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A Mystic Impulse: From Apophatics to Decreation in Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart and Simone Weil*

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Abstract

This article articulates a mystically motivated apophatic subjectivity that emerges from Simone Weil's life and thought. It does so genealogically, via excursions into Pseudo-Dionysius's and Meister Eckhart's negative theologies. These genealogical excursions expose Weil's resonances with and differences from these earlier thinkers of Christian apophysis. To highlight these differences, this article pays particular attention to two spiritual exercises, attention and decreation, which when taken together point out a tragic sense pulsing through and informing Weil's remarkable religious thought and praxis.

Keywords: Simone Weil, Eckhart, Pseudo-Dionysius, apophysis, decreation, affliction

The spiritual itinerary of Simone Weil—philosopher, political activist, and religious mystic—moves according to a mystic impulse, as she feels

* I owe thanks to Thomas Carlson for his comments on an earlier version of this text and to Duane Williams and two anonymous reviewers for *Medieval Mystical Theology*, whose thoughtful readings and helpful suggestions immeasurably improved what follows.

herself lovingly advancing toward the utterly unknowable.¹ Her spiritual itinerary aims at something unknowable, propelled by a spiritual desire for passage, for a crossing beyond the limits of human experience. This crossing involves an expenditure of self in the form of a powerful love that seizes this subject—an expenditure that comes at the price of subjectivity. In this way, her spiritual itinerary calls for and culminates in an apophatic subjectivity: a subjectivity that undoes itself, out of love and an ardent hope for mystical passage across the threshold of experience.

To flesh out this apophatic subjectivity, I set Weil in conversation with Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, two medieval mystical Christian thinkers (both of whom are, like Weil, deeply influenced by Platonism and Neoplatonism) who articulate apophatic theologies that resonate with and, I think, illuminate Weil's and the mystical impulse at its heart. My motivation for doing so is genealogical, as a way of tracking resonances of Weil's thought with a genealogy of Christian *apophasis* and, in the process, of performatively proposing an apophatic genealogy in which to regard Weil's writings—an alternative genealogy from those philosophical genealogies in which scholars tend to locate her, one that highlights aporias and impossibilities as well as motions between, toward, and into the unknown.²

Reading Weil's oeuvre with an ear for resonances with Dionysius's apophatic theology and Eckhart's apophatic anthropology also highlights the dissonances between Weil's thought and theirs. While the resonances indicate where the medieval and the modern touch and even cross, the dissonances (1) reiterate that Weil's engagement with medieval apophatic

1. For two recent introductions to Weil's life and thought, see Yourgrau, P., 2011, and Plant, S., 2007. For a systematic and periodized treatment of Weil's writings, see Ross, M., 2003.

2. While many scholars read Weil as a mystical Christian Platonist, I suggest inverting the order of these terms and reading her as a Platonic Christian mystic—which could as easily and as effectively describe Dionysius or Eckhart—for the mystical dimensions of her thought are most distinctive and most provocative. For readings of Weil along the lines of mystical Christian Platonism, see Springsted, E., 1983; and Doering, E., and Springsted, E., 2004. Springsted, like many scholars, sees Weil's Platonic affiliation as definitive. But such a reading risks a reductionism, according to a logic of 'it all goes back to Plato'—a reductionism that effaces the originality of Weil's work. Moreover, it reads her famous assertion that 'Plato is an authentic mystic and even the father of Occidental mysticism' in a way that collapses the mystical within the Platonic (seemingly via the Neoplatonic), whereas I read this assertion as a testament to the crucial position of mysticism in her work. For other readings of Weil's mysticism, see the 2006 proceedings of the American Weil Society's Colloquy 26, 'Simone Weil and Mysticism'.

theologies is a creative and felicitous, rather than “faithful,” one and (2) point toward distinctive elements of Weil’s thought and practice. Among these distinctive elements are the twin peaks of Weil’s mystical itinerary, affliction and decreation, with the former tingeing her ultimate decreative *apophasis* with a tragic sense. Because Weil’s spiritual program entwines a tragic sense with an apophatic praxis, it sets hers apart from apophatic predecessors (including Dionysius and Eckhart) in provocative ways that ultimately produce a reframing of Christianity in relation to tragedy. This tragic element is made tragic by excessive desire—one that infuses Weil’s life and thought—for what remains impossible, across the threshold.³

Understanding the compelling power of this double climax—of affliction and decreation as the zeniths of Weil’s spiritual itinerary—requires understanding the path along which a spiritual itinerant advances. That path comprises a progressive arrangement of ascetic exercises whose performance enacts a subjective *apophasis*. Engendering and supporting this subjective *apophasis* is a theological *apophasis*, crystallized in Weil’s quintessentially apophatic assertion that ‘all affirmations, on the subject of God, have as their true senses negations’.⁴ Absence and negation are the apex of her tragic Christian sensibility, according to which God exists in creation only via a void, only as an absence: ‘God can be present in creation only under the form of absence’.⁵ Similarly, human language can express what is supreme by negation, which points to a divine negativity that Weil conceives in terms of an originary void—‘the void is God, the void is primordial’—which demonstrates the radically negative dimension of her theological vision.⁶

3. For related readings of tragedy in Weil’s writings, see Tracy, D., 1999; and Leithart, P., 2004. For a treatment of tragedy and Christianity, see Hunt, B., 1985. I have considered tragedy and Christianity in Robert, W., 2010, esp. pp. 88–102.

4. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.2.482; see also 6.2.318 and 6.2.358. This and subsequent citations of Weil’s *Oeuvres complètes* (according to tome, volume, and page numbers) are from Weil’s *cahiers*, a series of personal notebooks that she kept between 1933 and 1942. All translations of Weil’s writings are my own.

5. *Ibid.*, 6.3.105; see also 6.2.105.

6. *Ibid.*, 6.2.68. This quotation already signals a potential dissonance between Weil and Eckhart, for while void might ‘be’ (an image of) God in Weil’s theology, it might not be in Eckhart’s, since his *apophasis* rejects all images, including negative ones—which, on some accounts, might make his *apophasis* more radical than hers.

Apophatic Theology: Dionysius

Theologically as well as experientially, negativity indicates a void, an abyss of emptiness, a dark night. This negativity finds expression theologically and experientially in *apophasis*, which means un-saying or speaking-away and moves via negation. It names a mode of ineffable discourse based on aporia, one traditionally paired with *kataphasis*, or affirmation, saying, speaking-with. As Michael Sells points out, ‘every act of saying [or unsaying] demands or presupposes a previous saying’.⁷ *Apophasis* is language turning back upon itself and undoing itself, unraveling a prior statement, but this unraveling constitutes a saying that must in turn be unsaid. Hence *apophasis* and *kataphasis* exist in mutual interdependence, with *apophasis* indicating a linguistic performance.⁸

In Christian traditions, *apophasis* is often related to or called negative theology (making *kataphasis* affirmative theology by implication), insofar as, Sells writes, *apophasis* ‘denies that the transcendent can be named or given attributes’.⁹ Its theological importance, then, is that it leaves God ultimately ineffable, for as a way of using language, *apophasis* dislodges any foundations for language. Through *apophasis*, theology is left ungrounded; theology undoes itself, as it speaks by unspeaking and moves by way of negation—the *via negativa*—toward an unnamable transcendence. Sells suggests three identifying elements of Western apophatic discourse: ‘(1) the metaphor of overflowing or “emanation,” which is often in creative tension with the language of intentional, demiurgic creation; (2) dis-ontological discursive effort to avoid reifying the transcendent as an “entity” or “being” or “thing”; (3) a distinctive dialectic of transcendence and immanence in which the utterly transcendent is revealed as the utterly immanent’.¹⁰

7. Sells, M., 1994, p. 3; see also pp. 207-209, where Sells helpfully outlines principles of apophatic language.

8. Given this article’s constraints, I am unable to unpack fully the performative dimensions of *apophasis*, particularly in Dionysius’s and Eckhart’s theologies. That Dionysius opens his *Mystical Theology* with a prayer-poem and then structures the subsequent text as a didactic epistle offers two examples of the rhetorical strategies he employs to *perform* his theological *apophasis*—rhetorical strategies that serve as integral components of apophatic operations. I thank an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this point. For explorations of apophatic performances in embodied directions, see Boesel, C., and Keller, C., 2009.

9. Sells, M., 1994, p. 2.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

These elements appear exemplarily in the texts of the author writing as Dionysius the Areopagite, known as Pseudo-Dionysius, who, more than any other author, opens the Christian tradition of negative and mystical theologies.¹¹ For example, he announces at the outset of his *Divine Names* that ‘we must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being’, for no words can ‘come up to this inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra-existent Being’.¹² No, this Good or One or Source or Being remains ‘not only invisible and incomprehensible but also “unsearchable and inscrutable.”’¹³ Dionysius thus engages in *apophasis* as, according to Denys Turner, ‘the *linguistic* strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language’ and the *epistemological* strategy of human unknowing regarding the nature of God.¹⁴ Dionysius uses symbols as analogies, allowing him to ‘approach the ray which transcends being’ and which ‘neither intelligence nor speech can lay hold of nor can it at all be contemplated since it surpasses everything’.¹⁵ God, therefore, is not a thing, and Dionysius can say nothing about God (who is nothing), which leaves praise as the only available discourse.¹⁶

11. My reading of Dionysius here remains truncated and tactical. For careful and considered treatments of Dionysian thought, including a helpful account of its influences in medieval and modern contexts, see Stang, C., 2012; Carlson, T., 1999, pp. 155-70; and Coakley, S., and Stang, C., 2009. For an examination of negative theology’s place in the Dionysian corpus, see Golitzin, A., 2003.

12. Dionysius, 1987, 49/588A, 49/588B. This and subsequent citations of Dionysius’s writings give page numbers in the *Complete Works* followed by the standard pagination from J.P. Migne’s *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* III (1857).

13. Dionysius, 1987, 50/588C.

14. Turner, D., 1995, p. 34, original emphasis. To illustrate this latter point, Turner points to Nicholas of Cusa, who develops a doctrine of *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance). See Nicholas, 1997, pp. 85-206.

