. For instance, Saussure argues that the notion of 'mourning' is not pre-existent in a fixed form in all languages. Instead, he would rather see it as a floating concept with different associations. Saussure says: "Language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the sign".<sup>19</sup> This position is far from the assumption that the concept of 'mourning' is an arbitrary concept in itself.

Benveniste concludes from his preceding argument that in fact the connection between the signifier and the signified "is not arbitrary". The relation is on the contrary "necessary". In other words, it is necessary in one's consciousness to see the concept and the sound-image as identical.<sup>20</sup> He concludes that these two in fact "evoke each other".<sup>21</sup> Benveniste explains:

The signifier and the signified, the mental representation and the sound image, are thus in reality the two aspects of a single notion and together make up the ensemble as the embodier and the embodiment. The signifier is the phonic translation of a concept; the signified is the mental counterpart of the signifier. The consubstantiality of the signifier and the signified assures the structural unity of the linguistic sign.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 79.



But this is precisely what Saussure is saying when he takes the signifier and the signified as the two sides of a sheet of paper. There is no doubt that the process of expression and communication within a linguistic structure is possible only when one believes in a sense of a necessary relation between the signifier and the signified. Yet, I do not subscribe to the point that this necessary relation is in opposition to the arbitrary nature of the sign. I would think this relation is *necessary and arbitrary*.

The conclusive point made by Benveniste is that he is impressed by Saussure's argument that, because of its arbitrary nature, the sign is both *mutable* and *immutable*. Here, Saussure presents a paradox. He interestingly suggests that language is mutable because the nature of its formation is arbitrary. Yet at the same time the arbitrary nature of language leaves no firm and rational ground to challenge the linguistic sign. In other words, this arbitrariness makes the sign even more fixed and immutable. This reminds one of Derrida's argument that the more abstract and arbitrary forms of language (alphabetic in comparison to, for instance, hieroglyphic) give language more 'power'. I will return to this point by Derrida later in this chapter. However, Benveniste argues that,

[i]t is not between the signifier and the signified that the relationship is modified and at the same time remains immutable; it is between the sign and object; that is, in other terms, the objective *motivation* of the designation, submitted, as such, to the action of various historical factors. What Saussure demonstrated remains true, but true of the *signification*, not the sign.<sup>23</sup>

Benveniste is correct in asserting that Saussure has not dealt with the "object" enough in his theory. But, as Stephen Moore reminds us, we should not assume that Saussure doubts the existence of the referent as a result. Saussure leaves the "object" out of his theory on the nature of linguistic structure simply because the object "is not part of the internal structure of language".<sup>24</sup> Apart from this point, the conclusive argument of Benveniste's gives us good grounds to move to Derrida's reading of Saussure. The

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, p. 15.

argument that places the linguistic sign as a whole in an arbitrary relation to the referent (proclaiming the arbitrariness of the signification process instead of the sign) is a significant critique of Saussure that links Benveniste's reading to Derrida's.

### *Derrida's reading of Saussure*

In order to grasp Derrida's reading of Saussure in full, I will start from the notion of 'logocentrism'. Derrida's approach to Saussure is divided. As Jonathan Culler asserts, Saussure's relation to 'logocentrism' is a complicated one.<sup>25</sup> Culler correctly argues that "for Derrida, a reading of Saussure plays a crucial role, providing classic assertions of logocentric positions but offering also instances of principles that undo or subvert them, exposing them as constructions or impositions".<sup>26</sup> As I demonstrated earlier, Saussure insists on the fact that the signifier and the signified are not autonomous entities. Derrida accedes to the "absolutely decisive critical role" that Saussure plays in suggesting that the signifier and the signified are distinct and yet act in a "two-sided unity" (PO, 18). He reminds us that this is in direct contrast to the tradition of maintaining the opposition of the concept and the image, for instance in the shape of the metaphor of "soul and body" (PO, 18). Derrida argues that Saussurean semiology "has marked, against the tradition, that the signified is inseparable from the signifier, that the signified and signifier are the two sides of one and the same production" (PO, 18).

However, Derrida believes that Saussure fails to live up to this expectation since he eventually maintains the opposition. The point of departure between Saussure and Derrida is the fact that Saussure's theory is still firmly based on the opposition between form and meaning or the sensible and the intelligible which belongs to "the logocentrism of Western thought"<sup>27</sup> and is also the foundation of the

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Saussure*, p. 112.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113. Derrida is critical of Hegel's semiology on the same ground. To Derrida, Hegel sees the sign always remains the "monument" or "the pyramid" of an outside meaning (see Jacques Derrida, "The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 81-87).

representationalist viewpoint. Derrida objects to this opposition not only because it is a typically logocentric approach but because, for him, the distinction between the signifier and the signified is elusive. This 'elusive' distinction partly comes from Saussure himself in his formulation of the *differential* character of signifiers and signifieds.

But what is Derrida's position regarding Saussure's notion of *differential* characteristic? The problematic relation of Saussure to logocentrism is demonstrated more clearly when we see that Derrida also hails the Saussurean argument that emphasises "the *differential* and *formal* characteristics of semiological functioning" (PO, 18). Culler agrees with the fact that "Saussure's insistence on the differential nature of linguistic units works against logocentrism".<sup>28</sup> However, as I argued above, Derrida's argument is that since the signifier and the signified are both *differential* or *relational* entities, the relation between them is also not so *distinct*. Thus, Culler proposes that the difference between the signifier and the signified is "purely functional": "the signifier is whatever promises signification, but a signified can play the role of signifier in its turn, as we discover when we look a word up in a dictionary to discover its meaning and find, of course, another word, which we can also look up".<sup>29</sup>

In sum, in spite of Saussure's emphasis on the differential nature of language, Derrida argues that Saussure's "maintenance of the rigorous distinction" between the signifier and the signified, which is "an essential distinction," leaves open "the possibility of thinking a concept signified in and of itself, a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language, that is of a relationship to a system of signifiers" (PO, 19). This calls for a metaphysical concept - "transcendental signified" - which "in and of itself, in its essence, would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer itself function as a signifier" (PO, 19-20). Therefore, the way Saussure problematises the relation between the signifier and the signified becomes an important point for Derrida to begin his understanding of

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<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Saussure*, p. 113.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

representation. In fact, Saussure's theory regarding the curious relation between the signifier and the signified can be set against the way Benjamin problematised the relation between linguistic being and mental being. Both these views, despite their differences, share an internal inscription between the sign and meaning. They both seem to be cautious of attributing representation or immanence to language and as a result argue for a middle ground between this opposition. This conclusion can lead us to elaborate further on the relation between deconstruction and the sign.

### ***Deconstruction and the sign***

Derrida's formulation of the notion of the sign is extensively indebted to his reading of Benjamin's position towards representation through his critique of both mystical and bourgeois views on language and his theory of linguistic being and mental being. Regardless of his objections, deconstruction is also influenced by the way Saussure formulates the relation between the signifier and the signified.

I think one of the most elusive points in Derrida's thought is the notion of the sign and its relation to representation and signification. Here, I attempt to explain in a clear way what Derrida thinks about the place of signs and meanings in the text. This formulation will also explain what Derrida means by the paradox of representation. Here, I present seven arguments in relation to representation. These arguments should be read in a narrative way:

1. *There is no escape from the metaphysical system of representation. Yet, representation in the sense that a signifier represents a signified is impossible.*
2. *This is because the borderlines between signifiers and signifieds are not distinct and they are not autonomous entities.*
3. *The text is a texture of signifiers.*
4. *Signifiers through free association loosen the system of representation.*
5. *The sign is paradoxically the only escape from the system of representation.*
6. *Signs make meanings possible and multiple.*

## 7. Signs deconstruct the authority of meanings.

It is argued repeatedly that Derrida's point regarding representation and the sign lies in his critique of the 'secondariness' of the signifier in relation to the signified.<sup>30</sup> Although this critique is important to the deconstructive criticism of Derrida regarding representation, I believe the role of the paradoxes involved is far more significant. As I mentioned earlier, I believe Derrida's views are caught in a few major 'aporias'. Derrida's argument regarding representation has two facets. In brief, Derrida does not see any system functioning outside the representative system. He argues that there is nothing but signs and representation *yet* he quickly declares that representation is in effect impossible. He suggests that there are only signifiers that are engaged in a chain and as a result we only have representation *yet* this representation, if it means a signifier as the mark of a signified, is impossible because no autonomous signified - what he calls 'transcendental signified' - exists.

Let us look more closely at this. *On one side*, the signified acts as a signifier. In other words, each concept in itself is a sign for another concept. Therefore, we are always faced with a representative mechanics within language which constantly defers our access to the signified or meaning. Yet, despite what is widely argued about Derrida, this does not mean that by erasing the difference between the signified and the signifier we can evade the metaphysical system. Derrida does not argue that we substitute the signifieds with the signifiers. If this difference is erased, "it is the word 'signifier' itself which must be abandoned as a metaphysical concept" (SSP, 125). *On the*

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<sup>30</sup> See Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 212-3. Dominique Janicaud, in "Presence and Appropriation: Derrida and the Question of an Overcoming of Metaphysical Language," represents this widely agreed hypothesis by placing Derrida at the other end of the spectrum in relation to Hegel:

Both systems organize excess: in Hegel, the excess of the signified; in Derrida, the excess of the signifier. On the one hand, signs are fulfilled with significations in order to reach the sovereignty and overflow of the absolute knowledge. On the other hand, signs are emptied because of an excess of polysemia; nothing is ever definitively signified; signifiers always overstep prior definitions and meanings. (Dominique Janicaud, "Presence and Appropriation: Derrida and the Question of an Overcoming of Metaphysical Language," *Research in Phenomenology*, 8 (1978), p. 72)

other side, Derrida explains that to create a critique of the 'transcendental signified' means to reject the notion of 'sign' as a whole: "as soon as one seeks to demonstrate in this way that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word 'sign' itself" (SSP, 125). Derrida is quick to mention that this "is precisely what cannot be done" (SSP, 125). Therefore, I would argue that the critique of the sign by Derrida still holds within it the affirmation of representation.<sup>31</sup> What Derrida is interested in from the very beginning of his deconstructive enterprise, in "Structure, Sign, and Play," is the *deconstruction* of the distinction between the signifier and the signified. Yet, he objects to the misleading sense of erasing the difference and instead 'solicits' the relation and erases the hierarchy between them.

As I said earlier, Derrida is concerned with the fact that when one distinguishes the signifier and the signified so distinctively, there will be room for the possibility of a 'transcendental signified' as a "*concept signified in and of itself*, a concept simply present to thought, independent of a relationship . . . to a system of signifiers" (PO, 19). Derrida questions this possibility and argues that "every signified is also in the position of a signifier" (PO, 20) and that no signified can act 'transcendentally' outside this system. In his interview with Kristeva, Derrida in support of the above argument says:

The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken and written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. (PO, 26)

He concludes from this hypothesis that as a result "the distinction between signified and signifier becomes problematical at its root" (PO, 20). Derrida proposes that this

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<sup>31</sup> The motif of 'postcard' again can be invoked for the question of representation. The possibility and the impossibility of sending (non-arrival) and the fact that this representation can lead to many readings and misreadings bear on the Derridean paradox of representation (Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction*, pp. 98-100).

distinction is a *functional* and *provisional* one instead of a substantial one.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the signified *provisionally functions* as a signifier. As a result, when Derrida writes that the difference between the signifier and the signified is nothing (OG, 23), he does not refer to a unitary state. Instead, he reiterates that the signified acts in place of a signifier in a certain position to other signifiers.<sup>33</sup>

As I demonstrated earlier, Derrida sees the opposition of 'the signifier' and 'the signified' at the heart of metaphysical-theological thinking. He traces it from Greek thought to Saussurean semiology. In the first two chapters of *Of Grammatology*, while proposing his thesis on the notion of speech and writing, he explains that he does not see the sign (the word) as a simple container of the signifier and the signified. He believes that the widely acknowledged notion that the sensible represents the intelligible is only a simplification.

Derrida argues that there are two "heterogeneous ways of erasing the difference between the signifier and the signified". First is "the classic way" in which the sign "submits" to thought through which the signifier is "reduced or derived". The end is the signified in which the signifier dissolves. This accords with what I discussed earlier as the way theological discourse looks at representation. The second view which Derrida subscribes to is "against the first one". Yet Derrida claims that he erases the opposition between the first and the second view by putting "into question the system in which the preceding reduction functioned". Derrida believes that to do this "first and foremost" the opposition between "the sensible and intelligible" has to be

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Saussure*, p. 125.

<sup>33</sup> David E. Klemm, in the essay "Open Secrets: Derrida and Negative Theology," (in Robert P. Scharlemann, ed., *Negation and Theology* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992)) argues that Derrida in effect undercuts "stable relations between linguistic signs on one side and both the structures of thought as well as the reality to which thought refers on the other side" (p. 11). He therefore believes that Derrida's deconstruction is "systematically differentiating signified from signifier" (p. 11). I cite this to show how the relation between deconstruction and representation can be misread. As I indicate above, on the contrary Derrida asserts that for him the boundaries and limits between the linguistic signs and the reality or thought are elusive, and therefore he sees the two analogous and even, in some degrees, indistinguishable. Klemm's reading leads him to conclude that, for Derrida, "the dominant paradigm of representational thinking comes to an end" (p. 11). This statement is true in one sense as I explained above but not conclusive since it does not account for the paradoxes involved.

questioned. This is because “the *paradox* is that the metaphysical reduction of the sign needed the opposition it was reducing” (SSP, 125-6).

In his interview, “Semiology and Grammatology,” Derrida talks at length about his position in relation to the notion of the sign. He objects to the presumption that the sign is “in all its aspects” metaphysical (PO, 17). He argues that the sign while belonging to the system of metaphysics in effect simultaneously *marks* and *loosens* “the limits of the system” (PO, 17). Therefore, we seem to face “an uprooting of the sign from its own soil” (PO, 17). I would argue that Derrida’s presumption that deconstruction is *already at work* in the text can be rooted in the deconstructive role of the sign in language. In other words, what Derrida relates to as the deconstructive characteristic which exists within the text seems akin to the way signs deconstruct their own function. Therefore, there is no deconstructive method for the criticism of the text. Instead, we can read the text by tracing the threads by which the signs work *for and against* its linguistic structure.

This position towards the signs becomes clearer when we look at the way Derrida compares Chinese ideograms with alphabetical language. Despite the association between Chinese ideograms and the immediacy of a language that attempts to bridge the gap between sign and meaning, Derrida argues that ideograms are also subject to dissemination. In other words, this form of language is still part of the representational system of language: “The discourse of the Chinese, then, entangles itself in the disseminations of meanings and accents”.<sup>34</sup> Derrida, in “Scribble (writing-power),” shows clear preference for the alphabetic language against ideographic language. His argument is interesting since he argues that in fact alphabetic language is more ‘powerful’ than the ideographic or hieroglyphic one because it is not so narrow. The substitution of the alphabet in place of the hieroglyphs has made the mark more powerful because the abstraction has made it easier to turn away from the mark itself and get closer to the thing signified.<sup>35</sup> This position can lead us to a better

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel’s Semiology,” p. 104.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Scribble (writing-power),” trans. Cary Plotkin, in *The Derrida Reader: Writing Performances*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 64, 65, 67, 70.



understanding of the role of representation for Derrida. Derrida is not trying to deconstruct the metaphysics of language through negating signs and signifiers. On the contrary, for Derrida, the excess of signs, as in alphabetical language, with loose relations to meanings, paradoxically liberates the text from metaphysics. Let me cite again a significant point made by Saussure when he says, "[l]anguage is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the sign".<sup>36</sup> Derrida's point that the arbitrary nature of the alphabet makes the mark more powerful has direct echoes of Saussure's idea. Saussure and Derrida are in agreement that the way the signifier and the signified relate can become problematised and Derrida takes this further and declares that this is a positive move towards the production of meanings. Signs paradoxically make the text more able to resist the way signs point to particular meanings. They make the text more free to defer meaning and this in turn deconstructs the very notion of a sign system.

Derrida's essay, "Sending: On Representation," ends with these words: "it is difficult to conceive anything at all beyond representation, but [this] commits us perhaps to thinking altogether differently" (SOR, 326). Derrida's position regarding representation can easily be summarised in this short concluding statement. Derrida knows that an anti-representational approach usually asks for a replacement. But is it not the case that any substitute still functions according to the laws of representation? Jeffrey Nealon in *Double Reading* writes:

A criticism based on an "antirepresentational prejudice" remains naive and, essentially, representational. If it attempts to recuperate another, simply nonrepresentational ground for interpretation, if it simply pushes representation to the margins and moves another notion to the center, it ends up simply

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<sup>36</sup> Cited in Emile Benveniste, "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign," p. 80.

recuperating a representational, metaphysical world view or hermeneutic in the name of an antirepresentational thinking.<sup>37</sup>

But Derrida is aware of this danger as we read his "Sending: On Representation":

We might say in another language that a criticism or a deconstruction of representation would remain feeble, vain, and irrelevant if it were to lead to some rehabilitation of immediacy, of original simplicity, of presence without repetition or delegation, if it were to induce a criticism of calculable objectivity, of criticism, of science, of technique, or of political representation. The worst regressions can put themselves at the service of this antirepresentational prejudice. (SOR, 311)

Antirepresentational theories are, after all, a representational gesture, or as Geoffrey Hartman says, "they are more referential than they know".<sup>38</sup> In order to escape this aporia, Derrida elsewhere sees a necessity to replace the place of representation. He believes that within representational language, through "the indefinite drift of signs, as errance and change of scene, linking re-presentations one to another without beginning or end," one can avoid speaking in the language of sign and representation.<sup>39</sup> This position means that deconstruction becomes neither an advocate of the immanent possibility of language nor does it subscribe to an imprisonment in the representational prison-house of language. Yet, this critique of representation unavoidably makes Derrida's thought close to the thought of immanence.

Here, I return to Susan Handelman, this time to examine her account of Derrida's theory of representation. Handelman, in her *Slayers of Moses*, has a few basic points to make about Derrida. These points all stem from Handelman's distinction between Hebraic thought and Christian doctrine. The basic distinction that Handelman repeatedly suggests between Christianity and Judaism throughout her book

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<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Double Reading*, p. 92. The search for the other of this representational faculty or the metaphysical nature of language will be further discussed in the conclusion. In short, each part of this thesis is in effect about a way to escape this metaphysical nature of language through a paradox or aporia within the linguistic system.

<sup>38</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore, Md.: The John Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 120.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, ed. and trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 103.

is that Christianity is engaged in metaphysical metaphors that evoke the spiritual and the figurative (in the text) while Judaism is more interested in the metonymical associations and the extensions of interpretations which allows it to escape metaphysics. For her, Christianity's "attempt to transcend the literal" and its displacement of "the sensuous basis of metaphor for a transcendent spiritual referent which represents pure presence" are the basic indications of this position. She argues that for Derrida this attitude is the sin that is located "at the basis of philosophy".<sup>40</sup> Handelman cites the famous statement by Derrida saying that "[t]he sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological" (OG, 14). However, she argues that "Derrida's claims are doubtless true for the Christian tradition. What we have stressed as unique about Rabbinic thought, however, is its escape from precisely this Greco-Christian ontotheological mode of thinking".<sup>41</sup>

Handelman argues that in Hebraic thought, "the literal had as much importance as the spiritual; there was no hierarchy of interpretation".<sup>42</sup> She reaches this conclusion through an earlier discussion of some Hebraic texts that their "literal sense" is as important as a transcendental meaning. My argument is that this on no account resolves *the hierarchy between the meaning and the letter*. Handelman's hypothesis could only break free from *the hierarchy of literal and figurative meaning*. While the literal meaning and the transcendental meaning are placed "horizontally," the letter and its meaning are still in a "hierarchical" relation. In other words, the distinction is not between the letter and the meaning but between two distinct categories of meaning: literal and figurative.

As I briefly pointed out above, another point which I shall discuss here is the way Handelman relates the metonymical logic to Derrida's thought. Handelman correctly contends that metaphor resides at the heart of metaphysical thinking as also argued by Heidegger.<sup>43</sup> She then maintains that this metaphysical thinking has its roots

<sup>40</sup> Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, p. 91.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

in the Greek thought that forms the basis of Christian doctrines. She believes that Judaism instead escapes this metaphysical thinking through suggesting a “metonymical” logic – a logic of “contiguity” and “displacement” instead of “substitution”. She then links this logic to Derrida’s objection about metaphysical substitution and sees the roots of Judaic thinking in Derrida’s proposition of “displacement”. Handelman is again quick to differentiate between Christian and Judaic thought. She argues that the word and the thing are separated in the Greek-rooted traditions but they are “intimately interconnected” in Hebraic thought. This distinction is what she later refers to as the distinction between metaphor and metonymy respectively.<sup>44</sup>

Handelman then argues that Derrida is trying to “rejoin” the opposition of “word-thing” that Greek thought “split,” thus giving Derrida’s thinking a rabbinic stance.<sup>45</sup> But Derrida never talks about the identity between word and thing. As I explained earlier, Derrida gives a good account of the relation between the signified and the signifier but even that relation is far from being one of unity. In order to support her contention, Handelman refers to “White Mythology”. Derrida in this text speaks of the “possibility of *restoring or reconstituting* beneath the metaphor which at once conceals and is concealed, what was originally represented”.<sup>46</sup> Handelman misses two crucial points here. First, the notion of “restoring or reconstituting” which is confused with “rejoining” and second the fact that the relation is in fact that of the signifier and the signified instead of word and thing. Here, Derrida is speaking of “restoring or reconstituting” the relation between the signifier and the signified which in no sense accounts for “rejoining,” especially that of words and things. I would argue that to restore or reconstitute the relation within a binary opposition is what Derrida means by the term ‘deconstruction’.

Confusing the opposition of *the sensible and the nonsensible* with that of *word and thing* is a prominent characteristic of Handelman’s critique throughout. For instance,

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. My emphasis. See also WM, 211.

Handelman repeatedly refers to the Christian distinction between “the letter and the spirit” and later on associates it with “word and thing” which are not in any sense similar.<sup>47</sup> I can only assume that what she means in these arguments is the relation between the word and meaning and not the word and thing. Handelman, in the end, quickly concludes that “Derrida and the deconstructionist school of critics have focused their attack on this very notion of representation”.<sup>48</sup> As I have explained so far, the relation between Derrida and representation is not a simple “attack” or “opposition”. Moreover, although I would agree with Handelman’s formulation on the notion of metonymy to a certain point, I would maintain that the identity of the metonymical thought of Judaism with that of Derrida’s is an over-simplification. Derrida’s ‘displacement’ leads to a paradoxical axis of immanence and representation while Hebraic thought eventually leads to pure immanence.

### *Deconstruction and speech / writing*

In order to examine the relation between deconstruction and representation in more detail, I now move to an important point in Derrida’s writings: the problem of speech and writing. One of the primary and famous ‘deconstructions’ of Derrida is his critique of the opposition of speech and writing. I believe that a discussion of Derrida’s position towards this opposition has strong bearings on his views on the question of representation. Indeed, one of the best places to start Derrida’s reading of language and representation is in his critique of the superiority of speech over writing in Western metaphysics. Here I have formulated the discussions of Derrida regarding the opposition between speech and writing. I would argue that this discussion can also contribute to the elaboration of the position of deconstruction regarding immediacy and immanence within language.

The whole opposition between speech and writing throughout the history of philosophy (and indeed of the human sciences) stems from two distinct ways of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

looking at language: language as always being present and *a priori*, or one made by convention, by human beings, to act as a sign for a meaning which is always considered superior.<sup>49</sup> The former view of language has usually been associated with speech while the latter is associated with writing. Language as an *a priori* experience of divine presence is an idealised pole of logocentrism which Derrida criticises and traces in such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Rousseau, Husserl, and Saussure (PO, 24). Derrida argues that these philosophers place priority on the interior essence of language that they call speech rather than the exterior one which they call writing. As Harold Coward sums up from *Of Grammatology* (OG, 11-12, 17), in Aristotle, voice has been considered as the true essence of language because it has

an immediate relationship with the mind which naturally reflects the divine logos. Between logos and mind there is a relationship of natural signification - the mind mirrors things by natural resemblance. Between mind and speech there is a relationship of conventional symbolization. Spoken language is a first conventional symbolization of the inner reflection of the logos. Written language is a second, further removed, convention.<sup>50</sup>

Socrates, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, argues that writing downgrades memory and wisdom since people rely on writing instead of their memory. Learning based on writing will teach nothing. Writing does not teach wisdom but the conceit of wisdom.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, it was believed that "the origin of language is located in speech, which symbolizes the clear mental reflection of the divine".<sup>52</sup> In the Christian tradition the same priority exists. Walter J. Ong in his *Orality and Literacy* writes: "In Christian tradition orality-literacy polarities are particularly acute. . . . In this teaching, God the Father utters or speaks His Word, his Son. He does not inscribe him." Although Ong

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<sup>49</sup> Harold Coward, "Derrida and Bhartrhari's Vakyapadiya on the Origin of Language," *Philosophy East and West*, 40:1 (January 1990), p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

later on mentions the significance of the Bible and the “written word of God,” he still maintains this established hierarchy.<sup>53</sup>

Derrida’s readings of Saussure and Rousseau demonstrate that these two thinkers also remain within a characteristically logocentric and metaphysical thinking about language which gives privilege to speech, either as the true presence of language (as in Saussure when he argues that sound is the prominent presence of language rather than the written sign), or as the original language of immediacy (as in Rousseau’s theory of the origin of language). Derrida, however, sees writing as a perfect example of what exactly happens in language. Writing becomes the emblem of the representational limits of language. Writing is a text always written in separation: it is about the absence of both the signified and the writer. Through his re-examination of the notion of writing, Derrida in effect tells us more about his position on representation. Yet, Derrida’s deconstruction of speech and writing is neither about reversing the hierarchy and granting speech a secondary status nor acknowledging representation as the essence of language. In fact, Derrida does not preserve the opposition of speech and writing as it is. Barbara Johnson thinks that Derrida “attempts to show that the very possibility of opposing the two terms on the basis of presence vs. absence or immediacy vs. representation is an illusion, since speech is *already* structured by difference and distance as much as writing is”.<sup>54</sup> I agree with Johnson that Derrida deconstructs the opposition of speech and writing. Yet, I do not think Derrida’s deconstruction is achieved through *unifying* these two notions. Speech is not the same as writing. Speech has a trace of the difference and absence of language within it, while writing narrates the separation from the immediacy of speech. They are inscribed within each other.

Susan Handelman also defends Derrida’s argument on the opposition between speech and writing:

Writing, the Holy Text, is the privileged term in Rabbinic thought; it not only precedes speech, but precedes the entire natural world. Rabbinic thought does not

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<sup>53</sup> See Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, p. 27.

<sup>54</sup> Barbara Johnson, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. ix.

move from the sensible to the ideal transcendent signified, but from the sensible to the Text. And that is Derrida's path as well, a movement from ontology to grammarology, from Being to text.<sup>55</sup>

As we note, Handelman in fact replaces the criticised hierarchy of speech over writing with a new one. Now, it is writing that is the ultimate as it is believed in Judaic thought. But does Derrida's deconstruction of the opposition of speech and writing seek to replace speech with writing on the hierarchical platform? Derrida believes that writing should be acknowledged as the 'representation' of language due to its characteristics of displacement, distance and absence, not because it is "the Holy Text". In fact, the 'text' in theological discourse is more equal to the 'book' rather than 'writing'. Derrida returns to the text as an unclosure, a disclosure, an openness which is mostly in contrast with the theological view of the book as a piece of writing which should not be changed at all. However, the theological perspective on this opposition is not that straightforward. Theology takes 'writing' or 'the book' as closed in its 'material signs' (signifiers) while the interpretation of the book remains open specifically according to the mystical readings of theology. I believe that this latter view has affinities with Derrida's viewpoint, as I will explain later in my discussion of deconstruction and signification. What Derrida is against is an end or halt in interpretation. Therefore, he acknowledges this trait in theological discourse that closure might not be the end, and he writes: "If closure is not end, we protest or deconstruct in vain".<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, p. 168.

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Ellipsis," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 294.



### ***Deconstruction and signification***

This is my starting-point: no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation. (LO, 81)

A discussion on representation is inevitably an account of interpretation and the meaning process. For, the act of representing is about the relation of the sign to the idea and the referent which creates meaning accordingly: "From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We *think only in signs*" (OG, 50). What I discussed above under the heading of representation was about the possibility of the representative role of language, i.e. the question of whether language has a representing element within it that makes it capable of acting as a sign and also the question of the possibility of word and meaning becoming close enough to make language immanent. Here I shall explain the deconstructive stance on the notion of *communicating meaning* within this representative system. To what extent can meaning get across within this reference? What is Derrida's answer to the hierarchy between the sign and meaning?

