THE "OPEN COUNTRY WHOSE NAME IS PRAYER": APOPHASIS, DECONSTRUCTION, AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

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Preliminary Considerations

Much of the retrieval of the Christian apophatic tradition has taken place in the context of a sustained dialogue with postmodern deconstruction. The purpose of this essay is to introduce into this dialogue the ancient practice of contemplation. This introduction is timely for at least three reasons. First, not a few of the concerns raised by some intriguing recent developments in deconstruction are directly addressed by ancient contemplative practices. Second, while those apophatic theologians who have featured largely in this dialogue, such as Gregory of Nyssa, Denys the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, and Meister Eckhart, among others, might well speak of a God unspeakably beyond the dreaded clinch of ontotheological fists and yet unspeakably embedded in the open palms of human vulnerability, they do not address the practicalities of what must happen to the discursive cognitive strategizing of the one who would encounter this God beyond all discursive knowing. Third, there is a tendency among scholars to reduce apophatic theology to literary strategies of effacement, unsaying, and oxymoronic collisions. While these literary aspects have been ably demonstrated to characterize the apophatic genre,[1] and with this I have no quarrel, this trend in scholarship overlooks the fact that the apophatic tradition also presumes of a way of life. It is a simple life that leads to the experience of silence, to "the experience of non-experience"[2] and not merely to an apophatic style of theological thinking and writing.

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Certainly for the apophatic theologians of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages there could be no search for God who dwells in silence beyond the grasp of image and concept, who has "made the darkness His dwelling place" (Ps. 17: 11), apart from a lifestyle that could lead to such a goal; the theologian likewise must enter this silence, likewise must enter this ineffable, wordless region, this open country beyond word and image and concept. Contemplative practice pertains directly to this way of life. While Gregory of Nyssa, Denys, Maximus, and a host of others theologize out of this context, they do not address in their writings what Hadot has called "spiritual exercises",[3] by which ontotheological fists are relaxed into open palms of silent communion beyond image, word, and concept. But many ancient authors did address these spiritual exercises, and, although they are not normally called apophatic authors and thus are largely left out of the dialogue with deconstruction, they have an important contribution to make; for they target in a precise and consistent manner the epistemology that fuels both ontotheology and the separate, knowing subject pasted up out of concepts and images. And so I would like to introduce into the dialogue between Christian apophaticism and deconstruction some of the spiritual exercises— contemplative practices—described by the fourth-century monastic author Evagrius Ponticus, with assistance from Diadochus, Macarius, Climacus and Hesychius.

The Problem of the Knowing Subject

Recent developments in the dialogue between Christian apophaticism and deconstruction have been helpfully framed by Mary-Jane Rubenstein.[4] She has put her finger on a problem in this dialogue: its leading lights, Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida are at an impasse, which signals the need for a reorientation of the debate. She locates this impasse in divergent readings of Denys the Areopagite's use of the term *hyperousias*. "Derrida reads [*hyperousios*] as 'hyperessentiality', so that any God without Being is merely a Being beyond Being, whereas Marion renders *hyperousios* as 'other wise than being' . . ."[5] With Derrida's reading, the charge of ontotheology remains levied against negative theology; for Marion, negative theology is acquitted of this charge. Rubenstein convincingly claims, however, that both Derrida and Marion have lost sight of the question: "the question is *not* whether or not Dionysius or Eckhart ever calls God 'Being', or even (gasp) *a* Being. They *do*. . . . The question, rather, is whether or not the divine designation remains lodged within ontic categories".[6] As a divine name "Being" becomes a problem when "it masquerades as The Divine Name, leading the ontotheologian to believe he comprehends God when he utters the word 'Being'".[7] This much is familiar to those who have followed the dialogue between Christian apophaticism and deconstruction in general and especially that between Marion and Derrida. But Rubenstein does not stop here; she

proceeds to redirect this dialogue out of its impasse by suggesting that the problem is very much tied to the knowing subject who uses "Being" as a divine name: "The error of ontotheology is not using the word 'Being' to refer to the deity, but deifying being as knowledge, and by extension, deifying the knowing subject itself".[8]