15. Dionysius, 1987, 53/592D.

16. Doing so allows Dionysius to elude the traps of any kataphatic predications of the divine and to participate instead in a linguistic economy of giving whose offerings reflect the unnamability of the divine that lies hidden beyond thought and beyond being. Such an economy of giving—and the figure of the gift more generally—has received much attention from recent readers of Christian *apophasis*. For a theology centered on donation, see Marion, J.-L., 1991, pp. 161-82. For a provocative reading of Marion’s theology, see Derrida, J., 1992. Carlson critically compares these two philosophers on the gift in Carlson, T., 1999, pp. 190-236.

Divine Names proceeds according to an apophatic logic of denial, progressively demonstrating that God is beyond names, 'more than ineffable and more than unknowable'.¹⁷ The most important name that Dionysius considers is 'Good' because it points to the processions of God as 'the transcendently good cause of all good things'.¹⁸ This notion of cause relates to the apophatic movement of ascension through denial, according to which even 'Good' must eventually fall away as an unsuitable name for the divine, for which 'there is no name...or expression'.¹⁹ The way of *apophasis*, the 'way up through negations', is the way to mystical theology, leading 'higher than any being, / any divinity, any goodness'.²⁰ In its opening prayer-poem, *Mystical Theology* offers a call of praise to the Trinity so that it might:

Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
up to the farthest, highest peak
of mystic scripture,
where the mysteries of God's Word
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.²¹

This prayer-poem, which Turner calls a 'self-subverting utterance', says and unsays in the same stroke, thereby demonstrating the linguistic movement of *apophasis*.²² But how is the utterance self-subverting, so as to say and unsay simultaneously? The paradoxical or oxymoronic term 'brilliant darkness' contains an affirmation, implying that 'God is brilliant', and a negation, that 'God is darkness'. In that these are said together as metaphors, they each serve to subvert the other, as brilliance and darkness cannot logically co-exist. In this manner, the affirmation is denied by the negation, while the negation is likewise denied by the affirmation. This effects not only the negation of the affirmation but also the negation of the negation. *Apophasis* therefore includes the movements

17. Dionysius, 1987, 61/640D.

18. Dionysius, 1987, 96/816B.

19. Dionysius, 1987, 129/981A.

20. Dionysius, 1987, 130/981B, 135/997A. Paul Rorem recalls in his notes to *Mystical Theology* that both 'mystic' and 'mysterious' are translations of *mustikos* in the sense of something mysterious, secret, or hidden. This linguistic link helps to illustrate the hiddenness of God in apophatic discourse as both 'negative' and 'mystical'. See Dionysius, 1987, p. 135 n. 2.

21. Dionysius, 1987, 135/997A-B.

22. Turner, D., 1995, p. 21.

of negation and of the negation of negation, as ‘the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence’ exquisitely demonstrates: this seeming oxymoron shows itself by not showing itself—or by showing itself to be unshowable, to be beyond showability.

Apophasis advances toward this *beyond* since it advances, Dionysius writes, ‘toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge’.²³ Such an advance requires ‘an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything’ so as to ‘be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is’.²⁴ He finally plunges into the ‘brilliant darkness’ that is neither darkness nor light but beyond both, in the realm of unseeing and unknowing (beyond all seeing and all knowing)—the destination toward which *apophasis* moves, for ‘the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing’.²⁵

By *Mystical Theology*’s final chapter, Dionysius writes only according to a ‘neither...nor’ formula, culminating in the negation of negation: God as supreme cause ‘falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being... There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial’.²⁶ Here Dionysius reaches the mystical pinnacle of his theology, the ecstatic moment that passes *beyond* as a hyper-unsaying—a moment linked to moments of giving, in which Dionysius describes the divine’s overflowing gift: ‘the cause of all things is himself overflowing with them in one transcendent excess of all’.²⁷

23. Dionysius, 1987, 135/997B. This *beyond* corresponds to the rhetorical strategy of ‘neither...nor’ that characterizes *apophasis*, which in theological terms yields a statement following the formula ‘God is neither *x* nor not *x* because God is beyond *x*’.

24. Dionysius, 1987, 135/1000A.

25. Dionysius, 1987, 139/1033B.

26. Dionysius, 1987, 141/1048A-B, my italics.

27. Dionysius, 1987, 127/972A. Here, Dionysius brings together Christological and Neoplatonic dimensions of his thought, through which he treats the dialectic of transcendence and immanence that Sells describes: Dionysius’s God is transcendent in and through immanence and immanent in and through transcendence. These Christological and Neoplatonic strands are woven together by a *logos* that follows a logic of procession and return. In a Christological direction, Marion explores Christ’s donation of body and blood on the cross, indexed and re-presented in the Eucharist, according to *agapē*; he extends Bonaventure’s insight, writing that ‘a properly theological gaze considers the eucharistic present...as gift that itself is given as mystical’. See Marion, J.-L., 1991, p. 180. In a

Apophatic Anthropology: Meister Eckhart

Dionysius's plunge into 'brilliant darkness' signals an ecstatic movement involved in mystical union: the dispossession of self that implicitly involves a negation. As Thomas Carlson describes, 'in the mystical movement of negation, the removal and abandonment of all beings goes hand in hand with the abandonment or dispossession of self. Theological *apophasis* goes together with an anthropological *apophasis*'.²⁸ To explore this anthropological *apophasis*, I turn to the sermons of Meister Eckhart, whose anthropology stems from his theology—which, like Dionysius's, is apophatic and Neoplatonic. Eckhart's God is 'wholly empty and free', beyond saying, beyond understanding, 'neither being nor goodness'.²⁹ God remains hyper-negative, 'a negation of negation', 'a light to which there is no access'.³⁰