Signification is about reference. Therefore, I will venture on an account of Derrida's 'references' to referentiality. I would argue that Derrida's position regarding referentiality can be formulated and summed up by three main arguments:

*Referentiality exists and happens all the time. BUT:*

- a) It 'defers' continually in a 'play' of differences.*
- b) It does not reach an ultimate point as the last reference.*
- c) It is self-referential. It does not refer to an external source but stays within the system of reference.*

Here I will try to elaborate on these three points and support my argument based on Derrida's texts and readings of these texts:

From his earliest lecture "Structure, Sign, and Play," Derrida has always asserted that the notion of 'play' plays a significant role in deconstruction. In particular, Derrida's theory of meaning is based on 'play'. In the same paper, Derrida explains that what he

means by 'play' is "a field of infinite substitutions" (SSP, 132): "The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified" (SSP, 132). Derrida elsewhere calls the process of signification "a formal play of differences" or "traces" (PO, 26). He then adds, "[t]here are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces" (PO, 26). The notion of trace will lead us to the second point of the first thesis which suggests that meaning is always deferred.

Meaning is constantly deferred while being caught in the play of differences and does not reach a final point. Here, Derrida critiques not only the notion of closure in discourse but also the possibility of the autonomous transcendental signified. In a literary text for instance, we are only faced with false beginnings and endings while in fact the final meaning of the text is always slipping away through the hands of the reader and the writer. The text becomes the ground for the play between what the writer wants the text to say and not to say. It also becomes a texture of various readings of the reader. The most unexpected readings of a text lead it to new 'references' which, in deconstruction, is a positive move. Derrida in *Of Grammatology* writes:

the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*. (OG, 158)

This "certain relationship" keeps the 'ultimate meaning' constantly deferred. At the same time, it "produces" and introduces new meanings and revelations to the text. Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is an example of a postmodern fiction that consciously demonstrates this view. I will return to this text later in this chapter.

Rodolphe Gasché in *The Tain of the Mirror* argues that Derrida is not denying the possibility of the reference as it is claimed by many critics. What he objects to is

the existence of an ultimate referent that could halt the process of reference within a text to a final point. Derrida in *Positions* says: "we must avoid having the indispensable critique of a certain naive relationship to the signified or the referent, to sense or meaning, remain fixed in a suspension, that is, a pure and simple suppression, of meaning or reference" (PO, 66). Gasché comments on this by saying that: "In other words, the rejection of the text as a totality dependent on a unifying last reason or transcendental signified does not simply mean the suppression of the text's referentiality".<sup>57</sup> What Derrida argues instead is the impossibility of the closure of meaning within the text. He therefore acknowledges the excess of references.

Gasché argues that when Derrida states that "there is no extra-text," he could easily have added that "*there is no inside of the text*" as well.<sup>58</sup> But what does Derrida mean when he writes in *Of Grammatology* that "*there is nothing outside of the text*" (OG, 158) or in *Dissemination* when he argues that "[t]here is nothing before the text; there is no pretext that is not already a text" (DS, 328)? Gasché argues that in these arguments Derrida does not negate the existence of "everything besides the text". Instead these remarks only signify that the text "has no extratextual signified or referent, no last reason, whether empirical or intelligible, at which its referring function could come to a final halt". He adds:

It also means that the generalized text does not refer to something outside the system of referentiality that could do without being referred to, but that its referentiality is such that it extends abysmally out of sight without, however, entailing the text's self-reflexivity. The absence of all extra-text, about which one could decide independently of the textual system of referral, implies that there is no one final meaning to the text.<sup>59</sup>

The Prague structuralists originally distinguished between the literary discourse and ordinary language, as Habermas reminds us. Structuralists argue that the

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<sup>57</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 280.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 281-2.

communicative characteristics of language in ordinary language produce "relations between linguistic expression and speaker, hearer, and the state of affairs represented".<sup>60</sup> In other words, it points to an external referent. However, in the poetic function of language, there is a "reflexive relation of the linguistic expression to itself". Habermas concludes that "[c]onsequently, reference to an object, informational content, and truth-value - conditions of validity in general - are extrinsic to poetic speech; an utterance can be poetic to the extent that it is directed to the linguistic medium itself, to its own linguistic form".<sup>61</sup> But Derrida argues that he sees the same function of self-referentiality in all discourse and not just the literary one. The text is self-referential not because of its "semantic wealth" but because of "structural reasons".<sup>62</sup> Derrida believes that the language of the other discourses is always contaminated with the rules of referentiality as I formulated above. As a result, for Derrida, interpretation, rather than being external to the text, is its extension.<sup>63</sup>

Another term that can clarify Derrida's position towards signification is *communication*. According to Derrida, communication is possible when we assume a distinctive character within the sign in which the signified and the signifier are distinctly separate. Derrida strongly doubts this distinction and externality. He contends that communication in effect implies

*a transmission charged with making pass, from one subject to another, the identity of a signified object, of a meaning or of a concept rightfully separable from the process of passage and from the signifying operation. Communication presupposes subjects (whose identity and presence are constituted before the signifying operation) and objects (signified concepts, a thought meaning that the passage of communication will have neither to constitute, nor, by all rights, to transform). A communicates B to C. Through the sign the emitter communicates something to a receptor, etc.* (PO, 23-24)

<sup>60</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>62</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, pp. 281-2.

<sup>63</sup> Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, p. 39.

As we see, Derrida is sceptical towards the mechanics of communication. He explains how in Western metaphysics, the relation between sign and meaning, or between the signifier and the signified is that of “*exteriority*”. By this, he means that the former becomes “the exteriorization or the expression” of the latter (PO, 32). In other words, language becomes *mere expression*. Derrida is critical of this and argues that the sign should not be placed in a secondary position. However, when Kristeva asks him if this “expressivity” can be “surpassed” and “[t]o what extent would nonexpressivity signify?” (PO, 32), Derrida responds in what he calls an “apparently contradictory way” i.e. through his paradoxical logic. Derrida believes that, *on the one hand*, “expressivism is never simply surpassable”. He argues that the “representation of language as ‘expression’ is not an accidental prejudice.” It is rather an illusion of a “structural lure” that Western metaphysics contributes powerfully in systematising it (PO, 33). Metaphysical thinking is in need of the assumption that expression works within the limits of representation. Yet, *on the other hand*, he argues that the differential texture of the text, or *différance* in general, makes this expressivity “always already” surpassable,

whether one wishes it or not, whether one knows it or not. In the extent to which what is called “meaning” (to be “expressed”) is already, and thoroughly, constituted by a tissue of differences, in the extent to which there is already a *text*, a network of textual referrals to *other* texts, a textual transformation in which each allegedly “simple term” is marked by the trace of another term, the presumed interiority of meaning is already worked upon by its own exteriority. It is always already carried outside itself. It already differs (from itself) before any act of expression. (PO, 33)

In other words, *différance* eventually becomes the force of the text to relate it to the outside, to the other texts. Therefore, expression is already surpassed because of the vulnerability of the text to the outside forces. This is the state of “non-expressivity”. And to Derrida, this is when texts *really* signify: “Only nonexpressivity can signify, because in all rigor there is no signification unless there is synthesis, syntagm, *différance*, and text” (PO, 33). In other words, the text stands in the gap between inside

and outside. This is the negative side of deconstruction that relates the notion of referentiality to negation. I will return to this in the next part and confine myself to citing Derrida's conclusion to this point in his interview with Kristeva: "Grammatology, as the science of textuality, then would be a nonexpressive semiology only on the condition of transforming the concept of sign and of uprooting it from its congenital expressivism" (PO, 34).

### *The process of signification in The Crying of Lot 49*

In the final section of this part, I will examine the paradox of representation in literary discourse. The story of *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon weaves a catalogue of signifiers that are supposed to lead us to the ultimate signified: "Lot 49". Yet, we are left destitute in a labyrinth of signs anxious to hear the "crying". This revelation is constantly deferred and we are finally left only on the verge of this revelation. The story is about the absence of the ultimate signified yet simultaneously it promises ultimate disclosure. My contention is that this disclosure happens within the text and after the text ends. In other words, the representative scene of the text becomes an impossible ground in which the possibility of meaning emerges. One can also argue that the ultimate signified never happens. The text is a nostalgic lamentation of the immanent state of language and the point where one needs to decipher signs constantly. These are the main points that I think should be discussed in a reading of *The Crying of Lot 49* which is also a deconstruction of the immediacy and representationality of language.

Oedipa, the central character in *The Crying of Lot 49*, one day finds out that she has become the executor of the late Pierce Inverarity's will. When she embarks on a quest to see the estate of Pierce Inverarity and his will, she also becomes aware of an enigmatic organisation called the Tristero that operates through an alternative communication system. Gradually, one suspects that Oedipa has become the object of an experiment in which she has to encounter infinite signs without any meanings. The

text is, in fact, a texture of present signs along with a disorienting absence of meanings. Messages and signs appear in the most unexpected places: on the walls of a toilet, on TV, through neon lights, the telephone, tattoos and so on. Yet, these signs do not necessarily point the reader or Oedipa to any understanding or revelation. Although the novel tells us about Oedipa's exposure to many brief revelations during her quest, these revelations – signifieds – are in themselves signs for further meanings which never arrive. The novel ends with Oedipa waiting to hear the crying of "Lot 49" which will, we can suppose, unveil the whole secret of the Pierce Inverarity's will and the Tristero. The 'crying' is never put into words on the page. We are left at the brink of the ultimate revelation.

Based on my formulation of the signification process in deconstruction, I would suggest that the process of meaning in literary discourse is similar to the structure of the labyrinth. I shall demonstrate that the narrative structure of *The Crying of Lot 49* is based on a labyrinthine system. The labyrinth is a place in which one is enclosed in a representative system of signs. It is made from signs – aisles – which lead the reader continually to the centre or the edges. The way the labyrinthine space of the city San Narciso is described is quite revealing. When Oedipa drives into the city, it reminds her "of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had".<sup>64</sup> This structure not only defines the space of the story, it also becomes a metaphor for the way both Oedipa and the narrative structure move and evolve.

As Oedipa's search continues, the centre, which here represents the meaning of the Tristero, is continuously multiplying: "The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was".<sup>65</sup> In this way, the spatial metaphor of labyrinth becomes a paradox of truth or lie. The text becomes a place of inside and outside. This again

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 14.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

reminds us of the structure of the labyrinth and its double bind: we must escape from the maze starting from the core towards one of the entrances (indicating wandering or freedom), *or* we must move into a labyrinth in search of the core (connoting an enclosing and totalising approach to find the truth, origin, and so on). Therefore, as Hillis Miller argues, the labyrinth "is at once an enclosure and a place of endless wandering." It is "a desert turned inside out".<sup>66</sup> In a short story entitled "Entropy," Thomas Pynchon has effectively illustrated this paradox of closure and dis-closure by juxtaposing "the sterility of an ordered closed system with the chaotic vitality of an open system".<sup>67</sup>

My main contention, here, is that *The Crying of Lot 49* becomes a description of the metaphysical system of representation according to Derrida. This system constantly reminds us that there is no escape from its enclosure yet the main tools of the system, signs themselves, wander in the text making it more and more vulnerable. Signs point to the outside eventually. The labyrinthine narrative structure demonstrates the impossibility of escape from representation yet each sign or aisle in the labyrinth points to and promises revelation, an escape from the metaphysics of representation towards revelation. In fact, one is not sure of the place of revelation within the text. In John Schad's words, "Is it possible, then, that the Tristero exists not so much *beyond* the urban web of hints, clues and muted post horns but *among* them"?<sup>68</sup> The narrator of the novel reminds us constantly of this possibility: "she might have found the Tristero anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if only she'd looked."<sup>69</sup> The structure of the labyrinthine San Narciso in the novel, which is a space full of signs, thus becomes impregnated with infinite possibilities or, more specifically, with bursts of meanings:

<sup>66</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 403

<sup>67</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, " 'A Metaphor of God Knew How Many Parts': The Engine that Drives *The Crying of Lot 49*," in Patrick O'Donnell, ed., *New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 112.

<sup>68</sup> John Schad, "Why wait for an angel? Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*," in David Barratt, Roger Pooley, Leland Ryken, eds., *The Discerning Reader: Christian Perspectives on Literature and Theory* (Leicester: APOLLOS, 1995), p. 256.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 124.



"Like many named places in California it [San Narciso] was less an identifiable city than a group of concepts - census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway".<sup>70</sup> This could well be a description of the literary text. John Barth in his famous essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," writes about this exhaustion of possibilities in a labyrinthine structure regarding Borges's 'labyrinths':

A labyrinth, after all, is a place in which, ideally, all the possibilities of choice (of direction, in this case) are embodied, and - barring special dispensation like Theseus's - must be exhausted before one reaches the heart. Where, mind, the Minotaur waits with two final possibilities: defeat and death, or victory and freedom.<sup>71</sup>

In other words, a labyrinth is an emblem of the 'exhaustion' of signs yet these signs always defer meanings. In other words, the *fulfilment* of these meanings is constantly deferred. The referentiality of meaning is always deferred and differed (*différance*) yet it also stays within the structure. The variety of paths in a labyrinth justifies the simultaneous possibility of being lost or saved. The meaning is, therefore, endlessly deferred and promised in the shape of a revelation. The meaning is also arbitrary since the choice of the good route or the bad route is not that straightforward. A route which can take you to the centre can also take you away from it if combined with another route. The constant deferring of meaning points to this view that revelation (final meaning, immediacy, or immanence) is always close at hand but never fulfilled. This can be seen in the metaphor of the urban landscape as a printed circuit. From the very first pages, the reader is faced with the existence of a revelation never fulfilled:

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," in Malcolm Bradbury, ed., *The Novel Today* (London: Fontana Press, 1990), p. 84. It should be noted that Barth's main argument in this essay is the capability of a fiction writer like Borges who "confronted with Baroque reality, Baroque history, the Baroque state of art, need *not* rehearse its [labyrinth] possibilities to exhaustion. . . . He need only be aware of their existence or possibility, acknowledge them and. . . go straight through the maze to the accomplishment of his work" (John Barth, 84-85).

Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. Smog hung all round the horizon, the sun on the bright beige countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken.<sup>72</sup>

This structure of labyrinth as a constant 'promise' of 'revelation' which is never fulfilled is closely related to the possibility of meaning in deconstruction. Derrida questions the straightforward way of the referential process or rather the signification process of language:

I try to *write* (in) the space in which is posed the question of speech and meaning. I try to write the question: (what is) meaning to say? Therefore it is necessary in such a space, and guided by such a question, that writing literally mean [sic] nothing. Not that it is absurd in the way that absurdity has always been in solidarity with metaphysical meaning. It simply tempts itself, tenders itself, attempts to keep itself at the point of the exhaustion of meaning. To risk meaning nothing is to start to play, and first to enter into the play of *différance* which prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a center the movement and textual spacing of differences. (PO, 14)

Derrida grants a significant place to the notion of absence in the process of signification. He argues that signs always present themselves in place of absent concepts. If concepts had always been present, we would have no need of signs at all. The play of absence and separation in writing leads Derrida to a more generalised view in which the force of absence and separation is within language at all levels. Deconstruction has been attacked on this point. James Breslin argues that,

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<sup>72</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, pp. 14-15.

deconstructionists are mesmerized by a "prison-house" they themselves have built - and whose walls they have decorated with beautiful tapestries to make incarceration a pleasurable aesthetic experience. As a metaphor for the language of art, the well-wrought urn has been displaced by *the infinite labyrinth - an opening that only leaves us more firmly enclosed*.<sup>73</sup>

Geoffrey Hartman seems to respond to this point when he explains how the experience of the text as a labyrinth can be liberating: "writing is a labyrinth, a topological puzzle and textual crossword; the reader, for his part, must lose himself for a while in a hermeneutic 'infinetizing' that makes all rules of closure appear arbitrary".<sup>74</sup> However, I would argue that the merit of deconstruction lies in its paradoxical attitude towards the centre and the entranceways of the labyrinth. Deconstruction sees a middleground between representation and immediacy. It does not simply negate the representational system of language nor does it see unmediated relation between the words and meanings. It argues that while words are imprisoned in the metaphysical state of language, they exhaust the text's meanings and references subversively. In other words, the signs within the text take the reference simultaneously towards the margin and the centre. The reader can start a quest to reach the "enigmatic centre" of the discourse *or* be more interested in "the many entrances leading into the interior," as Benjamin maintains in "A Berlin Chronicle".<sup>75</sup>

In "Edmund Jabès and the Question of the Book," Derrida writes that absence is "the letter's ether and respiration". Absence, for Derrida, becomes the very possibility of meaning: "The letter is the separation and limit in which meaning is liberated from its imprisonment in aphoristic solitude" (EJ, 71). Derrida believes that to ignore absence or to attempt to bridge the gaps of absence is only self-deception:

<sup>73</sup> James E. B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry 1945-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 260. My emphasis.

<sup>74</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 85.

<sup>75</sup> Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," trans. Edmund Jephcott, and Kingsley Shorter, in *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 319.

There is an essential *lapse* between significations which is not the simple and positive fraudulence of a word, nor even the nocturnal memory of all language. To allege that one reduces this lapse through narration, philosophical discourse, or the order of reasons or deduction, is to misconstrue language, to misconstrue that language is the *rupture* with totality itself. The fragment is neither a determined style nor a failure, but the form of that which is written. . . . The caesura does not simply finish and fix meaning. . . . the caesura makes meaning emerge. . . . without interruption - between letters, words, sentences, books - no signification could be awakened. . . . Death strolls between letters. To write, what is called writing, assumes an access to the mind through having the courage to lose one's life, to die away from nature. (EJ, 71)

For Derrida, writing is another signature that testifies to the absence of the 'marker'. It is a postcard that becomes the circulated sign of the absence of the addressee. As signature, it can be repeated, re-read and reinterpreted endlessly. Deconstruction sees this as the merit of writing. Writing as an example of representation becomes the final ground upon which language manifests its incompleteness, its absence. In other words, it is language that reminds us always of the absence of immanence. For Derrida, this is important because it shows the extent to which language speaks of this separation in writing. Writing is marked by absence throughout: absence of the author (when read), absence of the reader (when written), absence of the signified (the very reason that writing comes to life). Yet it also positively points us towards all these outside forces as well.

If we go back to the metaphor of labyrinth, we can see that the constant deferral ultimately makes the labyrinth a space of absence and separation. Paradoxically, when Oedipa steps into this overwhelmingly confusing space, she feels herself increasingly enclosed in a space in which nothing makes sense at all: it becomes the place of absence. The centre of this labyrinth is always escaping one's grasp:

Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its

own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back.<sup>76</sup>

This, I would argue, is the story of all literary discourse. The lamentational tone of writing is about the long-lasting love story between literature and the immanent pure language. Writing in this sense, then, becomes not only the *emblem* for separation but also the *story* of this separation as well. According to de Man, the poetic text is linked to the sacred text with a "negative knowledge". De Man argues that poetic language "does not depend on" sacred language. Poetry for de Man is a nostalgic voice for an origin that ontologically never existed. Poetry is born out of the fundamental separation of sacred and human language: "It is within this negative knowledge of its relation to the language of the sacred that poetic language initiates. It is, if you want, a necessary nihilistic moment that is necessary in any understanding of history".<sup>77</sup> I think Derrida argues differently regarding the relation between the sacred text and the poetic text. Derrida sees writing and especially literary writing as a text that tells us about this separation yet he generalises this point and believes that any effort towards *immediacy* or *singularity* is a *sacralising* effort (EO, 147-151). In "Edmund Jabès and the Question of the Book," he writes about this nostalgic view of literary writing:

God no longer speaks to us; he has interrupted himself: we must take words upon ourselves. We must be separated from life and communities, and must entrust ourselves to traces . . . because we have ceased hearing the voice from within the immediate proximity of the garden. (EJ, 68)

In the same essay, he reads to us an excerpt from Jabès which compares speech with garden and writing with desert. Writing is the moment of separation from the immanent language yet it is the only thing we have. It is also the place of the presence of signs and absence of meanings. These signs offer us revelations and surprise us

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 66.

<sup>77</sup> Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'," p. 92.

everyday. Literary language is an emblem of this effort: "*The garden is speech, the desert writing. In each grain of sand a sign surprises*" (EJ, 68).

In this part of the thesis I have attempted to formulate Derrida's points regarding representation, signs, and meaning into an argument. I was aware that these points are always positioned within the paradoxical logic of deconstruction. Therefore I explained how representation as the metaphysical quality of language cannot be escaped. But I also argued that deconstruction sees an alternative force already at work within the text. Deconstruction is witness to the subversiveness of signs. It narrates the way the metaphysics of language can be taken to its limits through significations and revelations. Deconstruction argues that the text is inscribed with meanings. In this sense, deconstruction is the most positive understanding of reference. References function within the text all the time and create meanings. What we need to note is that these meanings are in constant interaction in which the whole representative system of signs is placed under a question mark. This part also gave a close reading of the way Walter Benjamin problematises the representative system of language through his notions of mental and linguistic being. I also examined Saussure's theory to show how it also distances itself from a mere distinction between signs and meanings in which they can have a representational one-to-one relationship. My contention was that these two predecessors to Derrida have equipped Derrida's theory for such paradoxes. Derrida always sees the promise of immediacy and revelation at the threshold - a promise never fulfilled.

## Part III

# The Paradox of Apophatic Discourse

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### Chapter Six. Apophasis in Theological Discourse

*Benjamin's notion of negation and nonexpression*

*Paradox of negation in theological discourse*

*The aporias of transcendence*

*God as 'referent'*

*Transcendental experience*

*The affirmative force of language in theological discourse*

### Chapter Seven. Derrida and Apophatic Discourse

*Derrida's critique of negative theology*

*Derridean paradoxes of negation*

*'The impossible'*

*Deconstruction and theology as 'promise'*

*Negative theology as (a discourse on) 'language'*

### Chapter Eight. Apophasis in Literary Discourse

*The Unnamable: The story of that impossible place named silence*

*Aporias and paradoxes of the Unnamable*

*Self and language as counterparts*

*The impossible space named silence*

*Conclusion*

Here the discourse comes up against its limit: in itself, in its performative power itself. It is what I here propose to call the mystical. Here a silence is walled up in the violent structure of the founding act. Walled up, walled in because silence is not exterior to language. (FL, 13-14)

In Chapter Five, I argued briefly that deconstruction and grammatology can also be regarded as the negation of expression in a particular sense. I explained in detail that the notion of expression is questioned in deconstruction since Derrida problematises the relation between the signifier and the signified. In short, Derrida sees non-expression or non-communication as a 'reality' within the linguistic process due to the effect of *différance*. This argument brings with it a whole new discussion on the notion of negation. Examining the relation between deconstruction and negation is extremely important because many aspects of deconstruction eventually lead to Derrida's treatment of the notion of negation. In fact, the notion of negation is so prevalent in Derrida's writings that the most repeated objection towards his philosophy has been the assumption that his thought is nihilistic. I want to challenge this assumption in this part.

My objective here is to give a clearer picture of the relation between deconstruction and negation. I believe this can be achieved in the context of a discussion of the relation between Derrida and negative theology. It is important that we examine this relation because Derrida has written extensively on negative theology throughout his career. An investigation of the notion of negation within negative theology will provide us with a helpful context within which to situate the relation



between Derrida and negation. As a result, I start this part with Chapter Six on negative theology in which I examine the notion of negation or apophasis as a device used in theological discourse. This chapter will give an outline of the major arguments on the relation between mysticism and language. In Chapter Seven I first unfold the relation between Derrida and negative theology and then explain the relation between deconstruction and negation in general and apophatic discourse in particular. It is interesting to note that the notion of negation is again one of the most debated issues in the comparative studies of deconstruction and theology. In fact, this part is an attempt to conclude my comparative study of theology and deconstruction developed throughout this work through a direct examination of them. In Chapter Seven, I will argue that deconstruction uses the logic of apophatic discourse in theology, yet regardless of their similar way of questioning or 'deconstructing' language, the two discourses of deconstruction and negative theology remain separate in terms of the issues that they deconstruct. While negative theology is interested in assessing the limits of its language in relation to the name of God and transcendental experiences, deconstruction is engaged more in reflecting on the limits of language in philosophical and literary discourse. My conclusion to this part lies in Chapter Eight in which I will focus on literary discourse in the light of the theoretical points from the two preceding chapters. I would argue that Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* not only deals with the same theoretical questions but also practises them in literary discourse.

Part III is also intended to forge links with the previous parts. My ultimate aim is to introduce and discuss a third paradox in literary discourse. I first explain how in both theological discourse and deconstruction a paradox exists. The paradox concerns the way language is negated in these two realms and the way its negation results in the further affirmation and acceptance of language. In fact, my discussion is a deconstruction of the binary opposition of negation and affirmation in which, in a hierarchical structure, the absence of one equals the presence of the other. I will present an interrelationship between negation and affirmation which demonstrates the presumption that they depend on each other in many respects. This is the general

theme yet we see different facets of this hypothesis in the following discussions on 'the name of God,' 'the impossible,' the notion of 'promise,' and 'silence'.

Another link between this part and the previous parts of the thesis lies in my central motif: the notion of the name. Again I return to this emblematic face of language. My deconstruction of the name has so far emphasised the way in which the name is unique and single while caught in the paradox of being repeated, translated or countersigned (Part I). Then the name was considered as being meaningless and immanent while caught in the paradox of being represented (Part II). This part deals with the argument that the name is ineffable and impossible (unnamable). Name is, in fact, the negation of language or, as Derrida calls it, "the outcast of language," yet literary discourse becomes an attempt to inscribe the impossible name of 'silence' into its discourse.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Apophasis in Theological Discourse*

language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable. (OL, 123)

In the first chapter in this part, I attempt to provide a context for my later contentions. First, I reinvoked Benjamin's argument that negation of language, or "speechlessness" as he calls it, is in fact at the heart of 'pure language'. Benjamin is nostalgic for the primal 'inability' of language to represent and, as I discussed earlier, he sees the name as the "true call of language" that communicates nothing except itself. The name as the negative or the impossible side of language in Benjamin's thought will become a basis for the arguments in Part III.

Later, I will give an outline of the apophatic (negative) discourse of negative theology. I will argue that apophatic discourse is caught in a paradox. On the one hand, it negates any possibility of expressing the transcendent. On the other hand, it remains essentially within the confines of its language. I will explain that the main objects of apophatic discourse are the two notions of 'God's name' and 'transcendental experience'. Negative theology, through examining these two notions, simultaneously assesses its language and its ability to express them. One can conclude that apophatic discourse is primarily about the limitations of language as a tool to describe divine subjects. Although the primary objective of deconstruction is not divine subjects, I will argue in the next chapter that the logic and language of deconstruction remains essentially similar to the apophatic discourse of negative theology.

### ***Benjamin's notion of negation and nonexpression***

Before initiating the discussion on theological discourse and apophasis, I would like to invoke Walter Benjamin once again. Benjamin is aware of the power of negation within language in his writings. In "On Language as Such," he writes: "Within all linguistic formation a conflict is waged between what is expressed and expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed" (OL, 113). I would suggest that Benjamin's postulate regarding the non-representational or immanent language, as discussed in Part II, is closely linked to two important points in this part of the study.

First, Benjamin believes that immanent language is a manifestation of the "muteness of nature" (OL, 121) in the shape of its "unspoken language" (OL, 123). This "muteness" is not only an emblem of Benjamin's critique of the representative faculties of language but it also points towards the direction of 'pure language'. As I discussed in Chapter One, Benjamin sees the first stage of the human fall in the acquisition of a language different from God and the power of naming. For Benjamin, this is the first fall of humanity. Therefore, the 'mute' and non-expressive language of nature and 'things' becomes an emblem of that long lost language of God. For Benjamin, negation is not an absence of language but a strong force within the language system.

Benjamin asserts that "speechlessness" is "the great sorrow of nature" (OL, 121). This "speechlessness" goes back to the way things were only named by God at the beginning: "Things have no proper names except in God. For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names" (OL, 122). Although Benjamin calls this "muteness" "the great sorrow of nature," this eventually takes a more positive position in comparison to human language. Speechlessness for Benjamin points to the immanent pure language of paradise. Benjamin contends that in human language, things are "over-named" (OL, 122) and as Howard Caygill argues "[h]uman language 'overnames' by reducing the expression of other languages into its own terms,

silencing them and refusing to open itself to transformation”.<sup>1</sup> In other words, human language, instead of adopting or incorporating the speechlessness of nature, turns this “material language” into its own which, in turn, causes “mourning” and “lament” on the part of nature.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the negative force of language is ironically rooted in the expressive faculty of human language or its “over-naming as the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) of all deliberate muteness” (OL, 122). This “overprecision” is the result of “the tragic relationship between the languages of human speakers” (OL, 122). Hence, this silence only points to the non-use of language as a tool and does not signify negation in its usual sense:

the ‘denied’ of language, the ‘sphere of speechlessness’ is within language; it is not the ‘ineffable’ outside of language since it is precisely this sense of external transcendence that is to be ‘eliminated’. . . . Language is a complex totality which conveys at once meaning and the limits of meaning, the sayable and unsayable. The latter remains in complex ways within language, even though it cannot be spoken.<sup>3</sup>

As I explained in Part II, Benjamin not only does not see immanent language as an outside of language but also hails it as the original language. Likewise, the negative force of language is a force within the system of language.

In a letter to Martin Buber (July 1916, the same year as he wrote “On Language as Such”), Benjamin writes about his reservations that language be used as an

<sup>1</sup> Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Although, Benjamin, as far as I have read, has not written much about the way human language could have incorporated this ‘muteness’ of nature, I suggest that he has given many references to the literary and sacred language as great attempts in this respect. As I have argued above, Benjamin sees ‘mourning’ as an exemplary theme of the language of nature and he relates this to the mourning play (*Trauerspiel*). For instance, when comparing the mourning play with tragedy in “*Trauerspiel and Tragedy*,” he argues that the mourning play “is enobled by the distance which separates image and mirror-image, the signifier and the signified” (Walter Benjamin, “*Trauerspiel and Tragedy*,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 57) which has clear theological overtones (See also OGTD, particularly pp. 118-120). In his letter to Gerhard Scholem (1918), Benjamin asks this question: “How can language as such fulfil itself in mourning and how can it be the expression of mourning” (CWB, 120)? He then goes on to argue that “lament” is inferior to tragedy in German literature while being the opposite way in Hebrew literature.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, p. 14.

instrument in the hands of 'action'. Although what Benjamin communicates to Buber is his dissatisfaction about writing for Buber's highly political magazine *Der Jude*, Benjamin also translates some of his philosophical and theological thoughts on language into this context. In the letter, Benjamin explains how he believes in a "magical" or "un-mediated" writing: "I can understand writing as such as poetic, prophetic, objective in terms of its effect, but in any case only as *magical*, that is as *un-mediated*" (CWB, 80). To Benjamin, it is degrading and ineffective for language to transmit content. Language is effective "through the purest disclosure of its dignity and its nature" (CWB, 80). Benjamin then talks about ineffability as the purest form of language in which the word and the deed unite in a revelatory manner; this is the meaning of 'magical' for Benjamin:

My concept of objective and, at the same time, highly political style and writing is this: to awaken interest in what was denied to the word; only where this sphere of speechlessness reveals itself in unutterably pure power can the magic spark leap between the word and the motivating deed, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides. Only the intensive aiming of words into the core of intrinsic silence is truly effective. (CWB, 80)

As we see, there is a link between negation and revelation in Benjamin's thought. Benjamin does not see revelation as a negative force. Revelation is, in fact, the result of "the equation of mental and linguistic being". This "highest mental region of religion is (in the concept of revelation) . . . the only one that does not know the inexpressible" because "it is addressed in name and expresses itself as revelation" (OL, 113). For Benjamin, the unsayable is an integral (and 'magical') part of language which truly reflects pure language and is more effective and in line with action than representative language.

### ***Paradox of negation in theological discourse***

To impute a discourse common to God and to his creatures would be to destroy divine transcendence; on the other hand, assuming total incommunicability of meanings from one level to the other would condemn one to utter agnosticism.<sup>4</sup>

Mysticism and negative theology are closely connected to the notion of apophasis and ineffability in various ways.<sup>5</sup> First and foremost, mysticism is etymologically interrelated with the idea of negation, silence and ineffability. Ewert Cousins elaborates on this relation:

The very term "mysticism," in its etymological meaning, suggests the limits of language, derived as it is from the Indo-European root *mu* (imitative of inarticulate sounds). From this root are derived the Latin *mutus* (mute, dumb, silent) and the Greek verb *myein* (to close the eyes or lips), from which come the nouns *mysterion* (mystery) and *mystes* (one initiated into the mysteries) as well as the adjective/substantive *mystikos* (mystical, mystic). These terms have their cultural context in ancient Greece in what have been called the mystery religions.<sup>6</sup>

The background of apophasis in mysticism goes back to a specific period. Michael Sells, in his *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, traces the existence of apophatic discourse in mystical traditions to a 150-year period - from the middle of the twelfth century to the beginning of the fourteenth century. It is at this period that apophatic theology flourished simultaneously in the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian traditions.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 273.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term 'mysticism' in the sense of a non-metaphysical tradition in theology. I borrowed the division between "affirmative theology" as a metaphysical endeavour to express the divine and the "negative (mystical) theology" that "denies all that is and all references to beings and . . . all metaphysics" (Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, p. 200) from John Jones's commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius. Jones sees "two independent movements of negative theology, one metaphysical and the other mystical" (Toby Foshay, "Introduction: Denegation and Resentment," in Harold Coward, and Toby Foshay, eds., *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 11). Therefore, it is important to explain the way metaphysics is related to theology whenever we discuss mysticism or (negative) theology. Later in this part, I will examine the notion and role of metaphysics in theology and will argue that metaphysics should be at the heart of our study when we want to see the relation between Derrida and theology.

<sup>6</sup> Ewert H. Cousins, "Bonaventure's Mysticism of Language," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 236.

Some of the prominent figures would include "Ibn Arabi (d. 1240), Rumi (d. 1273), Abraham Abulafia (d. ca. 1291), Moses de Leon (d. 1305), the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Beguine mystics culminating with Hadewijch (fl. 1240) and Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), and Meister Eckhart (d. ca. 1327)".<sup>7</sup> Sells also points to the fact that apophasis is not exclusive to the scriptural religions. It can be seen especially in Far Eastern traditions in various mystical texts in which the logic of paradox is prevalent,

such as the Taoist *Tao Te Ching*, which begins with the statement "The *tao* that can be spoken is not the *tao*." It could include the Mahayana Buddhist *Vimalakirti Sutra* which asserts that "all constructs are empty," and then playfully turns that statement back upon itself with the assertions that "the construct that all constructs are empty is empty," and "the construct that the construct that all constructs are empty is empty is empty." It could also include more recent writings that engage explicitly the dilemma of saying the unsayable.<sup>8</sup>

Ineffability has had evident manifestation in the practical lives of many mystics, such as in their fasting through silence, meditation, and so on. It is also manifested in the discourses of the tradition. However, within theological discourse, ineffability is manifested and treated in different ways. My focus in this chapter, though, will be on the theoretical background of apophasis, the mechanics of unsayability in theological discourse in the shape of the paradox of negation.<sup>9</sup>

Generally speaking, mysticism insists on inventing "a new system of thinking to fit the [mystical] experience".<sup>10</sup> Bimal Krishnal Matilal in, "Mysticism and Ineffability: Some Issues of Logic and Language," maps out three distinct ways in which the language of mystical experience is expressed: metaphoric, paradoxical, and negative.

<sup>7</sup> Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> As an example on the importance of apophatic discourse in mysticism or negative theology, I would mention Dionysius's distinguishing of 'kataphasis' (saying) and 'apophasis' (unsaying) as the twin elements in 'mystical theology' (a term coined by Dionysius). He takes the apophatic element as the 'higher' or more accurate (Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, p. 5).

<sup>10</sup> Charles Morris, "Comments on Mysticism and Its Language," p. 306.



Metaphor is one of the basic tools in which the transcendental experience has been put into words through the ages. Metaphor is a metaphysical tool used in both theological and literary discourse. A huge corpus of commentary is written on this figure of speech in both of these disciplines. I will suffice, therefore, to give a brief outline of the significance of metaphor to apophatic discourse. Graham Ward in *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* writes:

Metaphors have the ability to speak of that which is unknown or ineffable. Metaphorical thinking is the way we all think - by making comparisons between the known and the unknown. Effective comparisons in metaphorical statements shock or surprise - that is, they have an emotional effect upon readers.<sup>11</sup>

Derrida sees metaphor as a metaphysical tool that distinguishes sharply the realms of the figurative and the literal. He then argues that, as a result, a representationalist view of language should consider all the words as metaphors as they are supposed to be the literal representation of some figurative meanings and concepts. However, the reason why metaphor has been used extensively in apophatic discourse lies in its power of evasion. Through metaphors the mystic could get close enough to the subject matter of transcendental concepts. To compare metaphysical concepts to literal and tangible things in life has been an easy way for the mystic to put a mirror up to these ineffable experiences. However, the use of metaphor has been criticised in apophatic discourse as, first of all, it confirms that language can eventually speak the ineffable subjects and secondly because it suggests that the transcendental experiences or concepts could have a counterpart in the material world and can be described within language. This is contrary to what negative theology argues in the first place: that language is not able to describe or name such concepts.

In order to examine the other two modes of language - negation and paradox - I would suggest they can best be examined if joined. I think it is a reductionist approach to distinguish 'paradox' from 'negation'. Instead, we need to examine the

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<sup>11</sup> Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), pp. 18-19.

question of 'the paradox of negation,' or rather, 'the paradoxical character of the language of negation.' Charles Morris in "Comments on Mysticism and Its Language" points to the frustration that the mystics feel when language resorts to negations without paradox:

Finally the mystic resorts to negations: that which he is trying to talk about is said to be nameless, to be neither temporal nor non-temporal, neither conscious nor non-conscious, neither this nor that. But since the primary experience was intensely positive, such negations are unsatisfactory symbols. And so the mystic in the end confesses the inadequacies of his secondary language, and returns to his primary signs and experience.<sup>12</sup>

And that is why the paradoxical logic of negation has helped the mystic to convey more than merely negative postulates: "We can thus once again *show* what is ineffable by means of what is effable in the language game that we play".<sup>13</sup> Negation should be examined in a paradoxical mode because it is inter-related with affirmation. We simply do not have a negative discourse in the literal sense. As soon as we want to 'represent' negation in the context of discourse, the paradox becomes prevalent. Negativity is expressed within the possibility of expression itself. Yet since the contradiction between negation and affirmation still exists, all the remarks about negativity become inherently contradictory. This makes the discourse paradoxical. Mystical discourse makes a statement while its subsequent negations shatter our ideological inclinations and consequently the singularity of interpretation of the statement. Negative theology, in short, challenges the predominant logic of binary oppositions. Therefore, I presume that the paradox of negation has been the main method in which theological discourse has come close to the notion of transcendence. This paradox has acted as a relief from the frustration and the inability to convey the mystical experience.

The definition of 'apophasis' in the *OED* shows a paradoxical significance. 'Apophasis' means "denial" in the sense of "a kind of irony, whereby we deny that we

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Morris, "Comments on Mysticism and Its Language," p. 310.

<sup>13</sup> Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Mysticism and Ineffability: Some Issues of Logic and Language," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 155-56.

say or doe that which we especially say or doe".<sup>14</sup> Therefore, apophysis becomes a kind of negation that exists within affirmation. Hence, it clearly reflects the thesis of the paradox of negation.<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that the meaning of 'apophysis' in Jainism becomes close to the concept of 'paradox':

... there is a well-entrenched philosophical tradition in Jainism where the word *avaktavya* (ineffable, inexpressible) is systematically interpreted as the *simultaneous* application of the contradictory truth-predicates to a metaphysical proposition - saying "yes" and "no," or "it is" and "it is not," at the same time in the same breath in the same sense. (Thus Vidyānanda explains it as "the *joint* and *simultaneous* affirmation and denial" and distinguishes it from "both affirmation and denial.") The idea is that we may affirm a proposition from one point of view or in one sense and deny it from another point of view or in another sense.<sup>16</sup>

The paradox can take different logics. It can be a simultaneous affirmation and denial as we see above, or a double negative. In the Upanishadic discourse, the truth or Brahman is finally determined as "not this" and "not that" that tends to collapse the dualities and dualist points of view towards a unity.<sup>17</sup> Double affirmations (stating the absolute is both this and that) also result in the same conclusion.

Michel de Certeau points to this paradoxical and enigmatic state of mysticism in his *Heterologies* when he writes: "Mysticism . . . can only be dealt with from a distance. . . . Its discourse is produced on another scene. It is no more possible to conceptualize it than it is to dispense with it".<sup>18</sup> The way mysticism relates itself to both negation and affirmation is the next thing de Certeau identifies:

With the mystics, a wish for loss is directed both toward the religious language in which the trace of their walk is imprinted and the course of their itinerary itself.

<sup>14</sup> Sanford Budick, and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 73. I will return to this in Chapter Seven when I relate this paradoxical statement to Derrida's '*dénégations*' meaning 'denial' in the same sense.

<sup>15</sup> Rumi writes: "Silence is the ocean out of which the stream 'speech' is derived" (Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (London: Fine Books, 1978), p. 46).

<sup>16</sup> Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Mysticism and Ineffability: Some Issues of Logic and Language," p. 152.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>18</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, p. 36.

Their voyages simultaneously create and destroy the paths they take. Or, more exactly, they take their course, but wish to lose the landscape and the way. Mysticism operates as a process whereby the objects of meaning vanish, beginning with God himself; it is as though the function of mysticism were to bring a religious *episteme* to a close and erase itself at the same time, to produce the night of the subject while marking the twilight of culture.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, the paradox of negation as simultaneously conveying and concealing is closely related to the notion of language and death. The coming to being of language becomes equal to its death. In the medieval Kabbalah, God is believed to have created Adam with the word *emeth*, which means 'truth,' written on his forehead. The word *emeth* consists of "the initial *aleph*, which according to certain Kabbalists, contains the entire mystery of God's hidden Name and of the speech-act whereby He called the universe into being, and what is left is *meth*, 'he is dead'".<sup>20</sup> What is surprising in this assumption is that 'emeth,' as 'truth,' implies creation and death simultaneously. This contradiction, I suggest, lies in the heart of language: in the fact that *the* truth is always associated with absence and death. Language, here, seems to have taken part in a simultaneous game of presence and absence. Its coming to being (presence) is next to its death. In other words, its manifestation is its annihilation and vice versa.

The notion of death or loss or "departure,"<sup>21</sup> as de Certeau states, always accompanies the language of negative theology. De Certeau writes on the function of 'the name' in Surin's poem and states that "the name traces in language the principle of its exile".<sup>22</sup> He adds,

every 'substantive or absolute term' in some way becomes adjectival, transformed into a 'mode of being' or a 'modified thing,' by virtue of its relation to an 'absolute.' This 'absolute' does not 'subsist by itself,' it is off-stage. It is a name. It is not something that 'remains' (like a substance) or 'holds together' (like a

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 124.

<sup>21</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 112-3.

symbol), but something that induces a departure. Mystic writing is this adjectivation of language. It narrativizes an endless exodus of discourse. It is the discourse of the drift of discourse effected by stylistic procedures (metaphor, oxymoron, etc), and its focal point is the *neither . . . nor*.<sup>23</sup>

And "mystic discourse," according to de Certeau, is "an *artifact* (a production) created by the labor of putting language *to death*". "Oxymoron and catachresis" are the "sharp knives" mystic discourse uses to break the semantic function of language.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it brings language to its limits.

According to negative theology, the reason why language is caught in unsayability is because it is entangled in an endless chain of signifiers. Language is in infinite regress. The moment we seem to 'possess' words, they evade our grasp due to the fact that signification is never a completely finished act; it is always in progress and in continuous correction: "Each statement I make - positive or 'negative' - reveals itself as in need of correction. The correcting statement must then itself be corrected, ad infinitum".<sup>25</sup> Sells continues this line of argument by explaining that meaning is created in the tension between these two forces of saying and unsaying.<sup>26</sup> This simultaneous conveying and concealing of language or meaning can be seen in many theological texts. We, in effect, deal with two processes of performance in language. On one level, mystics claim that to use language as an instrument of disclosing simultaneously results in concealing. The fact that we use words brings a sense of something concealed with it. Like a joke which can lose its effect if the humour is explained, the apophatic discourse should not be paraphrased either.<sup>27</sup> All explanations will refer to something that is unexplainable. Therefore, the conveying of *the* meaning will conceal and also create misunderstandings.

On another level, the structure of a mystic text becomes the other way round. It is not the affirmative conveying of the ineffable. The text in fact attempts to conceal

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 159-60.

<sup>25</sup> Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

further what has been said. De Certeau explains this when he writes: "Negative theology: it *signifies* by that which it *removes*" (cited in NY, 133). The presence of signs is the best reason why the meaning (the transcendental signified) is concealed. For him, the goal of mystical writings is "to disappear into what they disclose, like a Turner landscape dissolved in air and light".<sup>28</sup> De Certeau compares the mystical discourse to "beaches" that are offered "to the swelling sea". I would argue that de Certeau aims to reveal how language in different texts betrays what it means and conveys through the act of constant concealing. In fact, mystic speech is not complete in its primary statements; it is the unsaying or negation of these statements that make it complete and that generates meanings. It paradoxically "signif[ies] through the fact that it removes (and withdraws itself from) language's very signifyingness. . . . It would only say by unsaying, write by 'unwriting'".<sup>29</sup> I suggest at this point that in order to grasp this theoretical point, it would be useful if we see how the paradox of negation is *practically* exercised in theological discourse.

### *The aporias of transcendence*

As I mentioned earlier, negativity is prevalent in theological discourse only when the text deals with expressing the notion of the transcendent. I would argue that there are two theological 'subjects' that show inconsistency with language. One is the notion of 'naming God' and the other is 'mystical experience,' both of which indicate examples of 'transcendence'. My point here is that language (or rather, negation in language) is closely linked to the notion of transcendence.<sup>30</sup> For example, a significant corpus of writings on the philosophy of language consists of arguments about the subjects that cannot be discussed in language - subjects 'beyond' language - or transcendence.

<sup>28</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, p. 81.

<sup>29</sup> Hent de Vries, "Anti-Babel: The 'Mystical Postulate' in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida," p. 448.

<sup>30</sup> In the concluding remarks to this thesis I will recapitulate the curious relationship between language and transcendence. I will examine the extent that language is metaphysical (transcendental) in its economy.

Therefore I will examine the dilemmas involved in expressing the divine and the experiences of divine nature - 'the aporias of transcendence'.

Before going any further, I would argue that mysticism addresses the notion of ineffability on two levels: 'language in general' and 'language as a tool of expression'.<sup>31</sup> I suggest that when we speak of a mystical approach towards language, we should always ask in what context this language is referred to: the general 'function' of language *or* language as a 'tool' to express the transcendent (the divine or mystical experience)? I believe that mysticism usually addresses the notion of 'ineffability' when it is supposed to be used to express the transcendent and not the general notion of language. As we will see below, most theological texts examine language exclusively as a tool of expression. Therefore, our conclusions from statements regarding the inability of language to express the transcendent or convey mystical experience should not lead us to a general theory of language.<sup>32</sup>

Here, I will examine these two attributes of language. First, I will examine the two transcendental subjects ('the divine' and 'divine experience'), bearing in mind that this is also an examination of a mystical approach towards language as a tool. I will argue how paradox dominates the logic of this approach. Later, I will briefly examine language as *langue* in negative theology and argue that language in general receives an affirmative response in apophatic theology. In other words, *language as it is* becomes an affirmative effect in theology.

### *God as 'referent'*

In relation to the notion of God, again we see two aspects of the theological tradition "at odds with each other,"<sup>33</sup> as Robert P. Scharlemann argues in his "Introduction" to the essays collected in *Negation and Theology*. One view sees God just as being itself, and

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<sup>31</sup> This distinction is close to the notions of *langue* and *parole*.

<sup>32</sup> However, I will demonstrate later in the next chapter how negative theology could be regarded as a discourse on language in general.

<sup>33</sup> Robert P. Scharlemann, "Introduction," in *Negation and Theology* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 2.

the other identifies "God with what is other than being and nothing." Scharlemann argues that the latter is not in any sense a nihilistic view but a new look at "the metaphysical identification of God and being".<sup>34</sup> But what I argue here is that in addition to the above question, a close look at negative theologies shows that their most significant question is not only about the 'beingness' of God, but also the way it *should* and *could* be addressed. In brief, negative theology argues that God is the source of everything who cannot be known or expressed. The *name* of God is the direct attribute of ineffability and the *naming* of the divine the prime question. When asked about the Ultimate or the Absolute, the mystics' answer is that "[p]ure being, as such, has neither name nor attribute".<sup>35</sup> In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the name of YHWH is protected even in its meaning. As I suggested in Chapter One, the name YHWH, in itself, is a name while being an "evasion of the name ("I will be what I will be")".<sup>36</sup> God's name is therefore a gesture towards the unsayability of the name. In negative theology, the Ultimate is recurrently called 'unnameable' and 'ineffable'. It is a hidden name yet instrumental towards mystical comprehension.<sup>37</sup>

Saint Augustine repeatedly asserted that words are inadequate to describe the divine. For instance, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, he writes:

God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said, something is said. And a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. This contradiction is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally.<sup>38</sup>

However, interestingly, the theological approach toward this notion is expressed in paradoxes. Augustine himself argues that words should be used by the Christian preacher to praise the divine, and therefore he should spread the Word of God in

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Haunted House of Meaning*, p. 283.

<sup>37</sup> Steven T. Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Anne Howland Schotter, "Vernacular Style and the Word of God: The Incarnational Art of Pearl," in Peter S. Hawkins, and Anne Howland Schotter, eds., *Ineffability: Naming the Unnamable from Dante to Beckett* (New York: AMS Press, 1984), p. 24.



human words as best as he can.<sup>39</sup> In Augustine's words, God has "accepted the tribute of the human voice, and wished us to take joy in praising Him with our words".<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the assumption that "God cannot be expressed" occupies a huge corpus of theological writings. God has always been a recurrent referent in theological discourse while *simultaneously* it has been thought of as a 'referent' that cannot be referred to. Michael Sells calls this unresolvable dilemma "the aporia of transcendence". The apophatic discourse concerning God's name typically runs like this:

The transcendent must be beyond names, ineffable. In order to claim that the transcendent is beyond any names, however, I must give it a name, "the transcendent." Any statement of ineffability, "X is beyond names," generates the aporia that the subject of the statement must be named (as X) in order for us to affirm that it is beyond names.<sup>41</sup>

According to Sells, we can either choose 'silence' as the response to this aporia or distinguish between the ways in which the transcendent can and cannot be named. In the medieval context, these two distinguishing modes rule. We can see two kinds of naming: "God-as-he-is-in-himself and God-as-he-is-in-creatures".<sup>42</sup> In other words, there is a concept of God as it is in itself and another as it is in human minds. However, Sells maintains that neither of these two responses can be called negative theology. It is the third response - an unresolvable paradox - that is in fact the discourse of negative theology:

The third response begins with the refusal to solve the dilemma posed by the attempt to refer to the transcendent through a distinction between two kinds of name. The dilemma is accepted as a genuine aporia, that is, as unresolvable; but this acceptance, instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

This discourse has been called negative theology. It is negative in the sense that it denies that the transcendent can be named or given attributes.<sup>43</sup>

Sells also reminds us that the way language ‘acts’ within this dilemma can be varied. It can start by asserting theoretically that God is ineffable “followed by a full chapter or treatise that freely employs names and predications of the transcendent, and at the end reminds the reader that the transcendent is beyond all names and predications,”<sup>44</sup> or as a text full of paradoxical statements in which each remark overturns the previous one.<sup>45</sup>

### *Transcendental experience*

After ‘God’s name,’ the ‘mystical experience’ is the second transcendental concept to which negative theology always returns. If we look at the corpus of theological discourse that deals with the notion of ineffability, we see the prevalence of the theme of mystical experience. Negative theology generally asserts the inadequacy of language (expression) to express the transcendental experience. Because every mode of verbal expression of the mystical experience in effect reiterates the fact that the experience is just another one. This deprives the experience of its singularity and also removes it from its context and makes it nonsensical.

The inability of language to express these experiences simply points to an inconsistency between human language and the transcendental experience. Human language is deemed as “earth-bound, ill-suited to objects/subjects of ultimate concern”.<sup>46</sup> In most mystical traditions, we are constantly reminded that mystical experiences need not and cannot be conveyed literally, i.e. in linguistic patterns. In other words, negative theology problematises the relation between ‘experience’ and

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Having explained the importance and the arguments surrounding the question of the divine name in theological discourse, I will take it further in the next chapter in relation to deconstruction.

<sup>46</sup> Steven T. Katz, “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning,” p. 15.

'expression'. Annemarie Schimmel points to this curious relation in Rumi's mystical poetry when she writes:

words are merely dust on the mirror of 'experience,' dust brought forth from the movement of the broom 'tongue' . . . and the true meaning, the 'soul of the story' can be found only when man loses himself in the presence of the Beloved where neither dust nor forms remain.<sup>47</sup>

But why is human language deemed to be inadequate in expressing transcendental experiences? I suggest that two main reasons are put forward for this. First, language is seen as incompetent because this kind of experience is attributed to a limited number of people. Many apophatic writers believe that one "cannot understand what is being said unless she becomes it".<sup>48</sup> This will limit theological discourse to "the particular community (Beguine, Dominican, Sufi) of the author, to those sharing the same liturgical and meditational practices, to those cultivating the same states of consciousness".<sup>49</sup>

This argument has been generalised to the extent that all language is deemed to be private. In the context of the philosophy of language, it has been asked repeatedly if language can in effect communicate the most private feelings of hate, love, and so on. However, as Wittgenstein argues in his theory of "private language" this is in direct contrast to the very reason that language exists.<sup>50</sup> Language is based on some rules in order to be universal and be communicated. I would argue that this point in our argument evokes all the oppositions discussed already in this project. Private language is the language of singularity and uniqueness that resists inevitable multiplicity. Yet, the paradox lies in the fact that any attempt to express private language ends in the multiplication of its uniqueness. Private language is also the language of immanence

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<sup>47</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p. 48.

<sup>48</sup> Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Mysticism and Ineffability: Some Issues of Logic and Language," pp. 145-46.

rejecting the usage of language as a representative and universal tool of expression. And here it represents negation and denial of language all together.

This opposition is at the heart of the discourse of negative theology:

language of mysticism arises from the mystic's attempt to explicate for himself and for others his experience and his primary signs. And here the problem begins. For the explication must be made in terms of some conceptual system, and this will vary from culture to culture and tradition to tradition.<sup>51</sup>

Charles Morris's comment here points to the translatability of the experience between different traditions and cultures yet the main problem in mystical discourse is more intense than this. Negative theology questions the ability to express any experience to anyone. It negates the representative and universal faculty of language as discussed in the previous parts. And, as we discussed earlier, the non-universality of language has been the major reason, for many linguists, to claim that signifiers and signifieds are not directly related. There are gaps of meanings in every language and therefore "certain semantic truths . . . remain ineffable".<sup>52</sup>

The second reason why mystical experience has not been regarded fit for expression is its secret nature. Mystics have always been urged to keep silent about their spiritual meditations. They are told "what they have experienced is holy and should not be desecrated by the profane words of everyday speech".<sup>53</sup> But more importantly, it is because the language used for expressing these experiences has to be metaphoric or paradoxical or negative and, in any case, it would be misunderstood by the public and would cause danger: "This has led to the common attitude that concerning mystical experience one should *not* speak. Those who have been initiated into mystical experience should bind their tongue and close their lips. They must not break the taboo. . .".<sup>54</sup> Yet, in the next chapter, I take up this point further to argue that this

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<sup>51</sup> Charles Morris, "Comments on Mysticism and Its Language," p. 309.

<sup>52</sup> Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Mysticism and Ineffability: Some Issues of Logic and Language," p. 148.

<sup>53</sup> Ewert H. Cousins, "Bonaventure's Mysticism of Language," p. 238.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

secret is an “open secret,” i.e. a secret that is being told endlessly while the goal remains enigmatic and unknown.

### *The affirmative force of language in theological discourse*

Now I move on to a different understanding of language in apophatic theology. Language is perceived as affirmative when separated from the context of expressing the transcendent. At this point, I assert that negative theology has a genuinely affirmative attitude to language *as it is* (general concept of language) and move on to outline the grounds on which this argument rests.