God is, for Eckhart, an overflowing (*ebullitio*), a bursting forth, a movement from God to a soul and from a soul to God without any mediation: 'just as he breaks through me, I break through him in return'.³¹ The Neoplatonic element of procession and return comes in four parts. In terms of procession (*exitus*), *bullitio* corresponds to the inner emanation of the Trinitarian Persons, and *ebullitio* corresponds to the act of creation. In terms of return (*reditus*), the Word is born in the soul, and the soul bursts into the divine ground, where it can be 'free of "God."'³² Freedom from 'God' underscores Eckhart's apophaticism, in which God is ineffable, unspeakable, beyond names.

Neoplatonic direction, Paul Rorem, in his introduction to Pseudo-Dionysius's *Complete Works* (1987), makes particular reference to the *Celestial Hierarchy* and the triple movement of proceeding, returning, and remaining. See also Carlson, T., 1999, pp. 157-70.

28. Carlson, T., 1999, p. 188. My reading of Eckhart, like my reading of Dionysius, is truncated and tactical. For fuller treatments of Eckhart's thought, see Caputo, J., 1978; Davies, O., 1991; McGinn, B., 2002; and Tobin, F., 1986.

29. Eckhart, M., 1981, 180/2; 1986, 257/9. This and subsequent citations of Eckhart's sermons give page numbers in the relevant volume followed by the sermon number. This statement points to a divide between Dionysius and Eckhart. Though both recognize the namelessness of God, Dionysius sees Goodness as the last divine name standing, while for Eckhart the last name is Being. Hence Eckhart reverses Thomas Aquinas's ontotheological naming of God ('*esse est deus*'). For more on *esse* in Eckhart, see Eckhart, M., 1986, 15-30, as well as McGinn, B., 2002, pp. 93-99.

30. Eckhart, M., 1986, 281/21, 320/71.

31. Ibid., 288/29.

32. Eckhart, M., 1981, 200/52; see also 204/52.

In addition, God is uncreated, which allows passage from theology to anthropology, from God to a soul, from *exitus* to *reditus*. The key to this passage is ‘ground [*grunt*]’, by which Eckhart means the innermost and highest part of the soul, which he names metaphorically as a ‘little town [*bürgelîn*]’:

This little town... is in the soul so one and so simple, far above whatever can be described... This little town is so truly one and simple, and this simple one is so exalted above every manner and every power, that no power, no manner, not God himself may look at it... God himself never for an instant looks into it, never yet did he look on it, so far as he possesses himself in the manner and according to the properties of his Persons. It is well to observe this, because this simple one is without manner and without properties. And therefore, if God were ever to look upon it, that must cost him all his divine names and the properties of his Persons; that he must wholly forsake, if he is ever once to look into it.³³

This little town stands above description, above entry or gaze—even by God. If God wishes to look in, God must undergo the most rigorous apophatic stripping so that God sheds the possibility of being named. Hence the ground of the soul, like the apophatic God, remains,³⁴ above and beyond language, for it, like God, remains uncreated and thus beyond language. This utterly simple ground of the soul is, Eckhart describes, a ‘simple silence’, a ‘quiet desert’, a place ‘where no one dwells’ and where ‘the soul’s naked being finds the naked, formless being of the divine unity, which is there a being above being’.³⁵ There, the uncreated soul can understand God without mediation: uncovered, naked, exposed.

Eckhart uses the metaphor of the little town to illustrate this identity of God’s ground and the soul’s ground: ‘here God’s ground is my ground, and my ground is God’s ground’.³⁶ This identity exists thanks to their uncreatedness, which allows the soul to remain (like God) in utter simplicity, beyond predication, and to belong instead to a mystical order beyond affirmation and denial. God and the soul exist as *esse indistinctum*, allowing the soul to remark, ‘God’s existence must be my existence and

33. *Ibid.*, 181/2; see also 198/48; 1986, 257/9 and 288/29; and Milem, B., 2002.

34. Here I use ‘remains’ in the Neoplatonic sense according to the logic of processing, returning, remaining.

35. Eckhart, M., 1981, 198/48, 206/83.

36. *Ibid.*, 183/5b. McGinn considers ground in semantic and theological terms in McGinn, B., 2002, pp. 35-52 and 114-61.

God's is-ness is my is-ness'.³⁷ God and the soul exist without any medium, outflowing and inflowing and overflowing.

In the soul's innermost ground, which is identical with God's ground, God continually gives birth to the Word, the Son. For Eckhart, this constant birth is God's self-revelation, meaning that 'there in the soul God is made known to God'.³⁸ There, in the uncreated ground that God and the soul share, God speaks Godself in the Word. For the soul to share this ground, it must be completely detached from creation.³⁹ The process of detachment (*abgescheidenheit*)—metaphysical, ethical, and mystical—aims, in Bernard McGinn's words, at 'detaching, cutting off, leaving, letting go, resigning, unforming, un-becoming'.⁴⁰ This requires that it become inwardly poor in spirit, leaving it wanting nothing, knowing nothing, having nothing, willing and longing for nothing. Turner describes detachment as 'a complete self-emptying...the digging out of a void, an abyss within the self, a vacuum into which God is inevitably drawn'—a description that highlights Eckhart's spiritual and anthropological *apophysis*, making detachment 'the ascetic practice of the apophatic'.⁴¹ Detachment, as a practice, aims at '*the transformation of experience*'.⁴²

To achieve such perfect detachment requires an annihilation of self. The soul must sacrifice itself to God, paralleling God's self-sacrifice in Christ's crucifixion: according to Eckhart, 'God died so that I might die to the whole world and to all created things'.⁴³ Only then is an annihilated subject 'really like God': only when the soul turns in on itself, retreating to its uncreated ground, does it become 'receptive to nothing except God'.⁴⁴ Then, thanks to detachment, the soul compels God to love it (just as God compels the soul to love God) by issuing a silent call to God from within the darkness of its uncreated ground—a call to which God must respond.

37. Eckhart, M., 1981, 187/6. Turner extends this remark, via *bullitio*, to suggest that the soul was in the Godhead before it was ever created: 'before I was created I was uncreated' (Turner, D., 1995, p. 145).

38. Eckhart, M., 1986, 243/1; see also 301/40.

39. McGinn points out that detaching, birthing, and breaking through are inextricably linked as the three central activities in the process of return (McGinn, B., 2002, p. 132).

40. *Ibid.*, p. 133; see also Dobie, R., 2002.

41. Turner, D., 1995, pp. 172, 179.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 179, emphasis original; see also Kelly, C.F., 1977.

43. Eckhart, M., 1986, 289/29.

44. Eckhart, M., 1981, 286.

This *apophatics* of desire achieves, at the pinnacle of detachment, a unified, uncreated interiority that compels God to come inside and to remain.⁴⁵

Returning to Weil does not mean traveling far from Eckhart since, as McGinn notes, someone studying Eckhart's *apophasis* should keep in mind 'the absolute identity in the one ground that annihilating detachment creates, or perhaps better, borrowing a word from Simone Weil, "decreates."⁴⁶ Eckhart's detachment (*abgescheidenheit*) and Weil's decreation (*décréation*) resonate in this way, which makes sense given that Weil includes Eckhart in a list of medieval theologians she regards as important—a list that includes Peter Abelard, Thierry of Chartres, John of Salisbury, Alain of Lille, Hugh of St. Victor, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Angelus Silesius, and Giordano Bruno.⁴⁷ She refers to Eckhart as she elaborates this point:

The sole part of our soul for which it is not suitable that it be subject to affliction is that which is situated in the other world. Affliction does not have power over it—because perhaps, as Meister Eckhart says, it is uncreated—but it has the power to separate it violently from the temporal part of the soul, so that, although supernatural love resides in the soul, sweetness is not experienced by it. It is thus that the cry arises: 'My God, why have you abandoned me?'⁴⁸

45. 'Apophatics of desire' points to (1) the apophaticism of desire that Turner describes, through which a human subject comes to live 'without a why', and (2) a movement of desire through *apophasis*, thanks to which a detached soul can receive the gift of divine *erōs* in union with God. For an expanded reading of *erōs vis-à-vis* medieval Christian mysticism, see Jantzen, G., 2003.

46. McGinn, B., 2002, p. 138. For a different perspective on Weil's theological anthropology set amid a different historical genealogy, see Vogel, J., 2008. Moreover, proximity still implies distance, so while Eckhart focuses on God, Weil concentrates on the affliction of a soul as it journeys toward God. Similarly, while for Eckhart union with God is an act of God's knowing Godself in the soul, for Weil the remaining 'unknowing' of God for the soul is premised on an understanding of the soul as the agent of knowing. But for Eckhart the soul is not an agent of knowing, because God cannot be known as an entity distinct from God's knowing Godself. I thank an anonymous review for this point.

47. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.3.393. This list points to an interesting parallel in Bonaventure and Eckhart: both describe Christ as being uncreated. See Bonaventure, 1987, p. 170. Eckhart appears again in the closing pages of this *cahier*, where Weil cites a fragment from one of his sermons on Matthew (concerning the trustworthy servant in Matthew 25.23): 'as long as there is a single man whom you love less than yourself, you have never loved yourself... Never more did he evoke either himself or any other created thing with his created will' (Weil, S., 1988–, 6.3.423).