First, language in theological discourse is described as the ladder of creation. For instance, Judaic tradition takes the Hebrew alphabet as the “fundamental building blocks of creation”.<sup>55</sup> Comparing God’s act of creation of the world *through* language and man’s-creation *of* language is particularly helpful in this regard. Language, in the former, is the primary tool and, in the latter, it is the goal of creation. However, these two acts of creation act in parallel. Man, in a sense, is rebuilding “the temple in his ritual usage of language”.<sup>56</sup> Walter Benjamin focuses on this postulate when he explains how man by the “gift” of language becomes elevated over the material, mute earthly life. And this is precisely where we see a link between God’s creation and man’s creation: “the adamic giving of names is thought as the process in which the divine creation completes - supplements or redeems - itself”.<sup>57</sup>

Second, in theology, language is a ‘sign’ of God or the evidence of the existence of God in human experience. Mystics argue that since everything has the imprint of God, language is no exception. In Zen Buddhism, “everything is the Buddha-nature”.<sup>58</sup> The whole world, therefore, becomes “a sacred text or discourse” in which all the letters are the letters of the sutras.<sup>59</sup> The ‘logocentric’ logic of theology and mysticism is

<sup>55</sup> Steven T. Katz, “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning,” p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> Moshe Idel, “Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism,” p. 43.

<sup>57</sup> Hent de Vries, “Anti-Babel: The ‘Mystical Postulate’ in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida,” p. 456.

<sup>58</sup> Bernard Faure, “Fair and Unfair Language Games in Chan/Zen,” p. 167.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 166-7.

manifest when all these 'letters,' 'words,' or even 'sighs' are referred to God. They all have a meaning and the meaning is nothing but the 'name of God.' Explicating Kabbalistic ideas in Borges, George Steiner writes: "No act of speech is without meaning: 'No one can articulate a syllable which is not full of tenderness and fear, and which is not, in one of those languages, the powerful name of some god.'" <sup>60</sup> The 'teaching of the names' of God, in Islamic mysticism, is the way toward "the essence, the 'name,' of things that in turn reflects some manifestation of the Divine Names; that is, all names, all knowledge, derive from the transcendental attributes of Allah". <sup>61</sup> Therefore it leads to all names and words in our world. Another indication that points to the thought of language as a sign of God can be seen in the way Scripture is regarded in different religious traditions. The Book becomes the most sacred manifestation of divine truth.

The third reason why apophatic theology is positive about language is because it acknowledges the ontology of language. In other words, mystics know that even their praise of silence is also taking place within language and that no proposition can escape toward "that which cannot be said." As Emile Benveniste has shown,

the characteristic of linguistic negation is that it can cancel only that which is uttered, that it must grant explicitly in order to suppress, that a judgement of non-existence has also necessarily the status of a judgement of existence. Thus negation is first of all admission. <sup>62</sup>

In sum, the possibility of negation is placed *always already* in the place of affirmation. <sup>63</sup> Rumi, the famous philosopher and poet of Sufism, argues this in one of his prose works, *Fihī ma fihī*: "When you say, 'words are of no account,' you negate your own assertion through your words. If words are of no account, why do we hear you say that words are of no account? After all, you are saying this in words". <sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 69.

<sup>61</sup> Steven T. Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," p. 19.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Bernard Faure, "Fair and Unfair Language Games in Chan/Zen," p. 160.

<sup>63</sup> In other words, the negative is always inside the affirmative. Later, I will examine Derrida's argument in which he asserts that the affirmative need to pass through the negative.

<sup>64</sup> Steven T. Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," p. 3.

Fourth, despite its attempt to transcend verbal expression, negative theology desires nothing less than an immanent link between experience and expression. Mystical discourse is a nostalgic evocation of the supposed time when expression and experience were identical. It always returns to the immanence of the 'original' word - the language before Babel. For mystics, this event is the advent of separation in human existence.<sup>65</sup>

Fifth, language has been instrumental in teaching the ideas of mysticism, passing on the tradition of negative theology, and helping individuals in their spiritual path (mystical writings, dream analysis, prayer, and so on). I should stress the tradition of negative theology is passed on 'cognitively' as well as in a 'heuristic' manner. Mystics have written in a prolific manner and have always had a forceful urge to express their experiences without restraint as much as possible: "Language, special language, read in particular ways, following agreed-upon rules, including the authority of religious masters communicated secretly to their disciples, conveys a precise and didactic meaning".<sup>66</sup>

It is important to note here that in the teaching process, as well as being a post-experiential description of an experience, language also acts as a pre-existent effect on following experiences. In other words, transcendental experiences are shaped and influenced by the pre-existent linguistic patterns that have been "learned, then intended, and then actualized in the experiential reality of the mystic".<sup>67</sup> This is an essential part of the mystical teaching practice. Larry Shinn in his essay, "Names, Symbols, Experience, and the Naming of the Divine," points to the way each faith has

<sup>65</sup> The Romantics lament the loss of 'presence'. Deconstruction defines this romanticist theme as a desire for what is impossible and absent. This is especially evident in de Manian deconstruction of romantic literature. De Man argues that there is in fact a deconstructive force within romantic writing. For him, the Romantics themselves show that their desired 'presence' is always absent, something that is *always* in the past or in the future. I conclude from this that in fact what mystical discourse longs for is not a kind of language anymore. Language, in negative theology is identified as "multiplicity, division and dispersion" (Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 3). Therefore, the lamentation for the original language is in effect for a non-temporal and unified entity beyond the realm of what we know as language. Here, we can notice the theological approach towards the themes of 'singularity' and 'immanence' as discussed in Parts I and II.

<sup>66</sup> Steven T. Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," p. 19.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

its own context and terms of reference. He nevertheless believes that getting to know these symbols will help towards inter-faith experiences. I cite a passage in his essay in which he points to the way these symbols pre-condition religious experiences:

traditional words (myths, dogmas, or theology), symbols (images, colors, artifacts, or ciphers), and rituals associated with a particular divinity not only condition later experiences of any religion's sacred reality but also shape the original "pure experience" that . . . transcends words.<sup>68</sup>

For certain Christian mystics, like Bonaventure, the thirteenth-century Franciscan theologian and spiritual writer, "language is the key to the inner life of God - so much so that the mystic who experiences this divine life can say that expressive language constitutes the very inner reality of God."<sup>69</sup> This pre-existent effect of language on mystical experiences goes back to neoplatonic thought. Bonaventure's mysticism of language is an affirmative approach towards verbal discourse and logos, hence 'logos mysticism'. Ewert Cousins, in "Bonaventure's Mysticism of Language," maintains that "words, forms, concepts, and symbols have emanated from the Logos and bear the imprint of the Logos and hence can draw the mystic back with a magnetic pull into the Exemplar from which they flowed".<sup>70</sup> He claims that Bonaventure's "logos mysticism" is "kataphatic" (*via affirmativa*) "using the gaze of intellectual vision to penetrate by contribution to the divine Logos as the ground of all intelligible forms in the phenomenal world". To Cousins, this makes Bonaventure's mysticism "the distinctive form of the mysticism of Western culture".<sup>71</sup>

In short, negative theology is conscious and aware of the limits of language. It tries to save theology from the ontological and epistemological questions of philosophy. It is sceptical about the full presence in an experience and also in God. It does not negate God but it questions the possibility of God in order to find something

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<sup>68</sup> Larry Dwight Shinn, "Words, Symbols, Experience, and the Naming of the Divine," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 29:3-4 (Summer-Fall 1992), p. 421.

<sup>69</sup> Ewert H. Cousins, "Bonaventure's Mysticism of Language," p. 239.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 254-55.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.



beyond and above being. The next chapter will shed more light on negative theology as my comparative study between deconstruction and negative theology will create a new context and perspective to examine this subject.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Derrida and Apophatic Discourse

Language is spoken, it speaks to itself, which is to say, from/of blindness. It always speaks to us from/of the blindness that constitutes it.<sup>1</sup>

An examination of the relation between deconstruction and apophatic discourse is automatically a study of Derrida's long-term relationship with negative theology. In the past three decades there have been numerous conferences, articles, books, and interviews dealing with the similarities and differences between Derrida's ideas and negative theology. The method that I have used in this chapter to examine the relation between deconstruction and negative theology is a close reading of the texts in which Derrida endeavours to elaborate his relation to negative theology. My aim is to clarify the similarities and differences and finally argue that deconstruction is deeply attentive to *the language of* negative theology rather than preoccupied with divine subjects. To prove this point, I end this chapter with an account of the way Derrida refers to negative theology as 'language' and nothing more.

My first aim in this chapter is to give an outline of the main contentions regarding this issue and then move on to a detailed examination of the relation between Derrida and negative theology and, consequently, apophatic discourse. Here, by outlining the main arguments of an exemplary number of thinkers, I attempt to draw up a spectrum of readings of Derrida. I think we can put these figures into two groups. The first group, with very different reasons, do not see any affinity between Derrida and theology, and the second group acknowledge similarities, yet this kinship

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 4.

takes different directions, forces, and conclusions. In the first group, one can place very different and contending thinkers together: such as Christopher Norris, Richard Rorty and Rodolph Gasché. The only thing these thinkers have in common is that they do not see any affinity between Derrida and theological thinking.

Christopher Norris claims that Derrida is primarily a Kantian transcendental thinker using logical deductions to rule out logical truths through the powers and limits of textual critique.<sup>2</sup> Norris's writings examine deconstruction mainly in the context of philosophy. While claiming that Derrida transgresses the boundaries of rhetoric and reason here and there,<sup>3</sup> Norris would rather think of these diversions as "a kind of internal distancing, an effort of defamiliarization which prevents those concepts from settling down into routine habits of thought".<sup>4</sup> Therefore, deconstruction still becomes a philosophical attempt within the philosophical tradition seeking to overturn philosophical hierarchies. Consequently, Norris does not see a correlation between deconstruction and theology. Norris reminds us that Derrida's deconstruction of the hierarchy of speech over writing is against theology because, based on theological doctrines, the immediacy and spontaneity of speech becomes the emblem of presence and writing is devalued.<sup>5</sup> My contention is that Norris's argument is only correct when he refers to theology as the pure metaphysical doctrines of religion. Conversely, in the light of the non-metaphysical attempts (mysticism and negative theology), Norris's point lacks force.

Of course, what remains in Norris's reading is Derrida as a "transcendental" thinker who deals with traditional philosophical issues. Norris believes that Derrida philosophises from the transcendental position of a traditional philosopher and this is precisely what Richard Rorty argues against.<sup>6</sup> Rorty in his "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?" challenges this by a close reading of Norris and Gasché. He argues that

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Norris, *Derrida*, pp. 94, 183.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17, 18-27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 229-30.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty, "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?," *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2:2 (Spring 1989), p. 208.

Derrida's world "has as little room for transcendental deductions, or for rigor, as for self-authenticating moments of immediate presence to consciousness".<sup>7</sup> Rorty, unlike Norris, believes that there is nothing philosophical about Derrida. He prefers to call Derrida a "private writer" as opposed to "a writer with a public mission".<sup>8</sup> He assumes that Derrida would have been better starting his writings with the "Envois" section of *The Post Card* or *Glas* rather than *Of Grammatology*.<sup>9</sup> But Norris reminds us that Rorty finally agrees with Derrida since they both are critical about totalising statements of philosophy professing the ultimate truth.<sup>10</sup> But we should not forget that Rorty wants Derrida not only to subvert the institutionalisation of thought but also to indicate his own position. Rorty writes:

On my view, the only thing that can displace an intellectual world is another world - a new alternative, rather than an argument against an old alternative. The idea that there is some neutral ground on which to mount an argument against something as big as 'logocentrism' strikes me as one more logocentric hallucination.<sup>11</sup>

However, as I attempt to show in this thesis, Derrida is not standing on a "neutral" ground but on a critical foundation in which the relation between oppositions is internal and reciprocal.

Rodolphe Gasché, instead, sees Derrida as someone treading a fine line between philosophy and literature. Gasché summarises his argument of his book *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* in this way:

In this book I hope that I have found a middle ground between the structural plurality of Derrida's philosophy - a plurality that makes it impossible to elevate any final essence of his book into its true meaning - and the strict criteria to which any interpretation of his work must yield, if it is to be about that work and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Norris, *Derrida*, p. 150.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Rorty, "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?," pp. 208-9.

not merely a private fantasy. These criteria, at center stage in this book, are, as I shall show, philosophical and not literary in nature.<sup>12</sup>

The bottom line in Gasché's argument is that "Derrida's work is a genuinely philosophical inquiry that takes the standard rules of philosophy very seriously".<sup>13</sup> For Gasché, Derrida, by using the same tools, attempts to disempower the same old ontological questions of philosophy. This argument evokes objections from thinkers like Rorty who argue that one cannot subvert a system while using the same tools adopted by the system. The main point in Gasché's argument, however, is that Derrida's philosophy is not a "philosophy of reflection," as in Hegel or Heidegger, but one that demonstrates a "subtle economy" in which Derrida "recognizes the essential requirements of philosophical thought while questioning the limits of the possibility of these requirements".<sup>14</sup> Gasché calls this economy 'quasi-transcendental'. In other words, to Gasché, through arguing for the possibility and the impossibility of the metaphorical (transcendental) thinking of philosophy, Derrida ends up standing between transcendental and non-transcendental thinking.<sup>15</sup> However, this is the closest Gasché can get to linking Derrida's thought with theology.

On the other side, we see a number of critics who started writing from the 1980s onwards arguing that Derrida is a theological thinker but with a twist. They contend that although Derrida is close to theology, this theology is in fact of a certain kind, i.e. a non-metaphysical or mystical one. We can gather these into one group: Jurgen Habermas, Graham Ward, John Caputo, Robert Magliola, and Kevin Hart.<sup>16</sup>

Habermas argues that Derrida, despite his resistance towards transcendental thinking, in fact advocates "the transcendental primacy of the sign as against the meaning"<sup>17</sup> and "remains close to Jewish mysticism".<sup>18</sup> Habermas is also very critical of

<sup>12</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 316-318.

<sup>16</sup> One can also mention Mark C. Taylor and Susan Handelman among others. I have excluded these two since I deal with Taylor's 'deconstructive theology' and Handelman's 'Jewish theology' elsewhere in this project.

<sup>17</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 171.

the way Derrida confuses the discourse of philosophy with that of literature. I would argue, as Derrida himself has pointed out regarding Habermas in *Limited Inc.* (LI, 156-158), that Habermas's reading of Derrida is very sketchy and with no references to texts while being full of dismissive generalisations.

Graham Ward, in *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, asserts that Derrida is attacking a certain kind of theology - a theology formed out of "classical rationalism and Enlightenment Deism".<sup>19</sup> Ward reminds us that Derrida in *Of Grammatology* has already branded this kind of theology as "infinitist theology" (OG, 71) that is, "a theology which does not recognize the limitations of its own language".<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that Ward places Derrida's contention about theology on the axis of language. As I will show later, this, I believe, is the primary point of departure between 'logocentric theology,' which is "satisfied with metaphors" (WM, 267) and does not question the nature of its own language, and 'negative theology' that constantly revises its relation to language because of its "heterogeneous nature".<sup>21</sup> Despite this, Ward is primarily cautious in linking *différance* and theology in a close way.

John Caputo, in most of his writings on Derrida, takes a more daring stand. For example, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* proposes a "deconstructive theology"<sup>22</sup> in which faith is prevalent but "without the assurance of faith"<sup>23</sup>. He thinks Derrida's thought is close to negative theology in its universalised or generalised translation.<sup>24</sup> Caputo is thus involved in linking Derridean terms with some theological counterparts but without enough investigation into their relation to language. However, Caputo's works remain one of the most comprehensive contributions in this area.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 345.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-2.

Robert Magliola, in *Derrida on the Mend*, correctly argues that Derrida narrows down the definition of 'mysticism' to the "Absolute Present and/or the Absolute Void" and asks: "Is it that Derrida mistakes some logocentrist *philosophies* of mysticism for all 'announcements' of mysticism?"<sup>25</sup> Magliola, therefore, believes that perhaps a vast ground of affinity between deconstruction and theology is undermined because of this essential misjudgment on the part of Derrida. I will elaborate on this point later in this chapter.

Likewise, the main thesis of Kevin Hart's *The Trespass of the Sign* is the contention that the attack of deconstruction on theology is based on defining 'theological' as 'metaphysical'. He asserts that, for Derrida, "any claim that a text is or can be totalised is theological".<sup>26</sup> He further adds,

'theological' and 'metaphysical' are convertible words in Derrida's lexicon, and it is evident that Derrida's usage of 'theology' is far closer to its original Greek sense, as the study of the being of the ground, than to its other, more common meaning, as the study of man's relationship in faith with God.<sup>27</sup>

However, for Hart, deconstruction acts as "an answer to the theological demand for a 'non-metaphysical theology'".<sup>28</sup> I will return to this later.

Although the above outline is very selective, it will give a proper ground for the discussions in this chapter. I should point out that the above thinkers along with others have been and will be invoked in various parts of this project. Derrida, since his very early writings, expected this response to his thought. Since as early as 1968, when he published "Différance," Derrida became concerned with these readings. In "Différance," he predicts that "the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology" (DF, 6). He objects to this

<sup>25</sup> Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1984), p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

view by arguing that since the nature of theology is engaged with “existence” and “essence,” *différance* can not be assimilated to it.

Although Derrida has always tried to deny a *simple* similarity, we do not have many texts by him dealing with this ‘misunderstanding’. In addition, as we will see later in this chapter, he has never denied his fascination with the subject of negative theology. Although he constantly ‘avoided speaking’ of negative theology, his writings have gradually become more and more affected by theological themes. Since he never denies the fact that his writings are also prone to being ‘deconstructed,’ it is fair to say that despite Derrida’s ‘denials,’ his writings resist a firm distinction from the assumptions of negative theology.

In this chapter, I will focus on the texts in which Derrida directly engages himself with the *via negativa*. In 1987, Derrida speaks of his *interest and avoidance* of negative theology in “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” a lecture which deals specifically with the subject of negative theology. I intend to read this lecture along with a later text called, “*Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)*,” in *On the Name*, published in 1995,<sup>29</sup> as a response to the papers delivered at a conference in Calgary, along with elaborate references to the poems of Angelius Silesius. It is in these texts that Derrida has indeed broken the silence:

As I have always been fascinated by the supposed movements of negative theology (which, no doubt, are themselves never foreign to the experience of fascination in general), 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, assuming that some such thing exists. (HAS, 12)

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<sup>29</sup> This paper was originally published in an earlier version as “Post-Scriptum” in *Derrida and Negative Theology* in 1992 and later in 1993 published in French as a separate booklet, *Sauf le nom*. I see a certain movement from “How to Avoid Speaking” (1987) to “*Sauf le nom*” (1992). The span of time between these two texts shows a turn in Derrida’s approach toward negative theology. Derrida seems to have become more engaged in the discourse of negative theology and presents a subtle reading in “*Sauf le nom*.” I would argue that many misunderstandings of the relation between deconstruction and negative theology are due to the critics’ reading of Derrida’s earlier works that deal with the question of theology.



Now let us compare the above remark from "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" (1987) with the ending of "Post-Scriptum" (1992):

Negative theology, we have said this enough, is also the most economical and most powerful formalization, the greatest reserve of language possible in so few words. Inexhaustible literature, literature for the desert, for the exile, always saying too much and too little, it holds desire in suspense. It always leaves you without ever going away from you.<sup>30</sup>

As we can see, the tone is more decisive and fascinated. Yet the important point for me is the way 'language' plays a significant role in this fascination. Indeed, while outlining Derrida's stand on negative theology, I will argue that in these two primary texts, he places emphasis on the 'language' of negative theology and upon the hypothesis that negative theology is not only a mode or discourse of language but language itself.<sup>31</sup>

While Derrida does not see an overt relation between *différance* or 'trace' and negative theology, these texts show that the language of deconstruction and the language of negative theology are fairly analogous. For one, Derrida sees his idea of *différance* (probably the main concept in deconstruction) as "the unnameable" that makes it close to the main themes of negative theology, as discussed above. Derrida, in his early article, "Différance," writes:

*différance* has no name in our language. But we 'already know' that if it is unnameable, it is not provisionally so, not because our language has not yet found or received this *name*, or because we would have to seek it in another language. . . . It is rather because there is no *name* for it at all. . . . (DF, 26)

Moreover, when Derrida especially focuses on the 'acts' of language in negative theology, the similarities become more evident. What is significant in this study is not

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices," trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds., *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 321-322.

<sup>31</sup> In 1968, Derrida in the discussion that follows his paper "Différance" states that negative theology fascinates him because it is "an *excessive* practice of *langue*" ("The Original Discussion of 'Différance'," in David Wood, and Robert Bernasconi, eds., *Derrida and 'Différance'* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 85).

only a comparative inquiry but also its potential to examine how deconstruction contributes to our better understanding of the apophatic discourse and its mechanism, and eventually to our view on negative discourse in literature.

### *Derrida's critique of negative theology*

Before examining Derrida's positions regarding negative theology, I believe an outline of Derrida's main argument against theology (theology in its general sense) would help us to study the following argument in a clearer way. In brief, Derrida's attack on theology is the same as his critique of Western philosophy. Theology and philosophy, for Derrida (and perhaps to a great degree for Heidegger), are two counterparts that are deeply based on logocentrism. For Derrida, both of these discourses see a stable signified and being (*logos*) behind the parade of signs. Despite all the questions, critiques, and reservations, these two discourses ultimately consider presence and homogeneity as favoured terms over absence and heterogeneity. According to Mark Taylor, Derrida's question is simple yet devastating: "What if the presence of the *logos* is a fanciful dream that is a function of desire rather than experience? What if there is no firm foundation, no secure anchor, no abiding truth?"<sup>32</sup> This, I believe, is Derrida's main objection to theology. Now, let us see if Derrida succeeds in distinguishing theology from negative theology in the sense that I described in the previous chapter.

Derrida, in "How to Avoid Speaking," outlines three paradigms for the doctrine of negative theology: the Greek (based on Plato's *Republic* and the theme of *Khora* in his *Timaeus*), the Christian *via negativa*, and Heidegger's theology *sans* onto-theology. In the same lecture, he again insists on arguing that his writings are not in the register of negative theology. However, this time he has more time to elaborate on his persistent denials. Derrida's first argument that deconstruction is not the same as negative theology is that the 'logic' of the language of negative theology is

<sup>32</sup> Mark C. Taylor, "Deconstruction: What's the Difference?," *Soundings*, 66 (Winter 1983), p. 396.

propositional, hierarchical, and conclusive - modes that are inimical to deconstructive discourse:

No, what I write is not "negative theology." First of all, *in the measure* to which this belongs to the predicative or juncative space of discourse, to its strictly propositional form, and privileges not only the indestructible unity of the word but also the authority of the name - such axioms as a "deconstruction" must start by reconsidering (which I have tried to do since the first part of *Of Grammatology*). (HAS, 7)

In this remark, Derrida outlines the standpoint of negative theology on language as an "indestructible unity" with "the authority of the name." This is clearly in contrast with Derrida's 'ideal' of language as non-metaphysical (in a deconstructive capacity). However, these radical remarks concerning the language of negative theology conflicts with most of what Derrida portrays as negative theology in "*Sauf le nom*" five years later. As I will explain later, "*Sauf le nom*" deals with a facet of the language of apophatic theology in which paradoxes, aporias, and above all heterogeneous discourse (variety of discourses) leave no room for the absolute unity or the authority of the name.

Derrida is not interested in the predicative discourses of theology in which statements are made about the being of God, and so on. Instead, he is concerned with a discourse addressed to God, or sent to God, like a prayer. And negative theology in its apophatic discourse, as Derrida admits in "*Sauf le nom*," is involved in this endeavour. Apophatic discourse changes the axes of reference; it does not talk *about* God but *to* God: "This is why apophatic discourse must also open with a prayer that recognizes, assigns, or ensures its destination. . ." (HAS, 29).

Is Derrida therefore not speaking of a *certain kind* of theological discourse when he attributes the "propositional" mode of language with "the authority of the name" to the language for negative theology? Or are these reservations only a prelude to what he writes in "*Sauf le nom*"? I argued earlier, and will examine further, that the language of negative theology as a paradoxical expression in which the notion of value is

scrutinised can, in effect, reveal an opposite picture and that Derrida himself subscribes to this viewpoint.

However, Derrida's second and main concern, about his assimilation to negative theology in "How to Avoid Speaking," is the way negative theology looks at "being beyond Being" or "God without being," i.e. its "hyperessentiality". I would stress that Derrida only critiques negative theology as long as it is caught in a metaphysical logic:

Next, in the measure to which "negative theology" seems to reserve, beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond Being, some hyperessentiality, a being beyond Being. This is the word that Dionysius often uses in the *Divine Names*: *hyperousios*, -os, *hyperousiotes*. God as being beyond Being or also God as *without* Being. (HAS, 7-8)

Derrida is correct in finding this tendency in negative theology to be a prevalent one. I cite a representative example from Meister Eckhart: "When I said that God was not a Being and was above Being, I did not thereby contest his Being, but on the contrary attributed to him a *more elevated Being*".<sup>33</sup> In this excerpt, Eckhart takes his primary word of *without being* back and leaves us with the thesis that God is a supreme or higher kind of self-presence. According to this logic, the supposition that language cannot say leads us to conclude that there are transcendent entities beyond expression. Therefore, we can conclude that *negation* and *transcendence* become interrelated in a curious manner.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Derrida correctly sees a prevalence of 'presence' in this ontological approach: "No, I would hesitate to inscribe what I put forward under the familiar heading of negative theology, precisely because of that ontological wager of hyperessentiality that one finds at work both in Dionysius and in Meister Eckhart. . ." (HAS, 8).

<sup>33</sup> Cited in John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism*, p. 3.

Indeed, as Kevin Hart reminds us “the Greek prefix *hyper* can mean both ‘above’ and ‘beyond’”.<sup>35</sup> This double meaning of the term *hyper* leads Derrida to see a metaphysical hierarchy in which what is beyond is still a presence that is merely higher. This ‘presence’ of ‘beyond,’ for Derrida, points to the way a Supreme Being, in effect, acts as a ‘transcendental signified.’ Derrida, later on, situates his familiar terms of *différance* and ‘trace’ in this argument and argues that there is a distinct contrast between his thought and that of ‘hyperessentiality’:

... I thought I had to forbid myself to write in the register of “negative theology,” because I was aware of this movement toward hyperessentiality, beyond Being. What *différance*, the trace, and so on “mean” - which hence *does not mean anything* - is “before” the concept, the name, the word, “something” that would be nothing, that no longer arises from Being, from presence or from the presence of the present, nor even from absence, and even less from some hyperessentiality. (HAS, 9) -

Here, Derrida is situating his familiar terms (*différance*, trace, etc.) outside this logocentric state of being. They do not mean anything; they do not even exist. For Derrida, nothing means anything or exists outside this system. In other words, *différance* stands on a fine line between *within* and *without*. That is why Derrida is quick to mention that this “hyperessentiality” or “onto-theological reappropriation” remains not only “possible” but “*inevitable* insofar as one speaks” (HAS, 9). And that is why *différance* itself “remains a metaphysical name” (DF, 26). Despite all this, to ascribe metaphysical characteristics to the language of negative theology is not as unproblematic as it seems. This mode of language is caught in an aporia which in some instances sees no ‘beyond’. Derrida himself, in the afore-mentioned texts, expresses this ambivalence which essentially contradicts his main reasoning. And surprisingly, this inconsistent attitude towards negative theology dominates all Derrida’s direct examinations of negative theology. I would argue that in most of his

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Hart, “Jacques Derrida: The God Effect,” in Phillip Blond, ed., *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 275.

earlier writings on negative theology, Derrida is overtly in line with Greek thought and the Western metaphysics that he has always attacked. He takes God and theology as total presence and metaphysics respectively, which is obviously contrary to the notions of difference and absence. Therefore, as Kevin Hart asserts, to answer any question regarding God or theology depends on what we understand from these terms.<sup>36</sup> And Derrida has managed successfully to confuse his position regarding these concepts. Therefore, I shall concentrate on a few confusions that arise from this equivocal mode of logic.