48. Weil, S., 1950, p. 85.

This passage is worth dwelling on, as it succinctly articulates Weil's proximity to *and* distance from Eckhart's apophatic anthropology. Weil maintains, with Eckhart, that at least one part of the soul—the locus of 'supernatural love'—is uncreated (and thus atemporal), which allows for the identity of the soul's ground and God's ground (recalling Eckhart's 'God's ground is my ground, and my ground is God's ground') experienced in and through detachment, that apophatic process of unforming, unbecoming, undoing. Decreation is, for Weil, just that kind of apophatic process through which a human subject detaches and undoes herself. Decreation is the ascetic practice of *apophasis* that concerns the soul's uncreated part, the part Eckhart calls the innermost ground, though what Eckhart calls a retreat (of the soul into this innermost ground) Weil sees as a passage: a mystical passage from the created to the uncreated. In decreation, a human subject passes via negation 'into the uncreated'.⁴⁹

At this point, the resonances between Eckhart's detachment and Weil's decreation are, as McGinn mentions, so deep that decreation seems to be nearly a translation of detachment. Further deepening these resonances are the respective imports of the crucifixion for detachment and decreation. For Eckhart, the crucifixion opens the way of detachment and all that it entails ('God died so that I might die to the whole world and to all created things'). For Weil, decreation is from the start bound to the cross, as it makes its first appearance in Weil's *cahiers* in reference to the cross: 'Cross. Only extreme affliction fully brings redemptive suffering. It is therefore necessary that it be so that the creature can be decreated'.⁵⁰ The similarities are striking.

Apophatic Precursor: Affliction

But these similarities also expose dissimilarities. As the passage above illustrates, decreation is only half of the story for Weil. The other half is

49. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.2.349–50.

50. Ibid., 6.2.363. Quite provocatively, Julia Kristeva finds a similar move in Martin Luther. In a section entitled 'The Protestant Affliction' amid her consideration of Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, Kristeva writes that 'as early as his Ninety-Five Theses against indulgences, Martin Luther formulated a mystical call for suffering as a means of access to heaven' (Kristeva, J., 1989, p. 120). To support her claim, she points to theses four, seven, forty, and ninety-four. Her point resonates in very interesting ways with Weil's thoughts on affliction as part of a mystical route, though she seems to forget that in 1517, when Luther wrote the Ninety-Five Theses, he was still an Augustinian monk and not yet a self-consciously unorthodox 'reformer'.

affliction (*malheur*), a spiritual exercise that precedes decreation—and introduces a profoundly tragic dimension into Weil’s mystical program, one that ultimately marks her Christianity as fundamentally tragic. Since affliction precedes and makes way for decreation, understanding the latter requires understanding the former. While decreation affects a soul’s uncreated part, affliction affects its created, temporal part—or, more specifically, affliction has (returning to the passage above) ‘the power to separate it [the soul’s uncreated part] violently from the temporal part of the soul’, and that separation is what allows decreation to proceed. Phrased differently, affliction is the suffering that precedes the ‘sweetness’ of ‘supernatural love’.

But affliction is not simply suffering. It is a profound, unique suffering—one that is, according to Weil, ‘in the domain of suffering... a thing apart, specific, irreducible’, since it involves ‘an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death’.⁵¹ Affliction deracinates a human subject as such totally: as Weil writes, it attacks and arrests life ‘directly or indirectly in all its parts, social, psychological, physical’, thereby robbing a subject of her very subjectivity.⁵² Affliction makes a subject (a ‘who’) into a thing (a ‘what’), thanks to a violence: affliction, lacerating this human subject with the blade of the impossible, effects an experience of violence that, though specific, cannot be put into words by this eviscerated subject-turned-thing. Affliction is excessive; it is impossible; it is absurd. It marks a limit across which a human subject experiences something of the impossible, for (in Weil’s words) ‘affliction compels one to recognize as real what one does not believe possible’.⁵³

The cross lies at the boundary of affliction, which is also the boundary of humanity. By bringing a human subject to the foot of the cross, affliction positions her on the threshold of human finitude—a threshold crossed only by way of pain so thoroughgoing, so penetrating, that it defies description. Moreover, while this human subject might be metaphorically or metonymically at the foot of Jesus’ cross, she nonetheless feels at a complete remove from the divine whom she desires, since affliction

51. Weil, S., 1966, p. 98. Philippe de Saint Robert describes affliction as ‘a desired and creative suffering’ that ‘goes up to death’ (Saint Robert, P., 1999, p. 19, my translation). For helpful readings of affliction, see von der Ruhr, M., 2007, pp. 120-41; and, much more extended, Athanasiadis, N., 2001.

52. Weil, S., 1966, p. 100. Here and subsequently, I use feminine pronouns to refer to ‘the subject’ since this subject is one that Weil imagined and identified with, personally.

53. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.2.313.

apophatically ‘renders God absent for a while, more absent than a dead person, more absent than light in a completely dark prison’.⁵⁴ In the void of this absence, this human subject stands, waiting, at the foot of the cross.

The cross marks the site of Christianity’s tragic pinnacle. As Katherine Brueck notes, ‘Christ’s cross constitutes the cornerstone’ of Weil’s tragic Christianity, focusing ‘less on the joyous results of Christ’s having been crucified than...on the sufferings Christ himself endured’.⁵⁵ Weil’s Christology uniquely entwines Christ’s divinity and humanity in affliction: for Weil, what matters most about Christ is that he suffers and dies.