The first confusion arises when Derrida correctly points to the "heterogeneous" nature of negative theology and the fact that it has to be examined in its own context:

... the general name of "negative theology" may conceal the confusions it causes and sometimes gives rise to simplistic interpretations. Perhaps there is within it, hidden, restless, diverse, and itself heterogeneous, a voluminous and nebulous multiplicity of potentials to which the single expression "negative theology" yet remains inadequate. In order to engage oneself seriously in this debate, I have often responded, it would be necessary to clarify this designation by considering quite dissimilar corpuses, scenes, proceedings, and languages. (HAS, 12)

Here Derrida agrees with the fact that negative theology is a plural dialogic notion that remains very dependent on its various contexts. In his letter accompanying the essay "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy" to the editor of *Semeia*, Derrida seems to accept half-heartedly that, "what is called 'negative theology' (a rich and very diverse corpus) does not let itself be easily assembled under the general category of 'onto-theology-to-be-deconstructed'".<sup>37</sup> In this statement, Derrida finally attempts to differentiate negative theology from metaphysical theology or onto-theology. Therefore, I would first argue that Derrida needs to be less adamant in his considering negative theology as 'hyperessential'. For instance, while negative theology is very metaphysical in some traditions, it can prove to be particularly non-

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Letter to John P. Leavey, Jr.," *Semeia*, 23 (1982), p. 61.

metaphysical when it ascribes God's characteristics to man and sees no difference between them. The moment of union with the Absolute in mystical traditions is, in fact, when all the 'beyond' is trespassed.<sup>38</sup> This can be recognised as the apparent contradiction between the notions of 'beyond' and 'without,' to which Derrida admits later in his essay "*Sauf le nom*" (SN, 35). The plural attributes of the name of God suggest that there may be an element of apophatic thinking in religious traditions that acknowledges the inadequacy of words and even contradictory meanings or attributes towards negation.

Therefore, I would argue that apophatic discourse as a deconstructive force in theology questions the meaning or the attribute of the Absolute. It achieves this by referring us to as many signs as possible that can easily be substituted, declaring that we can only know the signs rather than the meanings. This makes the stability and univocality of meanings impossible. And this is when, as Ian Netton suggests, semiotics takes over from theology.<sup>39</sup> But Netton later reminds us that the word 'God' cannot be taken as a "true sign." As Todorov says, God is not a sign, the word 'God' remains transcendent by not meaning anything. We learn nothing about God by the word 'God.' It is distinct from other words by "a divergence between itself and other words: and it signifies more than just a divergence. It signifies a great gulf, a vacuum, an absence of 'meaning'".<sup>40</sup> I can conclude that Derrida is taking the name of God as another proper name that is outside language and which resists meaning. Yet, he *simultaneously* takes the name of God as an example of the name or even names in general (SN, 76).<sup>41</sup> This is one of the affinities between deconstruction and negative

<sup>38</sup> In theology, there are two distinct attitudes towards this subject. While in some theological arguments, God and man are incompatible and of two distinct entities, in others we find a much closer relation. In brief, onto-theology sees God as an existence distinct from human existence while mystical theology is oriented on the original unity of man and God and also their possible reunion. Therefore, this romantic desire for union challenges the notion of 'beyond' continuously.

<sup>39</sup> Ian Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology*, p. 324.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of this *deliberate contradiction*, see Part I in which I explain how Derrida reads the story of the Tower of Babel. In brief, for Derrida, God simultaneously asks his name to be translated (in the name of the tower, 'Babel') and keeps his name 'safe' in resisting towards its being translated. This double command makes his name a common noun and a proper name at the same time.

theology: in both we see a structural resistance towards stable and univocal meanings, referents and attributes.

The second problem in Derrida's argument lies in the relation of negative theology to theology (or what is perceived of theology as an onto-theological entity). As I mentioned earlier, Derrida takes examples from Dionysius and others arguing that their theological discourse is mainly hyperessential. Yet, as I discussed above, the notion of 'hyper' (beyond) is treated in different terms in theology. I suggest that Derrida's reference to theology as a metaphysical thinking goes back to his usage of the term 'theological' and its implications. Therefore, I will present a brief explanation of what is meant by the term 'theology' in his writings.

Interestingly, in "Différance," when denying the affinity between theology and deconstruction, Derrida is quick to mention that what he means by "theology" is in fact "onto-theology." Regarding negative theology, he thinks that, although God's being is refused, he is granted a more superior being after all:

And yet those aspects of *différance* which are 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. (DF, 6)

Therefore, for him, *différance*

*is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. (DF, 6)

However, he eventually accepts that *différance*, while including onto-theology, exceeds "it without return" (DF, 6). Therefore, he finally accepts the affinity but in a certain way.



As I pointed out earlier, when Derrida critiques negative theology on the basis of its hyperessentiality, he excludes non-metaphysical theologies. However, Derrida's attitude becomes ambivalent at this point. He calls negative theology non-theological but still deeply metaphysical. There is no doubt that many non-metaphysical 'doctrines' only claim to be non-metaphysical. But we cannot ignore an important corpus of theological texts that overturn the hierarchy, challenge God as the highest ground, and place God as a pervasive 'entity' spread throughout the universe. This kind of discourse considers no hierarchy between an existence as God and other existences. According to Altizer, when Derrida resists the affinity between deconstruction and negative theology, he only identifies God in his Christian identification as "pure or immediate presence".<sup>42</sup> Instead, Altizer sees an explosion of the Hellenic understanding of God as "total self-presence" in recent theological thought.<sup>43</sup> According to this perspective, "God is the name of that center which is everywhere, but it is everywhere only by being nowhere where it is only itself. . .".<sup>44</sup> God, in short, becomes the 'centre' that is explicated at the beginning of "Structure, Sign, and Play". The centre paradoxically remains "*within* the structure and *outside* it". For the centre, while being at the centre of the totality of structure, "does not belong to the totality" because "it is not part of the totality". Therefore, "the centre is not the centre" (SSP, 123-24).

Let us now return to the notions of 'beyond' and 'being.' Derrida, in "*Sauf le nom*," sees the non-theological facet of negative theology more precisely and writes: "*On the one hand . . . .* the principle of negative theology, in a movement of internal rebellion, radically contests the tradition from which it seems to come. Principle against principle" (SN, 67). Yet later, he argues that negative theology still belongs to this tradition of 'presence':

<sup>42</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, "History as Apocalypse," in Thomas J. J. Altizer, ed., *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 148.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

But *on the other hand*, and in that very way, nothing is more faithful than this hyperbole to the originary ontotheological injunction. The *post-scriptum* remains a *countersignature*, even if it denies this. And, as in every human or divine signature, there the name is necessary [*il y faut le nom*]. (SN, 68)

Derrida himself knows that these boundaries are not distinct. He elsewhere acknowledges the fact that “beyond,” for Dionysius, “exceeds the opposition between affirmation and negation” (HAS, 20), and then problematises the notion of ‘beyond’ when he writes:

The *without* of which I spoke a moment ago marks neither a privation, a lack, nor absence. As for the *beyond* (*hyper*) of that which is beyond Being (*hyperousios*), it has the double and ambiguous meaning of what is above in a hierarchy, thus both beyond and more. (HAS, 20)

Although Derrida correctly sees a double signification, here he tries to adhere to the concept of ‘beyond’ as a positive statement towards the metaphysical existence of being. And this eventually and inevitably results in the exclusion of the duality earlier asserted. In “*Sauf le nom*,” he asserts this again. For him, even when apophatic theology creates an ambivalence, it still belongs to the metaphysical realm of beyond:

In the most apophatic moment, when one says: “God is not,” “God is neither this nor that, neither that nor its contrary” or “being is not,” etc., even then it is still a matter of saying the entity [*étant*] such as it is, in its truth, even were it metaphysical, meta-ontological. It is a matter of holding the promise of saying the truth at any price, of testifying, of rendering oneself to the truth of the name, to the thing itself such as it must be named by the name, *that is, beyond the name*. (SN, 68)

One of the important distinguishing lines between metaphysical and non-metaphysical theologies lies in the notions of ‘loving’ and ‘knowing’. Therefore, in order to distinguish these two facets of theology (onto and non-onto), I suggest that the two significant notions of ‘loving’ and ‘knowing’ should be examined. Generally speaking, mysticism incorporates that part of theology which deals only with the

relationship between man and God by the help of love. For the mystic, knowing and reasoning the 'origin' and 'existence' of God is not important at all. In other words, negative theology sees 'heuristic' knowledge as prior to the 'cognitive' one. And we know that Derrida also defines epistemological questions as essentially metaphysical.<sup>45</sup> This, of course, is the opposite of the conventional theological thought in which God is an 'origin' to be justified by reason. Hart problematises this argument later by saying that:

There can be no strict division between 'knowing' and 'loving' with regards to mystical experience. St. Teresa may be right to affirm that 'the important thing is not to think much, but to love much', but this is a matter of priority not of exclusive prescription. Furthermore, even though mystical experience is more concerned with loving than with knowing, it bespeaks a relation between the two. The mystic loves God because he or she already knows something of Him: love in quest of knowledge, and knowledge leads to a deepening of love.<sup>46</sup>

I would argue that this uncertainty about the distinction between 'knowing' and 'loving' lies in the fact that the meaning of 'knowing' in mystical terminology is different from what it is in conventional theology or analytical philosophy. As Hart reminds us, 'loving' and 'knowing' inter-relate in a curious way. 'Knowing' is no longer an epistemological quest for an answer and, in effect, it becomes identified with 'illumination'.<sup>47</sup>

What I conclude from my above contention is that the distinction between 'ono-theological' and 'theological' (non-metaphysical and mystical) should be at the heart of our reading of Derrida and negative theology. This, I believe, is a more precise distinction in comparison to the Greek versus Hebrew contention of Susan Handelman's in which Derrida is placed firmly in the Hebrew camp.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, p. 103.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> I will return to the notion of 'illumination' and epiphany later in this part. Further related discussion on the notion of 'knowledge' can be found in Part I.

<sup>48</sup> See Part II for a discussion of Handelman's argument.

The third reason why Derrida's argument on the hyperessentiality of negative theology has flaws goes back to his examination of Heidegger's theological presumptions in "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials." In the last part of this lecture, Derrida focuses on Heidegger's theology without 'being'. Yet the section on Heidegger contradicts Derrida's argument in the earlier part of the lecture. Heidegger, according to Derrida, has argued that

"the word 'being' [das Wort 'Sein']" should not take place, occur, happen (*vorkommen*) in his text. It is a matter of "remaining silent," as one would prefer to do, he says elsewhere, when the "thinking of God" (on the subject of God) is in question. No; the point is, rather, not to allow the word *being* to occur, on the subject of God. (HAS, 58)

In fact, Derrida recalls a famous comment made in 1951 at a seminar in Zurich in which, in Derrida's words, Heidegger asserted that "Being and God are not identical, and that he would always avoid thinking God's essence by means of Being" (HAS, 58). Derrida repeats this comment by Heidegger in his letter to the editors of the *Semeia* journal:

If I were still writing a theology - I am sometimes tempted to do that - the expression 'Being' should not figure in it. . . . There is nothing to be done here with Being. I believe Being can never be thought as the essence and the bottoming of god. . . .<sup>49</sup>

But what does Heidegger really mean by theology without 'being'? Derrida sees a distinction between two kinds of theology in Heidegger:

It is necessary to distinguish between, on the one hand, onto-theology or theiology, and on the other hand, theology. The former concerns the supreme being, the being *par excellence*, ultimate foundation or *causa sui* in its divinity. The latter is a science of faith or of divine speech, such as it manifests itself in revelation (*Offenbarung*). (HAS, 55)

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<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Letter to John P. Leavey, Jr.," p. 61.

Heidegger sees, on one side, the “onto-theology or theiology”<sup>50</sup> whose only concern is the hyperessential themes and doctrines in which, through reason, the position of God is confirmed while, on the other side, revelation and heart-felt faith in God is not much concerned with reason and the position of supreme being. A more interesting point, though, is the fact that Derrida is inscribing this distinction in his study of theology. This distinction explains that one cannot unproblematically exclude the negation of the concepts of ‘beyond’ and ‘being’ from the corpus of theological discourse. In other words, Derrida ends up saying what he did not mean to say: namely, that there is a non-metaphysical force within theology (what he simply calls ‘theology’ in the above citation). Therefore, if we agree on a negative force against ‘being’ and ‘beyond’ in some corpus of theological discourse, Derrida’s earlier remarks stating that hyperessentiality is still the essence of negative theology are obviously contradicted.

Thus, I would conclude that negative theology in a restricted sense (which is not far from the context of Derrida’s study of theology) deconstructs the main trend in theology. While Derrida himself recognises a “more or less tenable analogy” in the manner of a “family resemblance” (HAS, 4) between *différance* and negative theology, I would argue that this relation is stronger than that. Kevin Hart asserts that “[i]n short, negative theology performs the deconstruction of positive theology”.<sup>51</sup> I believe that most of Derrida’s reservations regarding negative theology are a misplacement of the subject. In other words, Derrida seems to be involved in a deconstructive reading of negative theology and he tries to show that it does not do what it says. Yet this method cannot work because (especially in his later works) he seems to be fascinated by the idea that negative theology is a discourse of ‘beyond’. Stephen D. Moore calls negative theology “a self-subverting discourse that systematically showcases its own inadequacy to the theological task of enclosing God in concepts - a stuttering disruption of the

<sup>50</sup> Heidegger coins the term ‘theiology’ meaning “first philosophy” as “the science that observes beings as beings”. Heidegger writes: “First philosophy, as ontology, is also the theology of what truly is. It should more accurately be called theiology. The science of beings as such is in itself onto-theological” (HAS, 69). In other words, ‘theiology’ can be called a term shared by the ontology of religion and philosophy.

<sup>51</sup> Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, p. 202.

confident assertions of conventional theological discourse”.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, as Derrida himself recognises, negative theology is a discourse that stays within language and points beyond. And perhaps this paradoxical ‘place’ is the only place one can remain. As a result, Derrida’s fascination with negative theology seems to have its roots in the way the language of negative theology remains at this paradoxical point. In other words, it stays *within* language but points *beyond*. Deconstruction remains close to negative theology as far as this paradox is concerned, yet these two discourses have no similarity in the objects of their study. The language of negative theology stays within and without its discourse in relation to the notion of the divine, whereas deconstructive language stays at the same paradoxical point due to its examination of metaphysical limits in literary and philosophical discourse. I will return to this later.

I shall now move on to the particulars of Derrida’s thought on negation and relate them to some presumptions about the aporia of transcendence on the name of God discussed in Chapter Six. The paradoxes of negation, in both apophatic discourse and Derrida’s deconstructive thinking, can contribute greatly to my later concluding argument in this chapter that apophatic theology is a discourse *on* and *in* language.

### *Derridean paradoxes of negation*

Here, I will argue that the notion of negation for Derrida is caught in the same paradoxical - or as Barbara Johnson coins it “nonbinary”<sup>53</sup> - logic. Explicating Derrida’s position on the notion of negation is extremely integral to this study simply because Derrida has been repeatedly accused of being purely nihilistic in his thought. For instance, David E. Klemm, in his “Open Secrets: Derrida and Negative Theology,” even after a very interesting argument which I will return to later in this chapter, argues that Derrida’s distinction from negative theology is this pure negative thinking of deconstruction:

<sup>52</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> Barbara Johnson, “Translator’s Introduction,” p. xvii.

The resemblance to negative theology to which Derrida points can only be to the purely negative side of negative theology. But negative theology works by way of interplay between positive and negative ways. Derrida's relation to the positive is purely parasitical; he cannot incorporate it.<sup>54</sup>

This, I think, represents a typical confusion of the relation between deconstruction and negation. What I attempt to argue here is that Derrida does not see a prevalence of negation or absence in discourse, as many believe. Instead, the prominent point in his argument is the interaction and the interdependence of negation and affirmation (that is, paradox). This is the theme of many of Derrida's texts that I will examine in relation to language and discourse.<sup>55</sup>

Here, I will outline a few exemplary arguments made by Derrida regarding negation. In his lecture, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," Derrida argues that there is always already an existence of speaking. He argues that even if language does not say anything at all, it still "takes place," because it is still addressed towards "the other" who calls or to whom the speech is addressed. Derrida adds that "this call of the other" has "always already preceded the speech". It "announces itself in advance as a recall". He therefore concludes:

<sup>54</sup> David E. Klemm, "Open Secrets: Derrida and Negative Theology," p. 16. To give another example, I could mention Edith Wyschogrod's article, "How to Say No in French: Derrida and Negation in Recent French Philosophy," in which she basically stages a new opposition. To her, the notion of negation is essentially a French phenomenon while the Anglo-American philosophy is the philosophy of affirmation (in Robert P. Scharlemann, ed., *Negation and Theology* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992)).

<sup>55</sup> However, misunderstandings can always be found easily even in the most unexpected places. For instance, the term '*dénégations*' in the title of the essay "*Comment ne pas parler: dénégations*," has been translated as "denials." This changes completely the connotations of the term '*dénégations*' that is, in effect, an affirmative notion. Graham Ward translates the whole title as "How to Speak of the Negative: Concerning Negation" or literally "how not to say: a discourse on representation of the negative" (Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and Language of Theology*, p. 252). Furthermore, John Caputo translates the verb "de-negated" as "un-negated or divulged" (John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 33). I think Caputo's point goes back to Mark C. Taylor's elaborate discussion on this "mistranslation" in his article "nO nOt nO." Taylor argues that denegation "neither asserts nor denies" (Mark C. Taylor, "nO nOt nO," in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds., *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 184). It "repeats what it attempts to avoid, affirms what it tries to negate, owns what it seeks to disown" (Taylor, p. 176). I would argue, therefore, that what 'denegation' means becomes identical to the meaning of 'apophasis'. As I discussed earlier, apophasis is about denying what one in fact is doing. Therefore, 'denegation' becomes "the *saying* of the un-saying" (Taylor, p. 180). Derrida himself defines the term 'denegation' as "a negation that denies itself" (HAS, 95).

Such a reference to the other will always have taken place. 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. A trace of an event older than it or of a "taking-place" to come, both of them: here there is neither an alternative nor a contradiction. (HAS, 27-8)

Here, Derrida evidently maintains that apophatic discourse despite all negations and denials is "taking place" in different forms. As I will elaborate later in this chapter, this debt to the other that takes place always already both promises the affirmative and refuses the negative. In the same lecture, he surprisingly refers to deconstruction as the last testimony of faith<sup>56</sup> (HAS, 7), and places 'beyond' in an aporetic position, which exceeds negation and affirmation. Therefore, to Derrida, the expressible and inexpressible, the secret and non-secret, affirmation and negation, all intersect and coexist.

I choose another example from Derrida's account of de Man's notion of 'aporia' to elaborate on this paradox of negation. Derrida thinks that many misunderstandings occur if we turn to literal meanings of 'aporia'. Definitions such as "an absence of path, a paralysis before roadblocks, the immobilization of thinking, the impossibility of advancing, a barrier blocking the future" (MPDM, 132-3), give 'aporia' a negative sense. Instead, Derrida thinks that "the experience of the aporia," for de

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<sup>56</sup> Derrida suggests deconstruction to be the last testimony of faith in response to those who "consider 'deconstruction' a symptom of modern or postmodern nihilism" (HAS, 7). He compares it to arguing that in answer to those who need a proof for the existence of God, one can see "the first mark of respect for a divine cause which does not even need to 'be'" and surprisingly this logic lies in the heart of "the negation or suspension of the predicate, even of the thesis of 'existence'" (HAS, 7). Derrida elsewhere talks about the way 'deconstructive theology' can liberate theology especially in the context of 'faith':

the point would seem to be to liberate theology from what has been grafted on to it, to free it from its metaphysico-philosophical super ego, so as to uncover an authenticity of the 'gospel', of the evangelical message. And thus from the perspective of faith, deconstruction can at least be a very useful technique when Aristotelianism or Thomism are to be criticized or, even from an institutional perspective, when what needs to be criticized is a whole theological institution which supposedly has covered over, dissimulated an authentic Christian message. And a real possibility for faith both at the margins and very close to Scripture, a faith lived in a venturesome, dangerous, free way. ("Deconstruction in America: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," with James Creech, Peggy Kamuf, and Jane Todd, *Critical Exchange*, 17 (Winter 1985), p. 12)



Man, "gives or promises the thinking of the path, provokes the thinking of the very possibility of what still remains unthinkable or unthought, indeed, impossible" (MPDM, 132-3). Then he moves on to link this reading of 'aporia' to his logic of "simultaneous contradiction":

Now the aporetic always immobilizes us in the *simultaneously* unsurpassable and unsatisfying system of an opposition, indeed, of a contradiction. The aporia is apparently, in its negative aspect, the negative contraction of the dialectic, a dialectic which does not find its path or its method, its grand methodical circle.

But, against this negative reading, Derrida argues that

aporecity evokes, rather than prohibits, more precisely, promises *through* its prohibition, an other thinking, an other text, the future of another promise. All at once the impasse (*the dead end*) becomes the most "trustworthy," "reliable" place or moment for reopening a question which is finally equal to or on the same level as that which remains difficult to think. (MPDM, 132-3)

Derrida's notion of aporia, to me, is the response to the closed system of logocentrism which finds direct transcendental equivalents to every concept. Aporia points the conventional theological and philosophical thinking to the notion of 'the other'. It sees the limits of the logocentric system that is unable to fulfil its promise of representing all concepts through transcendence. Instead, it demonstrates the fact that sometimes the negation of language can be the best way to represent some concepts and also how understanding of concepts are linked to differential thinking. John Caputo draws our attention to this double bind in the apophatic discourse of negative theology that claims God cannot be named, etc. He relates this to the point that negative theology, through ineffability, in effect saves the name of God. It is a way of *saying* and *saving* "God such as he is," beyond all idols and images, a way of "respond[ing] to the true name of God, to the name to which God responds and corresponds".<sup>57</sup> Derrida writes:

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<sup>57</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 46. Reference is to SN, 69.

They name God, speak of him, speak *him*, speak to *him*, let *him speak in them*, let themselves be carried by him, make (themselves) a reference to just what the name supposes to name beyond itself, the nameable beyond the name, the unnameable nameable. As if it was necessary both to save the name and to save everything except the name, *save the name* [sauf le nom], as if it was necessary to lose the name in order to save what bears the name, or that toward which one goes through the name. But to lose the name is not to attack it, to destroy it or wound it. On the contrary, to lose the name is quite simply to respect it: as name. (SN, 58)

However, I would argue that Derrida does not want to save the name of God *as it is* because saving the name of God *as it is* means to give a 'higher,' more 'original' and 'centred' place to the name of God, and we know that Derrida is always suspicious of this movement. For him, the name is saved *if its being is questioned*. The impossible denial of the being of God and his name is the way in which God and his name can be saved in a more subtle way.<sup>58</sup>

David E. Klemm's main argument in "Open Secrets: Derrida and Negative Theology" is based on the analogy between the name of God and *différance* (or any other Derridean terms, for that matter). He believes that these two apophatic discourses deal with an "open secret". They point openly to the unknown yet warn us of the fact that it remains a secret. Klemm correctly argues that one of the reasons Derrida is so closely associated with negative theology is because his apophatic discourse is engaged in a "secret disclosure" as in religion. It resembles the "theological discourse" that "both veil divine wisdom (since it cannot be spoken in propositions) and unveil divine wisdom (by fighting it enigmatically)".<sup>59</sup> This open secret is particularly effective in the act of the naming the unnameable.<sup>60</sup> However, what Klemm concludes with is a restricted difference between theological discourse and deconstructive one: "Whereas the theological name both veils and unveils, the Derridian sign eternally differs itself

<sup>58</sup> This is an important point in which my argument connects to Part I. We recall how Derrida uses the same 'logic' to say that singularity is not a way of decaying. The impossibility of uniqueness paves the way for the universalisation and reiteration of the singular. Therefore, paradoxically the impossibility and necessity of repetition saves the singular.

<sup>59</sup> David E. Klemm, "Open Secrets: Derrida and Negative Theology," p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

from other signs and defers meaning".<sup>61</sup> I would disagree with this contention on the basis of my study of the paradox of negation and the interplay of negation and affirmation in deconstruction.

One of the main contentions of Derrida regarding the process of signification and the existence of meaning comes from this hypothesis. Derrida does not negate the process of signification. Instead, he claims that the act of unveiling the meaning inside the text (language) results in its further veiling. Yet this position has created some confusions regarding the play of reading and misreading, or absence and presence. Habermas, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, argues that, for Derrida, "any interpretation is inevitably a false interpretation, and any understanding a misunderstanding".<sup>62</sup> What Habermas is pointing to is the context of 'iterability' and how 'iterability' can lead readings to further readings. My reason for saying this is that Habermas, in support of his argument, cites a passage from Johnathan Culler's *On Deconstruction*. In this passage, Culler argues that any act of reading is a new understanding of the text and as a result we do not have any single and identical reading. Since I have discussed the significance of singularity in its relation to meaning and interpretation in Part I and II, I will not repeat myself here. I will confine myself to citing an answer that Derrida has given to Habermas. Derrida's response, I think, will shed more light on the relation between the alleged opposition between reading and misreading and, on a more general scale, absence and presence:

The relation of 'mis' (mis-understanding, mis-interpreting, for example) to that which is not 'mis-', is not at all that of a general law of cases, but that of a *general possibility inscribed in* the structure of positivity, of normality, of the 'standard.' All that I recall is that this *structural possibility* must be taken into account when describing so-called ideal normality, or so-called just comprehension or interpretation, and that this possibility can be neither *excluded nor opposed*. An entirely different logic is called for. (LI, 157)

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 15. Klemm repeats this point in his "Back to Literature - and Theology?" in David Jasper, ed., *Postmodernism, Literature and the Future of Theology* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1993), p. 187.

<sup>62</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 198.

I would conclude that, for Derrida, negation and affirmation intersect, interrelate, and coexist instead of working against each other. This is a significant argument for two reasons: Derrida here challenges *first* the way one side of the oppositions has always been privileged in the history of Western philosophy, and *secondly* the way the existence/presence of one side has been presumed equal to the non-existence/absence of the other.<sup>63</sup> Thus, for Derrida, the affirmative inevitably and necessarily passes through the negative.

### *'The impossible'*

Go there where you cannot go, to the impossible, it is indeed the only way of going or coming. To go there where it is possible is not to surrender, rather, it is to be already there and to paralyze oneself in the in-decision of the non-event.  
(SN, 75)

In deconstruction, 'the impossible' is not in binary opposition to 'the possible'. In Kevin Hart's words, the possible and the impossible "are not to be resolved dialectically or logically: they arrange and rearrange themselves in the negative form of an aporia".<sup>64</sup> I suggest that a study of the notion of the impossible will elaborate even more on the role of negation in deconstruction. I take 'the impossible' as the general notion of negativity that *positively* paves the way towards the affirmative. I propose to examine the notion of 'the impossible' in Derrida's thought as *the* way towards the possibility. Derrida acknowledges the fact that this is quite an unorthodox way of defining 'the impossible':

I have been regularly lead back over the past thirty years, and in relation to quite different problems, to the necessity of defining the transcendental condition of

<sup>63</sup> On the latter point, I'd like to point out an example. Levinas's postulate on the absence of God can shed light on the way paradox acts in Derrida's thought. Levinas believes that the absence of "the God of the Holocaust" is not equal to non-existence. Based on this, he theorises a "trust in an absent God" (Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, p. 172). Susan Handelman connects this point to Derrida's understanding of the schism between Jews and Greeks: "absence does not equal nonexistence. Absence, otherness, the 'trace,' all of Derrida's primary terms, comprise a vocabulary that seeks to evade the either/or trap of being-or-nonbeing of Greek philosophy" (Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, p. 172). For Derrida, instead of absence and presence, we play in the game of *différance*.

<sup>64</sup> Kevin Hart, "Jacques Derrida: The God Effect," p. 278.

possibility as also being a condition of impossibility. This is something that I am not able to annul. Clearly, to define a function of possibility as a function of impossibility, that is, to define a possibility as its impossibility, is highly unorthodox from a traditional transcendental perspective, and yet this is what reappears all the time, when I come back to the question of the fatality of aporia. (RDP, 82)

'The impossible' is what "thought cannot think".<sup>65</sup> It therefore signifies a paradox in itself. However, one can turn the tables and argue that paradox is also a prominent example of impossibility. I suggest that this relation can say a lot for Derrida's interest in the notion of the impossible. Indeed, Derrida has always been fascinated by the notion of 'the impossible'. For him, the impossible is the *necessary* way (indeed the *necessary possibility*) towards possibilities. He reads Silesius's poetry in "*Sauf le nom*," and cites Silesius saying: "*The most impossible is possible*" (SN, 44). He reminds us that Silesius's poetry is full of images in which the place where God is located is the place where you cannot go, see, or hear (SN, 44). It becomes a place of non-being close to what he discusses elsewhere as *Khora*. I start my reading of the notion of the 'impossible' with an account of its relation to deconstruction:

. . . undecidability is the *condition* of all deconstruction. . . . There is in this a power (a possibility) and a limit. But this limit, this finitude, empowers and makes one write; in a way it obliges deconstruction to write, to trace its path by linking its "act," always an act of memory, to the promised future of a text to be signed. The very oscillation of undecidability goes back and forth and weaves a text; it makes, if this is possible, a path of writing through aporia. This is impossible, but no one has ever said that deconstruction, as a technique or a method, was possible; it thinks only on the level of the impossible and of what is still evoked as unthinkable. (MPDM, 135)

In order to clarify the statement that deconstruction happens "only on the level of the impossible," I shall introduce a few prominent contexts. I will explain how the relation

<sup>65</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. xx.

between the impossible and the possible can be seen in the contexts of translation, interpretation, and finally theological hermeneutics.

In the context of translation, as I discussed in Chapters Two and Three, untranslatability (the impossibility of translation) is called for in order to survive the original. The impossible in this context becomes the most affirmative and indeed the most possible effect that can happen to the text. In "Ulysses Gramophone," Derrida argues that the only thing translatable indeed comes from the untranslatable: "what remains *untranslatable* is at bottom the only thing to *translate*, the only thing *translatable*. What must be translated of that which is translatable can only be the untranslatable".<sup>66</sup> Therefore, the text becomes *simultaneously* translatable and untranslatable.

Derrida's account of the possibilities of meaning is reflected in an exemplary deconstructive reading. Geoffrey Bennington, in "Derridabase," introduces a certain relation between 'the possible' and 'the impossible' in Derrida's thought. He contends that, for Derrida, what makes a phenomenon possible immediately paves the way for its impossibility. For instance, what makes a letter to be sent and received, makes its non-arrival also possible. He applies this thought to the operation of language and the transmission of meaning: "What allows language to be transmitted in a tradition opens meaning to a dissemination which always threatens any transmission of a thought".<sup>67</sup> I would argue that this reading of Derrida by Bennington is correct yet incomplete. It is true that Derrida is sceptical about the possibility of the process of signification and speaks of "the necessity of defining the transcendental condition of possibility as also being a condition of impossibility" (RDP, 82). However, the argument does not end at this point. He follows this path by stating that multiple possibilities result from these impossibilities. The event of signification happens only when it passes through the resistance of the text. The impossibility of getting across any meaning at all miraculously results in a kind of 'meaning event'. This is in accord with Derrida's

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone," trans. Tina Kendall and Shari Benstock, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 257-58.

<sup>67</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, "Derridabase," pp. 276-77.

formulation of the notion of the 'text.' As Graham Ward writes, "[t]he text itself becomes a sort of hole, or aporia through which we glimpse the indefinable".<sup>68</sup> For Derrida, silence (non-communication) emerges as the (necessary) condition for the possibility of meaning. Thus, in deconstruction, interpretation (and translation as an example of interpretation) is possible but in a paradoxical manner: possibilities of meaning occur particularly when the reader confronts real obstacles in understanding.<sup>69</sup>

In the context of theology, Derrida acknowledges that what deconstruction or deconstructive reading shares with negative theology is a certain "experience of the impossible" (SN, 43) (BM, 234). Deconstruction, as John Caputo reminds us, is called forth "in response to the unrepresentable".<sup>70</sup> It "stirs with a passion for the impossible, *passion du lieu*, a passion for an impossible place, a passion to go precisely where you cannot go".<sup>71</sup> As an example, God becomes part of this logic. Kevin Hart in "Jacques Derrida: The God Effect," writes: "God is possible, says the positive theologian, meaning that the divine is revealed if only we would see (and the terms of seeing are then spelt out). God is impossible, says the negative theologian, meaning that God always exceeds the concept of God".<sup>72</sup> Derrida, in "*Sauf le nom*," asserts that the deep-rooted notion of the impossible in theology

seems strangely familiar to the experiences of what is called deconstruction. . . . deconstruction has often been defined as the very experience of the (impossible) possibility of the impossible, of the most impossible, a condition that deconstruction shares with the gift, the "yes," the "come," decision, testimony, the secret, etc. And perhaps death. (SN, 43)

<sup>68</sup> Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 28. This is particularly seen in literary writing. One of my major arguments in this thesis is that the literary text is an endeavour against the resisting forces of language. It strives towards breaking the silence. This interestingly results from acknowledging the limits of language in the first place. The next chapter will shed more light on this.

<sup>69</sup> This can be seen especially in the practice of literary writing in the modern period.

<sup>70</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. xix.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Kevin Hart, "Jacques Derrida: The God Effect," p. 278.

I believe that here the question of 'decision' or 'decidability' links closely to the notion of 'the impossible'. In fact, this relation will shed more light on the concept of 'undecidability' in deconstruction. For Derrida, *decisions* pass through *the undecidable*:

Going where it is possible to go would not be a displacement or a decision, it would be the irresponsible unfolding of a program. The sole decision possible passes through the madness of the undecidable and the impossible: to go where (*wo, Ort, Wort*) it is impossible to go. (SN, 59)

Deconstruction comes very close to theology in the version outlined by theologians such as Karl Barth. Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics*, writes: "the concept of truths or revelation in the sense of Latin propositions given and sealed once for all with divine authority in both wording and meaning is theologically impossible . . . [I]t is a fact that revelation . . . is thus strictly future for us".<sup>73</sup> This kind of theology is based on "repetition, representation and textuality".<sup>74</sup> It is an apocalyptic theology based on its possibility in the future. Graham Ward thinks of this open theology as analogous to Derrida's remaining 'on the threshold,' and the notions of 'the trace of a gift,' 'promise,' 'yes,' and 'hope' that bear "none of the specifics of Christian proclamation or Jewish eschatology".<sup>75</sup>

### *Deconstruction and theology as 'promise'*

As I argued above, theological discourse is the discourse of promise. Ward asserts that "the possibility for theology, if there is one, lies in the future. It haunts the margins of every text. It makes questioning significant".<sup>76</sup> Derrida accedes to this point and argues that theological discourse is a text that turns "toward a past *and* toward a future that are as yet unrepresentable" (HAS, 11-12). Derrida calls the name of God ("I am who I

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and Language of Theology*, p. 256.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 255.



am") "a formula whose original grammatical form, as we know, implies the future".<sup>77</sup>

In "How to Avoid Speaking," he elaborates on the notion of promise:

I will speak of a promise, then, but also within the promise. The experience of negative theology perhaps holds to a promise, that of the other, which I must keep because it commits me to speak where negativity ought to absolutely rarefy discourse. . . . I will thus not speak of this or that promise, but of that which, as necessary as it is impossible, inscribes us its trace in language - before the language. . . . The promise of which I shall speak will have always escaped this demand of presence. It is older than I am or than we are. In fact, it renders possible every present discourse on presence. (HAS, 14-15)

As we see, Derrida is not talking about theology. He traces the notion of promise in all discourse. Deconstruction is not an exception to this. In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida asserts that deconstruction, as the impossible, points to "a certain experience of the promise".<sup>78</sup> Deconstruction, as 'the impossible,' therefore becomes a promise of something always to come, an open theology for the future. In Chapter One, I mentioned briefly the way de Certeau looks at mystic speech as promise. Chapter Two ended with the conclusion that translation remains as a promise. I argued that, for Derrida, translation is an impossible task that promises the survival of the original, while for Benjamin it promises the 'kingdom' in which all languages reconcile. As I will elaborate here, Derrida has forged an even stronger link between deconstruction and 'the promise'.

In this section, I would argue that the relation of promise to the language of deconstruction is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it shows the openness of the deconstructive discourse towards the future. By situating deconstruction in the future, Derrida not only points towards its impossibility and failure but also towards its openendedness contrary to the traditional philosophical doctrines ending with closure. Secondly, characterising this language as 'promise' inscribes within it the existence of

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 54.

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 89.

an 'other'. In other words, the language of promise is a language that is always addressed (promised) towards an 'other'. Thirdly, it points towards an apocalyptic essence of language which brings in the question of revelation once again.

I would claim that the most significant point that deconstruction raises regarding the promise is the argument that *language promises* in its every single word. In *Memoires for Paul de Man*, Derrida reminds us of the way de Man rewrites the famous statement by Heidegger. De Man changes Heidegger's "*Die Sprache spricht*" ("language speaks") into "*Die Sprache verspricht*" ("language promises") (MPDM, 97). Derrida concludes from this that "there is no speaking that does not promise" (MPDM, 97). In order to explain this, I need to give a brief outline of Derrida's reading of Austin and the question of 'performative utterance'. To Austin, 'promise' is a performative utterance. Taylor writes: "In contrast to constative utterances, which assert or describe facts or antecedent conditions, a performative utterance is a speech act that realizes a state of affairs that did not exist prior to the language event".<sup>79</sup> Austin believes that in order for a promise to be made we have to have present subjects fully conscious of the present. Taylor elaborates on this when he asserts: "An effective speech act presupposes that the participants are fully conscious of their deeds and clearly understand not only their own intentions but the intentions of each other". In other words, "a promise presupposes the full presence of the present". But according to Derrida, we cannot really have "the presence of self-consciousness and the self-consciousness of presence".<sup>80</sup> This makes the promise an impossible gesture. However, Derrida writes:

the promise is impossible but inevitable. . . . Even if a promise could be kept, this would matter little. What is essential here is that a pure promise cannot properly take place, in a proper place, even though promising is inevitable as soon as we open our mouths - or rather as soon as there is a text. (MPDM, 98)

In many interviews and speeches, Derrida has repeatedly contended that as soon as one opens one's mouth, one promises: "I promise to tell you something, to tell you the

<sup>79</sup> Mark C. Taylor, "nO nOt nO," p. 179.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

truth. Even if I lie, the condition of my lie is that I promise to tell you the truth. So the promise is not just one speech act among others; every speech act is fundamentally a promise".<sup>81</sup> In brief, *the impossibility* and *the inevitability* of the promise within every discourse are the two points Derrida argues that are not acknowledged in Austin's and Searle's theory.

Yet, promise and failure are always juxtaposed. In "Back from Moscow, in the USSR," Derrida argues that deconstruction "only happens, in the form of promise and of failure, of a promise that cannot be *sure of succeeding* except by succeeding in failing" (BM, 234). Language always promises, yet it cannot fulfil its promise simply because it always stays at this 'illocutionary' state of promising. Promise is the only thing language can do if we do not take the possibility of fulfilment into account. For instance, language, through its genre and logic strives to promise a single content or message. In this sense, any writing is a promise. Kevin Hart argues that all texts

are structured as promises. They make a promise to those who read them by their very structure; they may promise to convey emotion or knowledge, or just to speak in an idiom. They commit themselves to work in, around or against certain genres - the essay, the letter, the ode, the prayer, the treatise - to be 'philosophy', or 'theology', or 'literature' or whatever, and to be answerable to the laws of the Church or State. Moreover, they promise to be readable in the absence of author and intended audience.<sup>82</sup>

However, what happens in effect is that this promise is always betrayed by the reader or the one to whom the language is addressed. As a result, the promise of the text is always already a failure.<sup>83</sup> Not only does the other (the reader, and so on) free the text

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<sup>81</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable," in John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 23.

<sup>82</sup> Kevin Hart, "Jacques Derrida: The God Effect," p. 269.

<sup>83</sup> In Derrida's terminology, the promise of the text is also the secret of the text. According to traditional hermeneutics, the secret of the text is that innate message that is promised to be conveyed: "The secret as such, *as secret*, separates and already institutes a negativity; it is negation that denies itself" (HAS, 25). Since this promise is never fulfilled according to Derrida, he concludes that: "There is no secret *as such*; I deny it" (HAS, 26). The secret of the text in fact is not its message because when a text is interpreted, that interpretation in its turn acts as a new text for further interpretations. Thus the text always remains a "secret text". This does not mean that a secret code is transferred from one text to another, etc. But the text itself remains secret or secretive because of the suspension of meaning.

from this singular closure but the text itself, through the overturning devices within the language, betrays its singular 'intention'. Derrida, in other words, takes the notion of promise out of theological discourse and gives it a general interest in the study of language. He talks about the messianic character of language:

It is not a question of a messianism that one could easily translate in Judaeo-Christian or Islamic terms, but rather of a messianic structure that belongs to all language. There is no language without the performative dimension of the promise, the minute I open my mouth I am in the promise. Even if I say that 'I don't believe in truth' or whatever, the minute I open my mouth there is a 'believe me' at work. Even when I lie, and perhaps especially when I lie, there is a 'believe me' at play. And this 'I promise you that I am speaking the truth' is a messianic apriori, a promise which, even if it is not kept, even if one knows that it cannot be kept, takes place and *qua* promise is messianic. (RDP, 82)

As I mentioned above, another important point is the relation between promise and 'the other'. The language of negative theology (or even in this context, theology in general) is the language addressed towards the other, and in literary discourse as the language addressed towards the absent reader. A prominent example can be the language of prayer addressed to God, generally in the form of dialogue, or towards the future as a promise. This aspect of Derrida's philosophy, I believe, is strongly affected by Levinas's theory in which no language exists without an invocation of the other: "The most negative discourse, even beyond all nihilisms and negative dialectics, preserves a trace of the other" (HAS, 27-8). Regarding an examination of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*, Derrida writes:

The prayer, the quotation of the prayer, and the apostrophe, from one you to the other, thus weave the same text, however heterogeneous they appear. There is a text because of this repetition. . . . The identity of *this* place, and hence of *this* text, and of its reader, comes from the future of what is promised by the promise. . . . the apophysis is brought into motion - it is *initiated*, in the sense of initiative and initiation - by the event of a revelation which is also a promise. (HAS, 48-49)

Derrida later explains how the “revealed” place is also the “place of waiting”. It is at this place that one awaits for “the realization of the promise” (HAS, 49). But is it not the characteristic of all theological discourse to address either God or the “better reader” (the reader in the hope of becoming better) as Derrida writes of Dionysius’s (HAS, 48)? Derrida correctly takes this point further by arguing that since, in effect, the divine addressee of the negative theological discourse cannot be named or identified, it still addresses an ‘other’ in order to make the speaker able to speak:

The possible absence of a referent still beckons, if not toward the thing of which one speaks (such is God, who is nothing because He takes place, *without place, beyond being*), at least toward the other (other than Being) who calls or to whom this speech is addressed - even if it speaks only in order to speak, or to say nothing. This call of the other, having always already preceded the speech to which it has never been present a first time, announces itself in advance as a *recall*. Such a reference to the other will always have taken place. Prior to every proposition and even before all discourse in general - whether a promise, prayer, praise, celebration. (HAS, 27-8)

The relation between revelation and promise is also of importance in this study. For Derrida, language is always already apocalyptic because it always points towards a revelation. This revelation is made possible when language faces the impossibilities of the unreadable and the unwritable. In “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” this condition of possibility as something ‘to come’ is closely related to what Derrida calls the apocalyptic condition of all discourse:

wouldn’t the apocalyptic be a transcendental condition of all discourse, of all experience itself, of every mark or every trace? And the genre of writings called “apocalyptic” in a strict sense, then, would be only an example, an exemplary revelation of this transcendental structure. In that case, if the apocalypse reveals, it is first the revelation of the apocalypse, the self-presentation of the apocalyptic structure of language, of writing, of the experience of presence, either of the text or of the mark in general. . . .<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., *Semeia*, 23 (1982), p. 87.

Yet, it is important to mention that Derrida, by acknowledging an apocalyptic quality in language, does not argue that there is a singular meaning hidden within discourse that language promises to reveal in a moment of illumination. For Derrida, the moment of interpretation is the moment of loss. Because when the alleged meaning or 'intention' of the text starts to be signified, it is no longer *the* meaning. Plural meanings are always within and without discourses, and being particularly absent from signs, they function in this absence. The whole point about the promising quality of language is the fact that language is always at the threshold of new meanings. It constantly promises new horizons for the reader (the other) and this is the important distinction between deconstruction and theology.

### *Negative theology as (a discourse on) 'language'*

As I argued earlier, in response to Derrida's 'denials' concerning his affinity to negative theology, his most astute readers propose a major counter argument (a deconstructive reading). I explained that these critics argue that what Derrida objects to is a 'kind' of negative theology, i.e. its metaphysical (hyper-essential, logocentric, or totalising) facet. Yet, negative theology *simultaneously* owns an alternative side and Derrida's thought is very close to "the non-metaphysical" theology. I acknowledge this contention and maintain that much of the misunderstanding comes from the contradictory usage of the term 'theological' in Derrida's writings, as I discussed earlier. However, I will also assert that Derrida's thought regarding negative theology is misunderstood because these exemplary readers have missed an essential point in Derrida's treatment of the subject of negative theology: Derrida reads (negative) theology as 'language' or a discourse "*in and on language*" (SN, 58).<sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup> I believe it is important to mention here that my hypothesis that Derrida considers negative theology as 'language' does not mean that Derrida only talks of negative theology "rhetorically". This is one of the prominent points for which Derrida has been criticised repeatedly. Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is a good example of a critique that accuses Derrida of sophistry, arguing that Derrida has confused the realms of literary and philosophical discourse and uses 'reason' and 'rhetoric' interchangeably in these two discourses. Likewise, David Klemm's "Open Secrets" repeats the same point. My response to this contention is that Derrida is aware and sensitive to the way language

The paradoxes of negation discussed above lead me to propose this *invention* in Derrida's reading of negative theology: negative theology as "a certain typical attitude toward language, and within it" (HAS, 4), as "the most intractable experience of the 'essence' of language" (SN, 54), a "monologue" (SN, 54), "a discourse on language" (SN, 54), the event of negative theology remaining "*in* and *on* language" (SN, 58), and finally even as "a language" (SN, 54). I shall conclude this chapter by exploring this enigmatic statement of Derrida's.

On the one hand, as I examined in this chapter, Derrida's logic and understanding of language are very close to the theological one (especially its negative discourse). A closer look at both of these discourses shows us that the paradoxes of language are present in both. For instance, the structure of 'neither . . . nor' is what is used repeatedly in both of these discourses. Derrida in "How to Avoid Speaking" explains that "the rhetoric of negative determinations" (HAS, 4) is based on this structure. It is in these instances that by rejecting "this or that," Derrida repeats his endless reservations in giving definitions to deconstruction or *différance*, and so on. Yet simultaneously, in negative theology - and deconstruction - the structure of 'both . . . and' grants the discourse a positive character.

On the other hand, Derrida's remark that 'negative theology is language' goes much further than the linguistic logic of negative theology. For him, negative theology becomes entangled in language while being merely about language as well. As an example, let us take Derrida's essay, "*Sauf le nom*." "*Sauf le nom*" is presented in multiple voices and Derrida argues that this is inevitable since he is writing about negative theology. He then refers to *negative theology as a discourse with multiple voices* (SN, 35). As another example, the way the name of God is discussed in negative theology is similar to the way Derrida explains his term *différance*. It is important here to stress that the aporias around the name of God in negative theology are structurally

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works within a discourse and his philosophy is based on this assumption that language in a certain discourse can mislead or overturn the main paradigms of that discourse. A deconstructive reading always points to these weak or, in fact, deconstructive forces within a certain discourse. For a reader who is not familiar with this practice, it might seem that he is confusing languages (reasons, rhetorics, and so on) among different discourses. Yet, his objective is to demonstrate the undecidabilities within discourse.

akin to the way Derrida separates the term *différance* even from a 'concept' or a 'word'.<sup>86</sup> These affinities relate to one another more on a structural level than on a semantic one. The comparison of the treatment of the terms *différance* and 'God' is an appropriate example because it also shows us the reason why many different misreadings of Derrida have taken *différance* as God. It is correct that in both theological discourse and Derrida's writings, *différance* and God are explained, for instance, as unsayable or unthinkable, yet these two terms do not operate in the same way in the two discourses. While the notion of the divine dominates theological discourse, Derrida overturns any superiority of *différance* in his thought.

Therefore, Derrida's thinking is theological in the way that he speaks mostly about the linguistic side of theological thinking (like naming God), but atheological in its wager against metaphysical, hyperessential thought. Caputo writes: "For Derrida, negative theology is an event within language, something happening to language, a certain trembling or fluctuation of language".<sup>87</sup> He stresses that this is why the prominent advocates of negative theology are the most wordy preachers who talk endlessly about the significance of wordlessness and ineffability. Derrida (and indeed Caputo himself) undoubtedly gets dangerously close to this practice.

Likewise, Michel de Certeau, in his "Mystic Speech" argues that mysticism is not primarily aimed at pioneering "new systems of knowledge, topographies, or complementary or substitutive powers". To de Certeau, mysticism reinterprets tradition in the context of a "new treatment of language" and this is true "of all contemporary language" and not exclusively the theological.<sup>88</sup>

Negative theology is a discourse on language. Yet it is also a discourse on the possibility of the impossible. Derrida seems to be joining these two attributes when he claims that to go where it is impossible to go is a "sweet rage against language," a "jealous anger of language within itself and against itself" (SN, 59-60). Negative theology through speaking endlessly about the limitations of language becomes

<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, "Letter to a Japanese Friend."

<sup>87</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 11.

<sup>88</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, p. 81.



increasingly a discourse on language. Moreover through these descriptions it becomes a unique kind of language in itself. In other words, negative theology (and for that matter, deconstruction) is a discourse *on* and *in* language, but towards exceeding language (SN, 48). Derrida refers to negative theology as language because, for him, the language (the way of thinking) of negative theology becomes instrumental for the language of deconstruction. Deconstruction is only similar to negative theology through its logic, its way of thinking, or through its language. I would argue that language is the only binding link between deconstruction and theology. Negative theology deals with the possibilities and impossibilities of expressing the divine name and the divine experience. It reminds us that the paradoxical language of theological discourse demonstrates the deconstructive forces of language within it, whereas Derrida is concerned with the limitations and deconstructive forces of language in philosophical and literary discourse. While both negative theology and deconstruction interrogate the 'limits' of language and the possibility of 'the other,' they remain 'parasitical' in relation to each other and neither of them can claim absolute priority.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Apophasis in Literary Discourse

. . . I shall have to speak of things which I cannot speak. . . . I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never.<sup>1</sup>

I argued in the previous chapter that negative theology and deconstruction share a persistent interest in language, a desire to see beyond language, and an engagement with the possibility of the impossible. Negative theology and deconstruction both tend to exceed language while being aware that this in itself is an impossible task. I take this argument further in this chapter by focusing on the question of language and its play within literary discourse. Through reading Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, I will return to many of the points already discussed in this part and re-examine them in the light of literary discourse.<sup>2</sup>

#### **The Unnamable: *The story of that impossible place named silence***

I would argue that *The Unnamable* is an example of literary discourse with close relations to apophatic discourse. While dealing with the theme of ineffability and negation throughout, the structure of the novel also demonstrates, in practice, the limitations and 'pains' of both language and self. Beckett's writing is also important to this project because of its relation to Derrida. Having been asked about the importance

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder Publications, 1994), p. 294. Thereafter *Unnamable* in parentheses within the text.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to point out from the outset that this reading of Beckett is not intended to find parallel philosophical explanations of the text. Beckett has said in an interview that "[i]f the subject of my novels could be expressed in philosophical terms, I'd have no reason to write them" (J. D. O'Hara, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 9). My intention here is to see how literary discourse becomes the context of the paradox of negation that I demonstrated in the last two chapters.

of Beckett to his work, and the fact that he has never written about Beckett, Derrida answers:

This is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel very close; but also too close. Precisely because of this proximity, it is too hard for me, too easy and too hard. I have perhaps avoided him a bit because of this identification. Too hard also because he writes - in my language, in a language which is his up to a point, mine up to a point (for both of us it is a 'differently' foreign language) - texts which are both too close to me and too distant for me even to be able to 'respond' to them. (TSI, 60)

Derrida acknowledges the fact that Beckett is too close to him because his writing is already "self-deconstructive". He explains how it is impossible to cite some "significant" lines from a work by Beckett because eventually what remains from a Beckett text as his "signature" is "the composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of his works". In other words, the paradoxical deconstructive logic of Beckett's writings can be noted as each statement becomes overturned by the other ones in the text. Derrida argues that Beckett is "nihilist and he is not nihilist". His is a "certain nihilism" that is both "interior to metaphysics" and "then, already, beyond" (TSI, 61). In short, within the domain of literary discourse, Beckett seems to have already achieved what Derrida strives to argue for. Beckett's texts "make the limits of our language tremble" (DO, 162).

*The Unnamable* is a monologue - loosely in the form of a stream of consciousness - told by an unnamable narrator. The fact that it is narrated by one person is, of course, not so certain. The narrator in parts is called Mahood, and in parts is called Worm, but his search for his self makes us less certain about his connection with either of these two. In fact, Mahood and Worm seem to function as foils - or "vice-exister" (*Unnamable*, 317) as he calls them - in order to enable him to situate himself outside so as to see himself: "Mahood. Before him there were others, taking themselves for me" (*Unnamable*, 317). The novel is about the search to define and name oneself, to examine the role of language in this definition, to look at the

'beyond' and examine the possibility of it, and finally to assess the possibility of silence *within* and *beyond* language and being.<sup>3</sup> The novel seems to be derived from the voices inside the narrator. The voices sometimes do not seem to be addressed to a reader, but in fact address themselves to the self. And the dialogue between the voice inside and the consciousness seems to be the way the self tries to find his name. This self-searching is the main motivation for speaking during the first half of the novel which gradually overlaps and becomes overshadowed by the search for silence and peace.

*The Unnamable* is also closely linked to the main themes of negative theology. Although Beckett always resisted any assimilation between his works and theological discourse, his writings have strong theological themes and allusions and have been examined extensively in relation to theological issues in literary criticism. The title phrase, 'the unnamable,' as the first point, can be attributed to both God and *différance*. The title of *The Unnamable* is not simply an allusion; it deals with the same mystical themes of negation, limits of language and self, the beyond and the impossible. While the mystic wants to reject language and speaking because language is inadequate to tell us about truth, unity, beyond, and so on, the narrator of *The Unnamable* starts by saying "I shall have to banish them in the end, the beings, things, shapes, sounds and lights with which my haste to speak has encumbered this place. In the frenzy of utterance the concern with truth" (*Unnamable*, 302). However, one should note that although the structure of the quest in both is the same, as I will demonstrate later, the way the narrator looks at the world beyond, as well as the questions of truth and unity in *The Unnamable*, is fundamentally different from negative theology.

*The Unnamable* is important to our study of apophatic discourse for the following reasons. It unfolds and practises some of the main points discussed in Part III of this project: 1) The language of the novel is based on aporias and paradoxes. Beckett puts dualisms into question. The oppositions of body/spirit,

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<sup>3</sup> The *Unnamable* tells us at the beginning that his story and what he says has already been said before reiterating the philosophical implications of his story: "What I say, what I may say, on this subject, the subject of me and my abode, has already been said since, having always been here, I am here still" (*Unnamable*, 304).

negation/affirmation, silence/speaking, self/other, subject/object are recurrent motifs of the novel that are constantly being deconstructed. 2) The negation of the subject (self) is juxtaposed to the negation of language. They are both under erasure. *I* and more generally *the name* are persistently negated throughout the novel and this is juxtaposed with the language emerging through (and in spite of) the self's struggle to silence it. 3) The impossible and the impossibility of beyond, as the main motifs, are constantly examined in the novel. The novel tells us the story of an impossible place named 'silence'. I would argue that silence is 'the promise' that the language of the novel constantly makes yet is never able to fulfil. Silence - and its connotation, death - becomes part of (inside) the language of the text while always pointing to the outside.

*The Unnamable* is thus about three things, as Beckett's narrator tells us: "in my life, since we must call it so, there were three things, the inability to speak, the inability to be silent, and solitude, that's what I've had to make the best of" (*Unnamable*, 400). *The Unnamable* is the story of the *self* who strives for *silence* but is *obliged to go on*.<sup>4</sup>

### *Aporias and paradoxes of the Unnamable*

The structure and the logic of the argument of *The Unnamable* is built upon an unorthodox relation between oppositions, i.e. paradoxes and aporias. From the very first page, the narrator warns us that the negations and affirmations here are not kept separate or confirmed in their own place. He tells us that he is unable to answer 'yes' or 'no' to questions easily. He asks a few fundamental questions to begin with and leaves them unanswered until the end:

What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? . . . With the yesses and noes it is difficult, they will come back to me as I go along and how, like a bird, to shit on them all without exception. (*Unnamable*, 293-4)

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<sup>4</sup> *The Unnamable* is the third in the so-called trilogy. However, I would examine the novel on its own in line with the way Beckett himself treated the novel as a separate work. In fact, the three novels have always been published separately in their French versions.