There, in this emotional physicality, lies the supernatural aspect of Christ’s affliction and self-sacrifice. Rather than trying to circumvent or eliminate suffering, Weil’s vision of Christianity places suffering at its center, with its most acute articulation coming in Jesus’ tragic cry from the cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’⁵⁶ Weil cites this cry again and again in her *cahiers*, seeing it as *the* tragic cry and finding in it what she identifies as ‘the true proof that Christianity is something divine’ and, consequently, locating the divinity of Christianity in Jesus’ most human, most mortal, most tragic moment.⁵⁷ In this way, Christianity’s divine aspect depends on its utterly human aspect, for in Christ’s mortal experience of suffering, Christ’s desire for consolation and an end to affliction, Christ’s sense of his finite solitude, Weil locates the compelling power of the crucifixion. Hence for her, the cross involves a violent ‘tearing to pieces [*écartèlement*], a ‘supreme laceration, suffering that no other approaches’ since the death of Christ, insofar as he is divine, tears God from God. God is torn in and through human mortality: in the crucifixion, God self-lacerates; God subjects Godself to affliction; God undergoes the cleavage entailed in God’s loving self-sacrifice.

This love, Weil writes, ‘of God for us is passion’, a passion realized in the crucifixion but a passion already inscribed in the incarnation insofar as it involves God’s self-subjugation to a violent *écartèlement*.⁵⁸ Weil describes this *écartèlement*—God’s act of tearing Godself apart and becoming human—in terms of *pathēma*, the Greek word used to designate

54. Weil, S., 1966, p. 102.

55. Brueck, K., 1995, pp. 5, 6.

56. Mark 15.34 (quoting Psalm 22.1). Though reading Christianity in tragic terms goes against the usual hermeneutic grain, Weil is not alone in her reading. See, for example, Mack, B., 1991.

57. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.2.368; see also 6.3.34.

58. *Ibid.*, 6.3.279.

the Passion, through which 'love is modified, submits, suffers'.⁵⁹ Love plays a key role in the passion of crucifixion, which Weil describes as a 'marvel of love' even as it tears God apart.⁶⁰ How? Because for Weil, God is the love between God and God, even when separated—even in the separation that leaves Jesus feeling totally abandoned on the cross. The suffering and death of God is what, for Weil, demonstrates Christianity's divinity: God's self-abandonment, captured in Christ's tragic cry demonstrates, 'at the supreme moment of the crucifixion', such an impassible 'abyss of love on both sides', so that the death of God serves as 'the most marvelous testimony of perfect love'.⁶¹ Weil locates this love at the heart of Christianity, where love, suffering, and death form for her an inseparable trinity.

Hence for Weil, affliction—bound to the cross—names a spiritual exercise of suffering love and marks the intersection of humanity and divinity. Weil locates the cross 'at the intersection of creation and Creator', of human being and God, and Christ, as God become mortal, 'is the point of contact, of tangency, between humanity and God'.⁶² The cross is the site of this tangency; the cross is thus a cross and a crossing. The intersection of its limbs marks the intersection of humanity and divinity and thus the possibility of crossing from one to the other. There, afflicted, she is ready to touch this point of tangency between herself and God, to be like God crucified, to emulate God's charitable self-donation and 'to cross... the infinite thickness of time and of space' as an act of love.⁶³ The cross becomes the threshold across which God and this human subject pass in their loving traversals toward one another.

The cross becomes, in other words, the site and vehicle for decreation as apophatic exercise. But Weil's rendering of affliction inserts a tragic component into her extreme *imitatio crucis*—one that, as its necessary precursor, effects the spiritual passage that decreation enacts. Affliction thus makes clear that though Weil shares a kinship with apophatic thinkers such as Eckhart, her spiritual itinerary takes a markedly different path from theirs, as it goes by way of extraordinary suffering and tragic

59. Weil, S., 1985, p. 55.

60. Weil, S., 1966, p. 106.

61. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.3.88.

62. Weil, S., 1966, p. 121; Weil, S., 1988–, 6.3.258.

63. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.3.115. Weil remarks that once this human subject has performed this *askēsis*, 'the supernatural part of the soul reigns over the natural part not by violence but by persuasion, not by will but by desire' (Weil, S., 1985, p. 31).

excess. These divergences come primarily via the different theological and spiritual functions of the cross, which for Eckhart and Weil (and others) remain importantly linked to a soul's apophatic undoing.

Apophatic Exercise: Decreation

Having done its work on a soul's temporal created part via an extreme uprooting and tragic tearing, the dark night of affliction gives way to the 'brilliant darkness' of decreation. Decreation is the ascetic practice of *apophasis* that concerns the uncreated part, the part Eckhart calls the innermost ground, which for him is identical with the divine ground. But what Eckhart calls a retreat (of the soul into this innermost ground) Weil sees as a passage: a mystical passage from the created to the uncreated. Just as, in affliction, a human subject passes by negation, through death, so, in decreation, she passes 'into the uncreated'.⁶⁴ In so doing, decreation achieves a second apophatic level: the negation of negation and subsequent passage from the negative to the mystical.

I do not mean to assert that decreation lacks a deeply negative dimension, because negativity is operative, thanks in large part to the preceding spiritual exercise of affliction. Affliction spiritually strips a human subject; it lacerates her; it brings this subject to the threshold of her mortality and leaves her there, exposed, feeling totally abandoned; it brings her, in other words, to the threshold of a void. Decreation concerns her passage across this threshold and into this void, this abyss of nothingness, and its achievement requires that she detach herself from created things, that she empty herself, and that she fix her desire and will on the void: 'to want the void, to will the void [*vouloir à vide, vouloir le vide*]'.⁶⁵ She must will the void; she must desire the void; she must choose the void; she must face the void and accept it out of loving self-sacrifice, for to love means 'to endure the void'.⁶⁶ Moreover, she must not only face the void but create it within herself by hollowing out an interior space through an act of self-negation. In doing so, she follows God, who in the act of creation must renounce being everything: 'God renounces—in a sense—being all'.⁶⁷ Creation, then, involves renunciation—self-renunciation—from the

64. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.2.349–50. For an insightful readings of decreation, see Irwin, A., 2002, and Radzins, I., 2005.

65. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.3.190.

66. *Ibid.*, 6.2.207.

67. *Ibid.*, 6.2.270.

beginning, since for something other than God to exist, God must contract Godself, thus renouncing claim to part of the totality of existence.⁶⁸

Creating a void within herself, a human subject follows God in terms of self-contraction, which requires a radical self-tearing, an ‘extreme uprooting [*déracinement*]’ that makes space for this void, toward which she directs her desire.⁶⁹ This uprooting is so extreme that, in carving out this void, she destroys her subjectivity: she obliterates her ability to say ‘I’. She must offer her ‘I’ in a self-renunciative imitation of God—because she, as a human subject, possesses ‘nothing in the world...except the power to say I’.⁷⁰ Her ‘I’ is all that she has to give to God, making the renunciation of human agency also its ultimate act. She creates a void within herself; she annihilates her ‘I’, which cedes its place to God.⁷¹ Hence Weil’s ethic of decreation involves a human subject’s *self*-annihilation—carving out an interior void within herself—and *self*-donation—giving her ‘I’, the only thing she has to give, to God. Thanks to these exercises of self-sacrifice, her ‘I’ becomes no longer the individual, finite ‘I’ of this subject but the ‘I’ of God. The ethical dimension of decreation yields a mystical outcome in which, Weil writes, ‘in a sense, God is “I.”’⁷² Here Weil’s apophatic anthropology echoes Eckhart’s concerning the identity of the soul’s ground and the divine ground, as when Weil writes that ‘the self of God is moreover I. Under all possible relations, it is always this which says I’.⁷³ There are also Dionysian resonances, since what is at stake is a spoken ‘I’, an ability to say ‘I’, that a human subject unsays in sacrificing her ability to say ‘I’. Thus in decreation, the linguistic *apophasis* of negative theology corresponds to the ethical, and finally ontological, *apophasis* of negative anthropology. Decreation is *the* apophatic exercise that, paired with affliction, stands at the culmination of Weil’s spiritual itinerary. Affliction corresponds to the tragic while decreation corresponds to the mystical.

In decreation, Weil creatively crosses theology and anthropology in a spiritual exercise of mystical passage: across a threshold, from created to

68. See also Weil, S., 1966, p. 131.

69. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.2.356; see also 6.2.264. Vetö develops a similar point based on what he very appropriately calls ‘abnegation’ (Vető, M., 1994, p. 32).

70. Weil, S., 1988–, 6.2.461.

71. *Ibid.*, 6.2.467.

72. *Ibid.*, 6.2.125. The ontological outcome is also powerfully mystical since, according to Weil, total relinquishment of creation makes a decreed subject a co-creator: ‘we participate in the creation of the world by decreasing ourselves’ (*ibid.*, 6.2.432).

73. *Ibid.*, 6.2.483.

uncreated. She positions decreation at the culmination of her spiritual itinerary so that a spiritual itinerant, advancing along this practical progression, concludes her journey with decreation, which marks the pinnacle of her apophatic expedition, in which she unsays and undoes her subjectivity. This move is from the created to the uncreated, a move across and *beyond* the ontological threshold of humanity. It is the move that this human subject has prepared for, but it is not a move that she can make on her own. She can create a void within herself; she can make room for God; she can sacrifice her 'I'; but she cannot advance on her own across the threshold she desires to cross.

She can move only up to the threshold, peering toward the mystical void that lies beyond it. Completely uprooted, having given all that she has to give, having subjugated herself to the point of self-annihilation, she must wait there for God to carry her across. Her ethical subjection opens onto a spiritual subjection built into decreation. Hence the passion that she experiences in terms of affliction leads to a different passion: a passivity, characterized by 'inactive action [*action non agissante*]', that leaves this human subject waiting for God to complete her decreation—since only God can.⁷⁴ She can bring herself only so far. God must then cross the threshold of creation twice: to retrieve this subject and to bring her back with God, thereby consummating her passage into the uncreated. Decreation therefore requires the passage of God to effect the passage of this human subject.

These crossings ultimately come out of love, as this human subject ceases to be through love. She advances to the threshold out of her love for God, driven by her unyielding conviction that 'after death, love [*après la mort, l'amour*]'.⁷⁵ After (and thanks to) death as passage beyond her created state, love engulfs her in a mystical excess. For Weil, the mystical moments of theological and anthropological *apophysis* operate according to love: a human subject's absolute love for God and God's absolute love for a human subject—to the point that God sacrifices Godself in the self-donation of incarnation and then crucifixion. Love is what propels, even compels, God to overfill the void that a subject creates for this purpose. This movement highlights the double sense of passion that opens onto a double crossing done out of love, according to a mystic impulse.

74. Ibid., 6.2.351.

75. Ibid., 6.2.97.

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