The narrator (the Unnamable) has a real problem with affirmative and negative statements throughout the novel. The logic in the novel is based on suggesting a position and immediately overturning it. For most of the 'opinions' and 'emotions,' we can easily find statements that are in contradiction. In other words, the structure of the novel is primarily based on the undecidability of meanings and intentions and the constantly oscillating negative and affirmative remarks: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (*Unnamable*, 418). Wolfgang Iser asserts this point in his reading of *The Unnamable*: "The moment one tries to restrict [Beckett's texts] to a specific meaning they slide away in a new direction."<sup>5</sup> Iser elsewhere points to the same logic when he argues that the structure of the novel is a "relentless process of negation . . . a ceaseless rejection and denial of what has just been said."<sup>6</sup>

As Shira Wolosky correctly contends, this logic not only demonstrates the logic of the narrator but it also challenges the readings of the novel as it defies any kind of closure for these readings: "This unrelenting process of retraction grips not only the narrators, but also the reader, who must ceaselessly undo his own readings. Every construction for interpreting the text must be constantly reviewed and revised".<sup>7</sup> I think it is important that any commentary or reading of *The Unnamable* should take note that to read this kind of discourse is possible only if we allow paradoxes into the commentary, and eventually unfold and deconstruct these paradoxes and double binds.

In order to give an example of the way the oppositions in *The Unnamable* have been read, let us look at one of the earliest and still one of the best-respected commentaries on the novel by Hugh Kenner. Hugh Kenner has interpreted Beckett's play with the opposition of subject/object on the basis of the Cartesian duality of mind and existence.<sup>8</sup> In the Cartesian thought, 'thinking' and 'being' are in the relation of cause and effect. Beckett's the Unnamable neither *thinks* nor *is* in this world.

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<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 258.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Iser, "The Pattern of Negativity in Beckett's Prose," *Georgia Review*, 29:3 (1974), p. 707.

<sup>7</sup> Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan*, p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (London: John Calder, 1961), pp. 130-131.

However, I believe Beckett's point of departure from Cartesian logic is the way the 'self' finally situates himself: "in the middle" of this duality. The Unnamable is between the object and the subject. Through this, he shatters or deconstructs this duality as well. This paradox is blatantly against the Cartesian epistemology.

Therefore, the following reading is based on the assumption that the novel unfolds while the language and the self both situate themselves in the middle of oppositions. Towards the end of the novel, the Unnamable finally manages to become close to where he thinks he has stood all the time:

Perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other side the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either.  
(*Unnamable*, 386)

The above lines are interestingly very close to Derrida's notions of 'hymen' and 'tympan'. The Unnamable finally situates himself as being inside and outside, being always at the threshold. And as we have learnt from Derrida's paradoxes, the threshold (the tympanum) is where negation and affirmation meet and coexist. For Derrida, 'tympan' is the place where the inside and the outside are not clearly defined. Derrida uses this term to explain his way of 'tympanizing' philosophy.<sup>9</sup> "Tympan" as the first article in the collection of articles, *Margins of Philosophy*, points to the way Derrida tries to situate the *limits* and *margins* of philosophy as *tympan*s that signify the inside and the outside. Beckett's story finally ends with being at the threshold: "you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story" (*Unnamable*, 418) The threshold of the story is that thin line between the world and beyond. The story ends at the

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Tympan," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. x.

threshold, as the narrator calls it. The end of the novel is where the narrator has always been standing: at the edge of here and there. As I will argue later, silence as beyond, on the one hand, is a counterpart to the language of the self, and, on the other hand, it remains far from language because it requires the negation of language and being.

### *Self and language as counterparts*

One of my main contentions regarding the novel is that in *The Unnamable*, the self and words are constantly placed next to one another where their negation, their limits, and their movements are examined in a parallel way. In other words, the limits of language are juxtaposed with the limits of being and the world. The novel starts with the questions of language and self. These two notions are the most significant concepts that are discussed continuously throughout the novel. Yet from the middle of the novel onwards, the question of silence and the place to go beyond becomes important to the narrator. The narrator, in fact, reflects on the place of silence in the light of language, self, and knowledge. At this point, I will present ten theses in relation to the themes of *The Unnamable* and their relation to the paradox of negation. These ten theses are divided into two groups: the first five explore the relation between subject and language and the next five examine the motif of silence.

1) *One lives in words and in self without knowing either of them.*

*One's knowledge of oneself is based on words.*

*The Unnamable* is the story of soul-searching: "All these Murphys, Molloyes, and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when . . . I should have spoken of me and of me alone" (*Unnamable*, 305). From the very first pages, the narrator realises that his name and self are not stable, predetermined, centred entities: "I like to think I occupy the centre, but nothing is less certain" (*Unnamable*, 297). Therefore, the self ends up building itself (or hopes to build itself) based on the words on the page. Yet the outcome is that the self effaces itself in the process of writing. While the self is itself a word or caught in words, it wishes to be



in a wordless state (silence). In Wolosky's terms, the self becomes "ineradicably linguistic"<sup>10</sup>:

I'm in words, made of words, others' words . . . I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling . . . I am they, all of them, . . . nothing else, yes, something else, . . . something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place, . . . where nothing stirs, nothing speaks. (*Unnamable*, 390)

Language and self are both impossible for the narrator to 'know' since he is imprisoned within both of them: "Words, he says he knows they are words. But how can he know, who has never heard anything else" (*Unnamable*, 358)? This helpless state continues until the very end of the novel: "it has not yet been our good fortune to establish with any degree of accuracy what I am, where I am, whether I am words among words, or silence in the midst of silence, to recall only two of the hypotheses launched in this connection" (*Unnamable*, 392).

2) *Limits of existence are the same as the limits of language.*

The narrator is imprisoned in this inability and inadequacy yet keeps speaking since he has nothing else to do: "you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me" (*Unnamable*, 418). The inadequacy of expressing oneself is adjacent to the inability to find a name for oneself. The narrator, whose identity changes a number of times throughout the novel, rejects the ability of language to formulate a name for himself. The *Unnamable* tries tragically to define his being based on his words and simultaneously tells us about the limits of language itself. He knows that the only thing he has in his hands to define the ineffable is temporal language, that is to say through the temporal pace of language, through the narrative of words: "About myself I need know nothing. Here all is clear. No, all is not clear. But the discourse must go on. So one invents obscurities. Rhetoric" (*Unnamable*, 296).

<sup>10</sup> Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism*, pp. 128-9.

Although the theme of the limit of language is a prevalent one in the novel, I believe many critics have made wrong conclusions about it. As Shira Wolosky reminds us, the main corpus of works on Beckett is based on the assumption that Beckett's texts are all about the inability of words to convey the 'essence' of the 'true self'.<sup>11</sup> However, I believe that these critics look at *the self* and *the name* as the "hyperessential" (as in onto-theology) that cannot possibly be explained in language. Let me mention two exemplary readers that Wolosky invokes. For instance, Federman believes that Beckett is in fact dealing with a "universal problem, . . . the dilemma of existence above and beyond all physical and linguistic limitations," that explains "the inadequacy of language as a means of artistic communication".<sup>12</sup> Wolosky also mentions Ross Chambers who

sees language in Beckett as given "a task it cannot fulfill, for the voice issuing from the soul . . . knows only the language of the outer world, of time and space." Only if the self were able "to invent a new language, of timelessness and speechlessness" would it be able to achieve a true "language of the self," one that in fact would become "the silence of eternal self-possession".<sup>13</sup>

But do the characters in Beckett's writings in fact look for a pure notion of reality, truth or self-hood, i.e. a pure name?<sup>14</sup> Although, at the beginning, the Unnamable is in search of his name, he later finds out that this is not only possible, but that the self is always inscribed with other pronouns, as I will explain later. In other words, the ideal state of self or truth is already shattered in the course of the novel and is replaced with the search for silence.

### 3) *One knows that in order to 'go on' (breathe, live) one has to speak.*

The self's constant questioning of the significance of 'going on' is not only an existential question but also a question directed at his writing. *The Unnamable* questions

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 82-3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

both the extent to which one must carry on using language and carry on 'being': "I have nothing to do, that is to say nothing in particular. I have to speak, whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak" (*Unnamable*, 316). The narrator speaks in an endless manner without any pause (the novel of over one hundred pages has only seventeen paragraphs which consist of a stream of short sentence-phrases) waiting to be put into silence by words. The long string of words on the page shows us the self's obligation to speak in order to 'be' as if to have a short pause in between - even for thinking in advance about what to say - might end in non-being: "One starts things moving without a thought of how to stop them. In order to speak" (*Unnamable*, 301-302). In fact, one can compare the flow of the sentences in *The Unnamable* to the flow of breathing. The self speaks (or rather, he 'is') in language.

Steven Connor correctly argues that the only thing the narrator has is speaking, and yet speaking cannot evoke the self and his name at all: "Speaking is the only means available for knowing the self, but, at the same time it only ever allows the articulation of a borrowed self, since one can never speak with one's own voice".<sup>15</sup> This statement echoes Derrida's argument that there is always a gap and a delay between what the text is meant to say and what constrains the text to mean. In *The Unnamable*, we read: "I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know" (*Unnamable*, 309).

4) *Language affects the self and vice versa. Language and the self define one another.*

Language and the world determine each other's limits, as Wittgenstein reminds us: "*The limits of my language* means the limits of my world. . . . We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot *say* either".<sup>16</sup> In *The Unnamable*, language and the subject are not only studied in a parallel position but they also affect one another: "I am afraid, afraid of what my words will do to me, to my refuge" (*Unnamable*, 305). While the words are defined and used by the narrator, they also

<sup>15</sup> Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 115 (5.6-5.61).

become the defining factor for him. In other words, the self tries to define himself through words. For the narrator of *The Unnamable*, to destroy life (existence) is the same as to destroy language. This relation is also of an exclusive nature. Language is stopped for the self to begin, or the words are used to forget the self: "Mean words, and needless, from the mean old spirit, I invented love, music, the smell of flowering currant, to escape from me" (*Unnamable*, 307).

5) *To define or know language or self, one has to see the other selves, words or pronouns.*

The Unnamable is in search of his name and identity or, more importantly, a proof for his existence. He first understands that his name is inscribed within other subjects. Therefore, he embarks on first identifying who he is not: "First I'll say what I'm not, that's how they taught me to proceed, then what I am" (*Unnamable*, 328). This act of unnamings carries on through the novel. The narrator unnames himself even in the shape of pronouns: "Someone says you, it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me" (*Unnamable*, 408). Ironically, the narrator takes the word "me" as the self and as a pronoun as well. Gradually throughout the novel, the Unnamable realises that to find his self as a singular unity seems more and more an impossible task simply because words and subject alike are defined through other words and subjects: "I have no language but theirs, no, perhaps I'll say it, even with their language" (*Unnamable*, 328). His name depends on other pronouns: "I seem to speak, that's because he says I as if he were I" (*Unnamable*, 407). He tells us that he is neither Murphy, Watt, nor Mercier. This is followed by a list of negative attributes that eventually amounts to total nothingness: "I never desired, never sought, never suffered, never partook in any of that, never knew what it was to have, things, adversaries, mind, senses" (*Unnamable*, 328). Wolosky argues that pronouns, like any other words, only mean anything within "a web of syntax," a web that entangles not only the words but which the self is strongly attached to and "can never finally evade"<sup>17</sup>: "In a sense, his [Beckett's] pronouns are nonreferential, underscoring their grammatical function

<sup>17</sup> Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism*, p. 127.

rather than pointing beyond themselves as though to some fixed, extralinguistic identity".<sup>18</sup> This treatment of the subjective pronouns as part of the linguistic structure reinforces Beckett's interweaving of human identity and language. In other words, the motif of pronouns that are always in the way of the Unnamable's quest point to both the multiplicity of language and subject:

someone says you, it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, that, it's a kind of pronoun too, it isn't that either, I'm not that either, let us leave all that, forget about all that, it's not difficult, our concern is with someone, or our concern is with something, now we're getting it, someone or something that is not there, or that is not anywhere . . . no one can speak of that, you speak of yourself, someone speaks of himself, that's it, in the singular, a single one. (*Unnamable*, 408)

As a result, the Unnamable searches for 'me' through other 'subjects': "It's I who am doing this to me, I who am talking to me about me . . . there's someone there, someone talking to you, about you, about him, then a second, then a third . . . these figures just to give you an idea, talking to you, about you, about them" (*Unnamable*, 398). The self cannot define itself separately; there are always other names and subjects that relate themselves to him. Shira Wolosky argues that "the self is none other than this multiplication, none other than this procession of figures, both as numbers - a 'second' and 'third' - and as multiple persons: I, me, you, someone, him, them."<sup>19</sup> This multiplication happens all the time; there is no singularity for either the text or the self. Yet, more importantly, the self depends purely on words to tell us and tell himself about who he is. This aptly accords with the way language works within the novel. Words are in need of one another, yet all are entangled in the syntax. The search for something beyond language ends in more words. Therefore, the search for a singular self within the novel is juxtaposed with the search for something beyond language.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

### *The impossible space named silence*

*The Unnamable* shows us that language and self are counterparts in search for a beyond. They both want to go beyond their context and this proves to be more and more impossible. For this reason, I believe Beckett's novel is involved in the same paradox that we see in apophatic discourse. The negation of language, despite its pervasiveness in *The Unnamable*, is not the end. Beckett reminds us constantly that the self is part of the play of language and in fact there is no alternative to this aporia. He must go on writing but this writing is deeply inscribed in the promise of silence. *The Unnamable* does not speak of the transcendental self nor does it show us the way to a 'beyond' of language. The novel, however, promises continually that silence is a close counterpart to language and is not its opposite. It deconstructs the opposition of language and silence telling us that they are inscribed within one another. The next five theses explain this inscription.

6) *One strives to go beyond language towards silence,  
and believes this is the moment of self-recognition,  
or replaces it with the moment of self-recognition.*

Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader* points to the search for selfhood within the novel and reminds us of "an extraordinary paradox":

The Beckett trilogy is based on an extraordinary paradox. The novels show how it becomes increasingly impossible for their narrators to conceive themselves - i.e., to find their own identity; and yet at the same time it is precisely this impossibility that leads them actually to discover something of their own reality.<sup>20</sup>

To a reader of Derrida, this formula seems very familiar. The impossibility of "going on" once again shows us the way forward. But, does the *Unnamable* gain any self-recognition in the end? I would think that although the structure of Iser's paradox works in the novel, the novel does not necessarily end in a discovery. Instead, I would

<sup>20</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader*, p. 174.

argue that the narrator's search for identity gradually becomes overshadowed by another impetus – to achieve silence and peace:

I know that no matter what I say the result is the same, that I'll never be silent, never at peace. Unless I try once more, just once more, one last time, to say what has to be said, about me, I feel it's about me, perhaps that's the mistake I make, perhaps that's my sin, so as to have nothing more to say, nothing more to hear, till I die. (*Unnamable*, 397-98)

Silence, as *the death of language* and *the death of the self*, is ultimately what the Unnamable longs for, especially when he fails in his search for selfhood as I discussed above. Silence is a "relief from the deceptions and travails of the world of utterance. . . . Words are denounced as opposing the self that they represent".<sup>21</sup> The Unnamable, in the very first pages, reflects on the possibility of becoming silent and becomes concerned as to what would happen to his search for self: "Talking of speaking, what if I went silent? What would happen to me then" (*Unnamable*, 309)?

The Unnamable assumes that silence can lead him to self-recognition or replace his search for self-recognition: "I'll speak of me when I speak no more" (*Unnamable*, 396). In other words, the narrator is convinced that if he can achieve silence he can also define his self. Silence becomes the "only chance . . . of saying something at last that is not false". It tells him the way "to get back to me, back to where I am waiting for me" (*Unnamable*, 324). This idea of silence as self-recognition becomes so forceful in the novel that at one of the final points, the narrator dreams of a self that is "made of silence" and wishes to be he:

he who neither speaks nor listens, who has neither body nor soul, it's something else he has, he must have something, he must be somewhere, he is made of silence . . . he's in the silence, he's the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, the one to speak, but he can't speak, then I could stop, I'd be he, I'd be the silence, I'd be back in the silence, we'd be reunited, his story the story to be

<sup>21</sup> Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism*, p. 120.

told, but he has no story, he hasn't been in story, it's not certain, he's in his own story, unimaginable, unspeakable. (*Unnamable*, 417)

7) *Beyond (silence) is the place of reunion; it is the beginning.*

Silence is not only what the self is looking for but it is also what he wants to be united with. It is the emblem of immanence, the ineffable state of existence where the only words that exist are the unspoken ones: "I've shut my doors against them . . . perhaps that's how I'll find silence and peace at last" (*Unnamable*, 395). This theme unfolds more and more as we get near to the end of the story:

the attempt must be made, in the old stories incomprehensibly mine, to find his, it must be there somewhere, it must have been mine, before being his, I'll recognize it, in the end I'll recognize it, the story of the silence that he never left, that I should have never left, that I may never find again, that I may find again, then it will be he, it will be I, it will be the place, the silence, the end, the beginning again. (*Unnamable*, 417)

Gradually, silence takes the role of that transcendental ideal which is longed for and cannot be achieved: "I am going silent, for want of air. . . Unless this time is the true silence, the one I'll never have to break any more, when I won't have to listen any more, . . . the one I have tried to earn, that I thought I could earn. . . the real silence at last" (*Unnamable*, 397). Silence and death eventually become "a blessed place to be" (*Unnamable*, 378). The *Unnamable* also tells us that silence for him is the space of singularity and immanence: "They told me there were others, I don't regret not knowing them. The moment the silence is broken in this way it can only mean one thing. Orders, prayers, threats, praise, reproach, reasons" (*Unnamable*, 339). It is not surprising, then, to see that critics take silence as the God of Beckett's negative theology: "This is the silence which some have praised as the very union with truth beyond speech that mystical transcendence seeks".<sup>22</sup> However, what follows in my argument takes this idealist view into a Derridean paradox.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



8) *Beyond (silence) is the place of non-knowledge.*

*One can only reach silence (beyond) when one does not know anything anymore.*

Another point which contributes to taking silence as an immanent space of beyond is its equation with non-knowledge. My arguments in Part I in which non-knowledge has always been associated with the garden of Eden and knowledge as the reason for the Fall could be reinvented. In *The Unnamable*, silence is the place where knowledge does not exist: "in the silence you don't know" (*Unnamable*, 418). It is the place of "feeling nothing, knowing nothing, capable of nothing, wanting nothing" (*Unnamable*, 351) and again "between them would be the place to be, where you suffer, rejoice, at being bereft of speech, bereft of thought, and feel nothing, hear nothing, know nothing, say nothing, are nothing, that would be a blessed place to be, where you are" (*Unnamable*, 377-78).

Silence is not only the place of non-knowledge but it is also that mystical place that one does not have knowledge of: "This silence they are always talking about, from which supposedly he came, to which he will return when his act is over, he doesn't know what it is, nor what he is meant to do, in order to deserve it" (*Unnamable*, 379-80). One can also note, "what can be said of the real silence, I don't know, that I don't know what it is, that there is no such thing, that perhaps there is such a thing, yes, that perhaps there is, somewhere, I'll never know" (*Unnamable*, 412). And finally these two points are joined together when the Unnamable says: "in the silence you don't know . . . I've journeyed without knowing it" (*Unnamable*, 418).

9) *Silence paradoxically motivates language.*

As I have already shown, the search for selfhood ends in the emergence of future 'pronouns'. Similarly, the search for silence (concealing) ends with the multiplication of language that is spread over more than one hundred pages: "One starts speaking as if it were possible to stop at will. It is better so. The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue" (*Unnamable*,

301-302). This wish for silence, expressed on nearly every single page of the novel in one way or another, reminds us of the main theme of the novel: ineffability. And as Shira Wolosky asserts: "Inexpressibility is not self-transcending but self-defeating".<sup>23</sup>

This place of silence is finally a place of affirmation, a place of "going on": "It will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (*Unnamable*, 418). Shira Wolosky argues that,

[t]he movement into silence constantly impels the texts into further utterance. . . . Beckett's work, in denying self-denial and negating negativity, finally reemerges toward affirmation: first in the language it itself generates, and not only as concession but as positive realization. Its gestures toward reduction inevitably give way to reproductive and inventive energy.<sup>24</sup>

Wolosky ends the above statement by suggesting that "Beckett's texts arrive at a sense that silence not only cannot be accomplished, but that silence is not an accomplishment".<sup>25</sup> I would contend, however, that the impossible silence is, indeed, an 'accomplishment' and an *inevitable* one at that.

*10) Silence is the impossible place since it does not belong to 'being' or language; it is also inevitable since language (and our breathing) always already promises silence.*

My final argument, here, is that silence in Beckett's text acts like the Derridean paradox of negation. Silence is an impossible state yet, throughout the discourse, its inevitability is constantly promised. As I demonstrated earlier, the *Unnamable* strives for silence: to silence himself. Yet this is precisely what is not achievable as long as there are words to be said. The narrator wants to leave the words to get united with himself, but leaving language equals leaving the world. He considers all the possibilities:

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 132-3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

If I could speak and yet say nothing, really nothing? Then I might escape being gnawed to death . . . But it seems impossible to speak and say nothing. . . . In a word, shall I be able to speak of me and of this place without putting an end to us, shall I ever be able to go silent, is there any connection between these two questions? (*Unnamable*, 305)

The theme of the impossible is closely linked to the theme of silence. The *Unnamable* wants to go beyond expression: "Overcome, that goes without saying, the fatal leaning toward expressiveness. . . . Speak of the world of my own, sometimes referred to as inner, without choking" (*Unnamable*, 394). However, he becomes more and more convinced that to go beyond language and thinking is impossible: "The one outside of life we always were in the end, all our long vain life long. Who is not spared by the mad need to speak, to think, to know where one is. . ." (*Unnamable*, 349).

I believe that the promise of silence that pervades the novel functions in the same way as Derrida's 'promise'. The promise of silence is accompanied by every single utterance of language. The words in this novel point always already towards this silence, however impossible to fulfil: "I want it [the voice] to go silent, it wants to go silent, it can't, it does for a second, then it starts again, that's not the real silence. . ." (*Unnamable*, 412). The aporia is that silence cannot be achieved through language. This is the problem of the narrator since the only thing he can hold on to is words. Eventually, he seems to decide that he has to "go on" with the words till he is stopped. It is only then that the impossible place of silence arrives - 'impossible' because it cannot exist within language. This is the paradox of the novel. To achieve silence (as compared with God in our previous discussions) is to know it and possess it (like a final truth), but how are we to know it if it does not exist within language? This is, in short, the paradox of apophatic discourse. Regarding this point, Leslie Hill argues:

In Beckett's writing, the end of speech, that is to say, both the object of speech and the falling silent of speech, cannot be separated from the movement of speech itself. . . . The end of speaking, in the shape of that strange figure of truth and

silence promulgated by the narrator of *L'Innommable*, is somehow already located within the process of speaking itself.<sup>26</sup>

But is silence really still within language? If that was the case, the narrator had little problem in achieving it. I have to disagree with Hill and argue that silence, truth or death is standing at the 'threshold' of the text in the shape of the tympan. Silence or death is inscribed within language and at the same time it is the outcast of language, it is the negative *and* the positive of language. It can only exist at the point that we cease 'being' yet it exists only within language and being. And it seems that the narrator of *The Unnamable* gradually becomes more and more aware of this aporia and double bind. Therefore, silence becomes impossible and inevitable:

I'm not outside, I'm inside, I'm in something, I'm shut up, the silence is outside, outside inside, there is nothing but here, and the silence outside, nothing but this voice and the silence all round, no need of walls, yes, we must have walls, I need walls, good and thick, I need a prison. (*Unnamable*, 414)

This forceful undecidability is a sign of the double notions of death or silence. The Unnamable is not sure if his quest towards silence is an act of courage or cowardice: "with you, you might have the courage not to go silent, no, it's to go silent that you need courage, for you'll be punished, punished for having gone silent, and yet you can't do otherwise than go silent" (*Unnamable*, 398). Let us compare the above with the following: "you want yourself, you want yourself in your own little corner, it's not love, not curiosity, it's because you're tired, you want to stop, travel no more, seek no more, lie no more, speak no more, close your eyes, but your own, in a word lay your hands on yourself" (*Unnamable*, 403-404).

Perhaps these mixed feelings regarding silence have led critics to be uncertain about the motive behind silence. David Hesla, in *The Shape of Chaos*, writes that he is unable to find "the remarkable impetus" of the novel.<sup>27</sup> Steven Connor seems to give

<sup>26</sup> Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction in Indifferent Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> David H. Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 115.

an answer to Hesla's question in his book, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*. Connor sees the technique of repetition as the only thing the narrator has in hand to find his selfhood.<sup>28</sup> Connor brings a few examples from the novel including "if I could remember what I have said I could repeat it, if I could learn something by heart I'd be saved, I have to keep on saying the same thing and each time it's an effort, the seconds must be alike and each one is infernal" (*Unnamable*, 399). Repetition is an integral rhetorical device in the novel. It is not only inevitable because of the circular narrative of the novel, it also suggests that perhaps we are waiting in vain for a quest to take place. I would say the "remarkable impetus" of the novel derives from the *obligation* to go on towards *silence*. Yet, silence and death are accompanying the reader and the narrator from the very beginning. Derrida writes about this "lapse," "silence," or death in discourse as an impetus itself:

The caesura does not simply finish and fix meaning. . . . the caesura makes meaning emerge. It does not do so alone, of course; but without interruption - between letters, words, sentences, books - no signification could be awakened. *Assuming* that Nature refuses the leap, one can understand why Scripture will never be Nature. It proceeds by leaps alone. Which makes it perilous. Death strolls between letters. To write, what is called writing, assumes an access to the mind through having the courage to lose one's life, to die away from nature. (EJ, 72)

The *Unnamable* has always already been standing at a position of a 'tympan,' unsure if he is inside or outside. One can say therefore that from the very outset of the novel, death and silence are inscribed, evoked, and in effect achieved, while they also remain an 'other' to the *Unnamable* who desires them till the very end.

## **Conclusion**

Being asked what is left of an art form that claims that there is nothing left to be done or can be done, Beckett responds: "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no

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<sup>28</sup> Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, pp. 72-78.

desire to express, together with the obligation to express".<sup>29</sup> As I suggested at the beginning of the study of Beckett's novel, I see this "obligation" as the primary positive force in Beckett's life and writing. He chooses the subject of suffering and the negation of language and the self because this is what he feels obliged to do. This excerpt from an interview could perhaps show the extent of this positive obligation:

At a party an English intellectual asked me why I write always about distress. As if it were perverse to do! . . . I left the party as soon as possible and got into a taxi. On the glass partition between me and the driver were three signs: one asked for help for the blind, another help for orphans, and the third for relief for the war refugees. One does not have to look for distress. It is screaming at you even in the taxis of London.<sup>30</sup>

Although Beckett's texts are full of nostalgic evocations of purity, timelessness, and beyond, what they amount to in the end is essentially a parody of this modernist wishful thinking. To me, Beckett is only modernist in the sense of still being occupied with the themes of modernism: disjunction, fragmentation within a nostalgic or messianic look at a unified perception. Yet, his treatment of these themes makes him close enough to the postmodernist thinking which parodies this wishful thinking. *The Unnamable* deals with the theme of negation in a paradoxical manner. Negation is part and parcel not only of discourse but also of life: it cannot be ignored yet our challenges and doubts regarding negation lead us to the threshold again. Beckett's characters always stand at the threshold of negation and affirmation in a waiting gesture. The threshold itself acts as a constant promise towards the future:

. . . the story of the silence that he never left, that I should have never left, that I may never find again, that I may find again, then it will be he, it will be I, it will be the place, the silence, the end, the beginning, the beginning again, how can I say it, that's all words, they're all I have, and not many of them, the words fail, the voice fails, so be it. (*Unnamable*, 417)

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p. 398.

<sup>30</sup> Tom Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," *Columbia University Forum*, 4:3 (1961), p. 23.

## CONCLUSION

### Limits of Language

Experience of Being, nothing less, nothing more, on the edge of metaphysics, literature perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself. (TSI, 47)

The ambition of this thesis has been to stage a theoretical context for paradox in theology, to relate this context to Derrida's theory, to formulate three paradoxes of language and, finally to explore the paradoxes in three literary texts. Throughout, I have also attempted to give a clear reading of Derrida's key texts in relation to language. In conclusion to this thesis, I attempt not only to recapitulate my responses to the objectives stated in the introduction but also to give a new perspective to my main argument by looking at the paradox of language, the limits of language (the metaphysical state of language), and the act of language (particularly the deconstructive forces of language) within literary discourse. I intend to connect the conclusions of the three parts and relate them to a general conclusion regarding the role of literary language and its paradoxes in taking language to its limits. Instead of repeating the points discussed, I will relate my findings to a more general and significant point: *the (metaphysical) limits of language and how deconstruction attempts to exceed them in literature*. This overview, though, is not intended to give a final sense of closure to the project. Instead, it is meant to create links between the literary texts discussed and to broaden the arguments and stimulate further questions and thoughts which can be pursued based on the present project.

### *Deconstruction, metaphysics and theological discourse*

'Theology' and 'theological' are elusive terms used in literary and critical theory and they are often referred to as a 'totalising,' 'metaphysical,' or even 'omniscient' point of view. Derrida, likewise, contributes to this confusion by making 'theological' synonymous with 'metaphysical' (VM, 141) and by *theologising* metaphysics: "metaphysics is a language with God" (VM, 116). However, as I showed in Chapter Seven, Derrida also writes on theology as a non-metaphysical concept. As a result, a problem arises not only from the double meaning and double usage of the term 'theology' but also, and especially, from the confusion between these two terms – 'theological' and 'metaphysical' – in Derrida's writings. I have argued in this thesis that Derrida's early works were more or less concerned with theology as a metaphysical entity. Derrida's later writings, instead, show a more focused attention and subtle approach to theology and negative theology and the double meanings involved. Finally, this confusion spreads to the readings of Derrida's critics who take the term 'theology' in either a totalising or a non-totalising sense.

But, my intention in this conclusion is to look at the extent to which *language* is metaphysical. Language has been regarded as a touchstone for metaphysics since the language system is fundamentally based on metaphysical rules. Indeed, language as a logocentric system is supposed to refer to certain references outside itself (people, objects, abstract meanings, and so on) and it is supposed to represent these referents directly as if it were a "window on the world".<sup>1</sup> This metaphysical essence of language is under attack in Derrida's theory as well as in many other areas of post-structuralist thought. In fact, many critics have described language merely as a 'theological' system. It has been argued that this referential side of language has roots in its reference to the total presence and God. Gayatri Spivak in her introduction to *Of Grammatology*, which had a canonising effect on deconstruction at the outset of its inception in its relation to theology, defines 'logocentrism' as "the belief that the first and the last things are

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and Language of Theology*, p. 5.



the Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind, the infinite understanding of God, an infinitely creative subjectivity, and, closer to our time, the self-presence of full consciousness".<sup>2</sup> The problem, then, lies in the fact that Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism and the metaphysics of language becomes automatically the deconstruction of theology.

One of the aims of this thesis has been to argue that deconstruction is not an atheological movement. Deconstruction is not atheological because its logic and discourse is intertwined with the theological notions of presence, centre, and, more specifically, God. The logic and discourse of deconstruction is not about undermining presence, centre or God; instead it invents a new relation between presence/absence and centre/marginality in which each side constantly demands the other side. Furthermore, the oppositions discussed in this thesis as the principal notions in deconstruction are also invoked from theological discourse. That is why theology becomes integral to this thesis. Above all, deconstruction is not atheological because, while it rejects the metaphysical logic of theology, it also does not see any escape from metaphysics. Rather, deconstruction, by acknowledging the play of paradoxes within theological discourse and especially negative theology, sees a future for theology as an open promise. *On the one hand*, through a restrictive understanding of the term 'theology' and its motifs (God, presence, absolute, and so on), theological discourse becomes effectively inscribed within metaphysics, while *on the other hand*, Derrida's writings extensively cover the argument that metaphysics is not that stable within theological discourse. The oppositions that are the centres of metaphysics are constantly under threat through the problematised relation (paradox) between the poles of an opposition. Deconstruction, after all, sees the same paradoxes that it sees in literary discourse in sacred discourse as well. In fact, as I have argued in this thesis, sacred discourse and literary discourse are the main discourses in which deconstructive forces are most obviously at work, subverting and overturning oppositions and hierarchies. Derrida succeeds in creating a non-exclusive paradox for these oppositions in which he

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<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface," in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. lxviii.

can place the two poles of each opposition in a curious relationship with one another. As a result, Derrida has no choice but to return to theology after the initial rejection. However, what deconstruction brings to theology is the compulsion to question its unproblematic usage of language through metaphors, allegories, and so on to express the transcendent. "Theology," as Graham Ward reminds us, "must be constantly vigilant of the limitations of its discourse".<sup>3</sup> Deconstruction asks theology to see the way these figures of speech can totalise meanings in the text and, at the same time, it wants to remind theology that theological discourse, like literary discourse, is caught in double binds and paradoxes.

### *Deconstruction of metaphysical language*

The only way to defend language is to attack it. (Marcel Proust)<sup>4</sup>

Now let us focus on the role of metaphysics within language. Since language is primarily based on the distinction between the signifier and the signified, it is, in effect, an emblem of metaphysics. Language is metaphysical because it always refers to something outside itself. What could be a better definition of metaphysics than this reference to the outside? Heidegger, in *On the Way to Language*, writes: "Language, as sense that is sounded and written, is in itself suprasensuous, something that constantly transcends the merely sensible. So understood, language is in itself metaphysical".<sup>5</sup> Language is then a metaphysical system based on metaphors. Or as Derrida argues, language is essentially 'metaphorical'. The definition of metaphor as a comparison between the known and the unknown is in fact the definition of language itself. Graham Ward believes that the problem of metaphor is that it "always promises more

<sup>3</sup> Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Gilles Deleuze, "Literature and Life," trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, *Critical Inquiry*, 23:2 (Winter 1997), p. 229.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 35.

than it can give".<sup>6</sup> In other words, Ward warns us about the instability of the metaphysical essence of language. This calls for the deconstruction of language.

My argument in this thesis has been based on the contention that paradox itself effectively acts as a deconstructive force within literary and theological discourse. Paradox as the logic of deconstruction overturns hierarchies and logocentric presumptions and opens up a new relation between two poles of oppositions. The deconstructive act of language is not something that has to be *applied* to the text. Language itself constantly resists the limitations that are imposed on it and attempts to transgress them. Deconstruction is only a name for this *tension* that betrays the metaphysical foundations of language. I have demonstrated in the three parts of this thesis how this new relation between oppositions makes language aware of its limits, survives the discourse from decadence, and opens it as a promise towards a future with infinite possibilities of signification. This thesis argues that the sharp end of deconstruction has always been pointed towards this metaphysical nature of language or its emblem: the name. Derrida's project of deconstruction, which covers a huge corpus of philosophical discourse, is ultimately engaged in a deconstruction of language. Derrida's philosophy is, therefore, different from its predecessors, such as Heidegger's, in that it attempts to see something beyond language, albeit in a special sense. Unlike Heidegger, Derrida does not accept the notion of being imprisoned in the house of language. Deconstruction inscribes 'alterity' within language:

I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' and the 'other of literature.' (DO, 123)

Language, for Derrida, always addresses and promises the 'other'. Of course, one can say that Derrida sees an 'other' of language but not 'beyond' language. Let me act as the devil's advocate and cite Derrida when he straightforwardly says, "there is no

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<sup>6</sup> Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and Language of Theology*, p. 223.

transgression, if one hereby means a mere settling in a 'beyond' of metaphysics" (PO, 21) and he adds later on, "I do not believe that one could, one day, *simply* escape from metaphysics" (PO, 27). My response to this ambivalence is that deconstruction does not "escape from metaphysics" but reminds us, rather, how the whole structure of metaphysics has thresholds, limits, aporias, supplements, traces, and hymens that are simultaneously outside and inside the system. What Derrida tries to argue is that one cannot go beyond metaphysics but one can "try to stand *at the limit* of metaphysical discourse" (PO, 14). Derrida's acknowledgement of the other of language is therefore an acknowledgement of beyond.

Derrida does not see a *complete inside* or a *complete outside* to metaphysics and thus does not believe that it is possible to escape the language system. Neither being fully within metaphysics nor going beyond this system is possible. Deconstruction reminds us continually of this impossibility. But as I have explained, this impossibility promises and paves the way for more possibilities. The simultaneous space of *inside and outside* is the space that deconstruction promises. I would argue that undecidability within language points to the deconstructive force that resists metaphysics. If language is completely metaphysical, then *it says what it means* and, more importantly, *it is able to say what it means*. Yet the *inabilities and limits* of language (as discussed in this project) point to a certain *ability* to see beyond the metaphysical system: "words are unchained. They drive the dictionary wild. Language [*langue*] has not taken place, has no place, has no sure place" (G, 8). To see something beyond language and the attempt to shake its limits is, in fact, the mission of deconstruction. This deconstruction is an act of "emancipation," as Derrida again says:

Emancipation from this language must be attempted. But not as an *attempt* at emancipation from it, for this is impossible unless we forget *our* history. Rather, as the dream of emancipation. Nor as emancipation from it, which would be meaningless and would deprive us of the light of meaning. Rather, as resistance to it, as far as is possible. In any event, we must not abandon ourselves to this language with the abandon which today characterizes the worst exhilaration of the

most nuanced structural formalism. (FS, 28)

The reason why Derrida is interested in literature, literary discourse, and the notion of the name is because he sees deconstruction already at work in them. The name and poetic language are the grounds upon which language resists logocentric forces: it is through them that metaphysical language is shaken to its limits.

But before going any further, let us first have an overview of the way this 'deconstruction,' this 'emancipation,' and this 'beyond language' is demonstrated in the present thesis. My thesis has focused on the metaphysical faculty of language in three guises. I have presented three main and prevalent oppositions within the language system: singularity/iterability, representation/immediacy, and negation/affirmation. The main contention of this thesis is that language and name are caught in metaphysical oppositions. However, I demonstrated how there is a deconstructive force or tension within these oppositions. This deconstructive force is nothing but the paradoxical relation between the oppositions. Each side of these oppositions has been privileged by different traditions. If we take any side of these oppositions as 'absolute,' then we face one familiar kind of metaphysics. However, the more significant metaphysical attempt in reading language is when we look at these oppositions in pairs. When one sees these oppositions as absolute and distinctive, and if one also privileges one side of the opposition over the other, one is creating a logocentric view of language and the way it works. Yet, my argument is that, before anything else, the two poles within these oppositions must be seen as not really in a contradictory relation; they are inscribed within one another in the way that each pole demands its 'opposite' and, furthermore, this new (paradoxical) relation opens up the text to endless significations that exceed its pre-defined limits.

The intersection between the opposites makes each side lead to the other and also makes one side go through the other. Eventually, each pole demands and desires its opposite and as a result the text represents a simultaneous desire to be singular yet repeatable, to stay self-referential yet represent outside meanings, to become silent yet

remain present. The text oscillates between the opposites and this two-sided 'desire' illustrates the inherent 'lack' within the text. In effect, through this lack, language succeeds in exceeding its limits. Language is not unique, immanent and secret, the qualities that make it equal to pure negation. Instead, these qualities are inscribed within its repetition, representation, and affirmation. Name represents while retaining immanence. It repeats while preserving a singular mark. Language speaks while silence is at the end of each full stop. Language is the playground, or in another sense the battlefield, of these opposing forces. It exists and has existed so far because of this play.

Within the language system, literature constantly "undermines, parodies, and escapes anything which threatens to become a rigid code or explicit rules for interpretation". It continually violates the codes that have been set for it.<sup>7</sup> Literature is the most original text while it is constantly re-read and re-written. It is the immanent text that is finally represented. It is the impossibly ineffable text that is made possible. For Derrida, that is as far as one can shake the limits of the metaphysics of language. As a result, the text constantly shifts its codes and rules. And one cannot deny that theological discourse and literary discourse have been the most significant bearers of this play and battle through the ages. Let me return to the three parts of my thesis and elaborate on my readings of the literary texts.

### ***Deconstruction of language: Part I***

*Literature is a proper name.*

Translation as a representationalist process should be considered a logocentric act since it transfers the meaning of the text into a single outside reference. The binary opposition to this act of repetition is singularity. Singularity does not permit any kind of repetition since language is considered unique. Interestingly, singularity itself is a logocentric view since again it views language as the emblem of absolute presence. Now, deconstruction enters the stage and sees a new relationship between these two

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Saussure*, p. 105.

absolute logocentric views. Derrida argues that what happens in a translating act or a literary writing is a simultaneous act of translation and singularisation. The text repeats something essentially singular. Yet this repetition is not always complete and absolute. There is always a *residue* of singularity within the repeated, translated, or interpreted text. Derrida calls this residue the signature, the proper name, or the singular mark. The text always bears the signature and the intention of the author, the genre of the writing, the style of the language, and so on only to be revised, or perhaps destroyed, through the act of repetition (translation, reading, interpretation): "The sacred surrenders itself to translation, which devotes itself to the sacred. The sacred would be nothing without translation, and translation would not take place without the sacred; the one and the other are inseparable" (EO, 204). In a curious relationship, therefore, both sides of the logocentric opposition deconstruct the (metaphysical) limits of the text. And that is why Derrida does not believe in a deconstructive method that can be applied to the text. Deconstruction always already happens in the text.

The whole idea of deconstructive literary criticism is to *leave* the text incomplete or rather to *see* the text as incomplete. The text has always been traditionally read through a closing effect. The critics had the ultimate mission of closing the text for us once and for all by giving us the final word on the text and its message in order to give us an ultimate singular 'translation' of the text. The deconstructive critic only shows the reader a text full of conflicting forces through which the meanings of the text become multiplied and problematised. For Derrida, an incomplete open text is the text that promises to us what is yet to come. It points the reader towards the impossible while showing the multiple possibilities that follow. It is impossible what literature wants: to be a singular mark and to create a singular event: "You will call a poem from now on a certain passion of the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion, each time beyond the *logos*. . ." (CCP, 297). What Borges does in his "Pierre Menard" story is thus a 'deconstructive reading' of *Don Quixote*. Although Borges is comparing two supposedly separate texts, we can argue that

in effect we are reading *Don Quixote* on two different scales. This kind of reading opens new horizons in the text. For instance, to open the text to a genre different from the one 'intended' by the author tells us not only about the significance of genre as a singular context in the process of interpretation but also about the arbitrary nature of genre itself. Moreover, it becomes a statement on the notion of 'intention' as well.

Literary language is a language of death. It is written in the absence of the reader and always suggests that it should be read in the absence or death of the author. Writing, therefore, becomes a text that can be read when the writer and the intended reader are absent. On the one hand, the text urges the reader to read (translate) it. Any writing can be read and re-read based on this. On the other hand, in literary discourse the text resists being repeated, interpreted, or translated. Timothy Clark in his reading of "Che cos'è la poesia?" writes:

A text which is addressed 'singularly to you' can be thought to singularise whoever happens upon it, in the time of that reading or encounter: yet, simultaneously, insofar as the word or call must function generally, be repeatable according to the established codes of the language, 'you' remains anonymous, indeterminate, empty in the mode of a merely abstract universal.<sup>8</sup>

The singular remains within the text as a residue. The text gives a double command to the reader – preserve me as a singular text yet destroy me in order to make me survive the decadence of the singular:

someone writes *you*, to you, of you, on you. No, rather a mark addressed to you, left and confided with you, accompanied by an injunction, in truth it is instituted in this very order which, in its turn, constitutes you, assigning your origin or giving rise to you: destroy me. . . . (CCP, 293)

A literary text speaks of death because it acts as a proper name. The proper name and signature act as the mark of what is absent. They exist in order to signify the absent

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy Clark, "By Heart: A Reading of Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?' through Keats and Celan," *Oxford Literary Review*, 15 (1993), p. 57.



referent. However, the paradox of singularity lies in the fact that this singular mark is resisted by being repeated and translated (by its iterability).

### ***Deconstruction of language: Part II***

#### *Literature is a labyrinth.*

Let us now look at the second part of this thesis. Again immanence, with its promise of a text in which the signs and meanings are equal, points to the logocentric notions of self-referentiality, revelation, and secret meanings at the centre of the text. However, representation always sees a strong distinction between language and its meaning. In the representationalist view, language is a logocentric vehicle that is able to demonstrate meanings. In Part II, I have proposed a metaphor to argue my case. I suggested that deconstruction is already at work within the text in the shape of a labyrinth. The meaning of the text is always oscillating between these two logocentric poles. There is a paradox in which the text moves towards the centre, which is the secret of the text (revelation), yet at the same time it is driven equally to the edges and limits of the text. In other words, the text moves towards immanence and self-referential language and at the same time it is endlessly deferred to further representations. Consequently, I would conclude that in the literary text, the logocentric presumptions of immanence and representation are deconstructed because there is already a 'tug of war' between the two poles. Furthermore, there is no opposition here after all. The reader simultaneously wishes to reach the labyrinth's centre (to find an inherent truth) and to exit from the labyrinth (to invent new meanings). Meaning always draws you towards the centre while at the same time there is the force of regression that pulls the text to its limits and thresholds. This battlefield or playground is the space that Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49* finds herself in. Derrida writes about this paradoxical force within the text: "there are only contexts . . . nothing *exists* outside context, as I have often said, but also that the limit of the frame or the border of the contexts always entails a clause of nonclosure. The outside penetrates and

thus determines the inside" (LI, 152-3). Meaning happens in the hidden aisles of the text (the labyrinth), oscillating between the centre and the limits: "Meaning is neither before nor after the act" (FS, 11). Instead, it is a 'force' invoked from within the text. Derrida, in "Force and Signification," talks about the idea of force as a "strange movement within language" (FS, 27). Force is the tension within language which creates signification. Meaning is produced within this tension drawing back to the text and referring to the outside. Derrida writes about this "revelatory power of true literary language" in which the dormant signs reawake and produce meanings:

It is when that which is written is *deceased* as a sign-signal that it is born as language; for then it says what is, thereby referring only to itself, a sign without signification, a game or pure functioning, since it ceased to be *utilized* as natural, biological, or technical information, or as the transition from one existent to another, from a signifier to a signified. And, paradoxically, inscription alone - although it is far from always doing so - has the power of poetry, in other words has the power to arouse speech from its slumber as sign. . . . It creates meaning by enregistering it, by entrusting it to an engraving, a groove, a relief, to a surface whose essential characteristic is to be infinitely transmissible. (FS, 12)

Derrida is quick to tell us here that while not all writing is capable of doing this, poetry has this "revelatory power". This excerpt also points to the moment of revelation in literary discourse. I would argue that revelation, with its biblical and literary connotations, is the moment of the 'emancipation' of the text from the limits of language. Revelation or epiphany indicates the threshold of language where the text can point to something beyond metaphysical language.

Kevin Hart believes that Derrida stages a no-win struggle between the metaphysical and non-metaphysical: "Metaphysics cannot control the meaning of a text, nor can there be a successful leap beyond metaphysics".<sup>9</sup> It is correct that Derrida does not see any hope in going beyond the metaphysics of language, but his position is to interrogate the discourses that stand at the limit of metaphysics. My reading of *The*

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<sup>9</sup> Kevin Hart, "The Poetics of the Negative," in Stephen Prickett, ed., *Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991), p. 310.

*Crying of Lot 49* shows to what extent a literary text can oscillate between two oppositional forces. The text not only moves towards the centre, the truth, or the secret, but it also moves to the limits of this labyrinth at the same time. This tension or 'tug of war' exhausts the process of signification and *defines* deconstruction.

### ***Deconstruction of language: Part III***

#### *Literature is silence.*

The absolute negation of language is an act of suicide. One is left with no words if one believes that language is incapable of communicating anything. Negation is logocentric since it believes in a form of transcendence which is indescribable by language. At the same time, the affirmative view of language regards language itself as total presence. According to this view, language is that logocentric entity which is both able to and should manifest the world. The third deconstructive force within the literary text convinces us that, in literature, language is affirmatively used, but this affirmation always inscribes within itself a kind of silence, the ineffable.

Literary discourse is a practice of the impossible. It is an attempt to speak of the 'unsayable,' the silence. Yet it faces the aporia that it cannot speak of 'outside language' *within* language. As such, the limits of language equal the limits of existence. Literary language therefore always speaks of death: "Death strolls between letters" (EJ, 71). In an act of deconstruction, literature promises a 'beyond' (an 'other'). This promise forces the narrator to speak while it constantly reminds him of the impossibility of speaking: "I shall have to speak of things which I cannot speak" (*Unnamable*, 294). Literary discourse always speaks of this "lack," this absence, this negation. Yet, it *speaks of* this negation; it does not restore language to pure silence. Mark Taylor writes: "To the contrary, lack releases the event of language. In this linguistic event, to speak is to say the impossibility of saying by promising what cannot be delivered".<sup>10</sup> Literary language, as a result, becomes the space of the 'tympan'

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<sup>10</sup> Mark C. Taylor, "nO nOt nO," p. 180.

which is at the threshold of absence and presence. Literary language speaks while inscribing silence within its discourse. It is a kind of language that is aware of the impossibility of saying things and which stands between the sayable and the unsayable. Deconstruction is this "situation" within language.

The paradox of absence/presence within literary discourse is the ultimate point of violating the limits of language. The signification process of the text gains a revelatory quality. The meaning of the text points to something unspeakable or unnamable. This suspends the referential apparatus of the text. Beckett's *The Unnamable* does not create any referential site for the reader to relate to. The text instead is about that state of meaning that cannot be placed easily on a referential site. In my reading of *The Unnamable*, I used 'silence' as this unnamable space that meanings relate to. For Derrida (and, in fact, for Beckett as well), this is the only way to speak of the transcendent while not being entangled in metaphysics. The paradox of absence/presence is at work in *The Unnamable* in order to inscribe the transcendent while not employing the transcendent as the referent. Meaning is produced between this kind of inscription.



The paradoxes discussed are the forces within language that make the metaphysical content and the structure of the text tremble, and point it towards its limits. There are self-deconstructing forces within language that rebel against the imprisonment of language in metaphysics: "There is war only after the opening of discourse, and war dies out only at the end of discourse" (VM, 117). The merit of Derrida's theory is that it reveals an internal (paradoxical) relationship between oppositions which are inscribed within each other.

Singularity is the aim of literature. The author wants to impose his proper name. Literature is the proper name and literary writing is an act of nomination: "if

there is any literature, it is sacred" (EO, 148). Bennington says, "To get across the idiom of my proper name, to impose my law by shouting my name, I must thus ruse with the language which just is not proper to me".<sup>11</sup> Yet, we are commanded to translate this singular mark since the text could be addressed to the 'other'. Literature, like the name, is also immanent (self-referential). It talks only about itself: "the poem . . . seals together the meaning and the letter, like a rhythm spacing out time" (CCP, 295). But, we are also reminded that this sealing cannot ultimately be achieved absolutely, simply because it is against the laws of representation: "There is no literature without a *suspended* relation to meaning and reference" (TSI, 48). The 'situation' of literature is "emptiness" (FS, 8) according to Derrida: "You will call a poem a silent incantation" (CCP, 297). And elsewhere, "Only *pure absence* - not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced - can *inspire*, in other words, can work, and then make one work" (FS, 8). Yet, literature is the most prolific exercise of language writing.

In fact, through these paradoxes, deconstruction opens up new possibilities for the interpretation of the text. In a deconstructive reading, signification becomes the ultimate aim which liberates language from metaphysics. It overruns singularity, representation and negation. Translatability becomes important in deconstruction as far as it is an act of signification. It is ironic that deconstruction has always been criticised for its suggestion that the text does not make sense, and that we are drowned in meaninglessness. I believe that the act of interpretation opens up deconstructive reading. When a text, like Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, becomes a singular mark (even as singular as Nietzsche's "*I have forgotten my umbrella*" (SNS, 123-143)), a deconstructive reading places the text in new contexts and invites new meanings. Meaning is at the *end* of a singular event that is repeated. When a text, like *The Crying of Lot 49*, looks for the whole truth as a secret message, deconstruction rejects it because it narrows the possibilities of meaning. Meanings here evolve within the curious relationship between the signifier and the signified. Finally, deconstruction argues how significant a text,

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<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, "Derridabase," pp. 180-81.

like *The Unnamable*, is when it tries to speak of the 'unspeakables'. Meaning is situated between the sayable and the unsayable. In fact, this is the ultimate position that deconstruction can hold as it in effect opens up the possibility of an attempt to speak the impossible, the unspeakable, in the shape of something similar to a revelation. Finally, meaning is situated 'nowhere' since it is too close to the impossible point of singularity, immanence, or negation.

Derrida in "Che cos'è la poesia?" talks about "the erotics of language". Timothy Clark defines this expression by suggesting that, "[t]he poetic emerges as a structure of passion that both sets in motion, resists and hence calls for the interpretation it yet continues to exceed".<sup>12</sup> The poetic text for Derrida is thus inherently contradictory. Derrida agrees that literature strives towards this singularity:

*Literally:* you would like to retain by heart an absolutely unique form, an event whose intangible singularity no longer separates the ideality, the ideal meaning as one says, from the body of the letter. In the desire of this absolute inseparation, the absolute nonabsolute, you breathe the origin of the poetic. (CCP, 293-95)

This nostalgic tone of literature has to face, however, the laws of representation in the end: "Reiterate(s) in a murmur: never repeat" (CCP, 295).

Derrida believes that literature has the "*right to say everything*".<sup>13</sup> This 'right' gives literary discourse a positive aspect. I take this point further and say that literature *can* say everything in its own way. Derrida in his argument on the right of saying is more interested in the economy of democracy and its relation to the modern perception of literature. But, what I conclude from this project is that literary discourse is capable of saying everything. It exemplifies the way language can exceed its limits and not be restricted by the usual referential laws that govern language. It is "the text as weed, as outlaw": "Between the fragments of the broken Tables the poem grows and the right to speech takes root" (EJ, 67). However, this "right to say everything" means

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Clark, "By Heart: A Reading of Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia' through Keats and Celan," p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian Mcleod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 28. Also in TSI, 36.

that literature says nothing. Literature, in a subversive manner, rejects its traditional role as the *mimesis* of truth or the world. The mimetic role of literature leaves it in a secondary position to the Ideal. *Mimesis* also imprisons literary language in metaphysics, fixing a sign for a signified. Literature, through coming close to the loss of meaning, sets itself free from philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Literature is the language addressed to the other who is always absent. Therefore, it always stays open. It stands always at the door, at the threshold, since it *remains* to be read in the future. It is a *would-be text* rather than a *present text*. As such, the literary text ultimately escapes metaphysics by escaping *presence*. Derrida ends his essay on “what is poetry” by putting poetry under erasure, as Heidegger used to do with Being: “‘What is. . . ?’ laments the disappearance of the poem – another catastrophe. By announcing that which is just as it is, a question salutes the birth of prose” (CCP, 299). As Derrida says elsewhere, poetry “exceeds the ontological, theoretical or constative utterance”.<sup>15</sup> The literary text is always written for the future yet-to-come. This future never arrives and therefore literature stays alive because of this. Poetic language is, in one word, the impossible. It is *in and beyond* language. The structure of ‘inside-outside’ “is language itself” (VM, 113). It is the *keeper* of language in its attempt to protect language through singularity, immanence, and negation from the outside. Yet, it demands that literary language be translated, represented, and spoken regardless. Literature is Babel with its double command. It is that nostalgic tone that reminds us with every word that *it lacks*. It is “mad about itself” because it speaks of “jealousy”. It is “nothing but jealousy unleashed” (MO, 24). It shows us the gaps and the holes. It is a song telling us the story of language that is no longer singular and immanent: it is the story of silence.

Deconstruction is against literary essence in the conventional sense. No text can be described as literary “*in itself*”. It is the “*functioning*” and “*intentionality*” of literature that makes a text ‘literary’ (TSI, 44-45): “No *internal* criterion can guarantee the

<sup>14</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, pp. 255-270.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 128.

essential 'literariness' of a text. There is no assured essence or existence of literature" (TSI, 73). Derrida places the 'literary' in quotation marks since his deconstruction is "the dream of a new institution" (TSI, 73) that "supposes a break with what has tied the history of the literary arts to the history of metaphysics" (PO, 11). In deconstruction, the 'literary' only becomes specific in its "subversion of logocentrism" (PO, 11), and in its "resistance" (PO, 69). As a result, it becomes specific in its ability to multiply significations and intentions, to bring new experiences and meanings through the act of reading rather than harnessing the singular experience and message of the author. It does this through the undecidability that makes the text oscillate between poles of meaning, and above all in its ability to acknowledge and inscribe its inabilities, limits, and impossibilities within the text. The literary text in this sense betrays the author's intentions and liberates language to signify endlessly. I end with Paul Celan's beautiful description of what literature is:

A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially dialogue, may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the – surely not always strong – hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart. In this way, too, poems are *en route*: they are headed toward.

Toward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen," in *Selected Prose*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), pp. 34-35.



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