The culprit, then, is the ontotheologian's objectifying epistemology, "holding in place the knowing subject and the known 'God'".[9] This objectifying epistemology renders God "nothing more than a grounding concept". In order to avoid this, theology "will need to depart radically from the self that knows itself as knowing".[10] Apophatic theology's contribution is not simply its eschewing, or not, the language of being but that it "removes 'knowledge' from its place of ontotheological privilege".[11] In contrast to the self-securing, knowing self that objectifies God (ontotheology), Rubenstein suggests the apophatic self that knows through unknowing, attains divine union only by "abandoning all knowledge of itself and the divine".[12] She is quick to point out, however, that what is abandoned is the epistemologically constituted "self" and "God", this "self" that knows itself as knowing and posits a "*cogito* at one end of the world and a conceptual divinity at the other".[13] This abandonment, however, does not end in atheism. Precisely because the apophatic theology clings neither to "self" nor to "God", it "receives them back, *sans* ontotheological quotations marks, by *letting them be*".[14]

How then to be free of this "God" of ontotheology? "To be free of 'God', the intellect must *give up* its conceptual grasp on God".[15] How can intellect give up its conceptual grasping? The relinquishing cannot be said, she suggests; "it can only be *done*".[16] Then how can it be done? Rubenstein finds an example of this doing in Eckhart's prayer to God to be freed of "God". But what precisely does she see Eckhart doing? "Eckhart is giving up the 'self' that holds 'God' in place".[17] It is precisely at this point that I would like to pick up where Rubenstein has left off. For Eckhart's prayer is a discursive prayer, a fruit of ratiocination, *a praying that*. What we will see in the contemplative practices taught by Evagrius, Diadochus, Macarius, Climacus, and Hesychius is a way of dealing with the discursive thinking that deifies the subject and objectifies God. This discursive mind is initially the major stumbling block to prayer, and the contemplative practices, by which the discursive mind (and its pasted up sense of self) is deconstructed by stillness, open gradually the closed fists of ontotheology, to expose open palms of vulnerability to the grace of simple Communion.

Evagrius of Pontus and the Problem of the Knowing Self

The fourth-century monk, Evagrius of Pontus (344–399), is enjoying a renaissance of interest.[18] Mentored by the Cappadocians, especially Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzen,[19] and mentor to John Cassian (an

important conduit of the desert tradition to Latin monasticism),[20] Evagrius remains one of the most important and psychologically astute representatives of the desert tradition. For the purposes of this article he is one of a host of those ideally positioned to demonstrate how the tradition of contemplative practice addresses in a direct way the very problem in the deconstructionist debate that Rubenstein has identified: the objectifying mind and its need to relinquish its conceptual grasp on "God". For Evagrius's very definition of prayer addresses this problem: "Prayer is the letting go of concepts".[21] According to Evagrius, conceptual thinking characterizes the objectifying mind and prevents what he calls "pure prayer".[22] His teaching on prayer includes a sustained critique of this very conceptual thinking that installs both the independent *cogito* and the conceptualized God of ontotheology.[23]

For Evagrius the practice of prayer involves one at some point in an unavoidable battle with thoughts, and he is well known for his insightful analysis of the intense struggle with obsessive patterns of thinking.[24] These obsessive patterns, which Evagrius calls the passions, are excited by any one or a combination of eight afflictive thoughts, with the result that the person of prayer is caught up in a great cocktail party going on in the head, or an elaborate selection of internal videos that are played over and over again and, if unchecked, are ultimately preferred over anything else. We really do not have much choice whether or not we will encounter this struggle with afflictive thoughts but only whether we meet these thoughts with our obsessive patterns of inner chatter and compulsive behavior: "It is not in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions".[25] That we will undergo an onslaught of thoughts is presumed. To what extent the attention is stolen by the discursive processes of the mind is the measure of the quality of our inner vigilance (about which more later). Evagrius is consistent in his critique of the role of thoughts in prayer and strong in his encouragement not to become embroiled in the discursive agenda they excite: "Stand resolute, fully intent on your prayer. Pay no heed to the concerns and thoughts that might arise the while. They do nothing better than disturb and upset you so as to dissolve the fixity of your purpose".[26] Again we see that it is not a question of damning up the discursive mind stream, or of not having thoughts by clenching one's jaws until the mind is furrowed and a ratiocinative blank stare is achieved. What is crucial, rather, is that we do not give our attention to these thoughts. We let them be.[27] This is the sense behind his advice to "strive to render your mind deaf and dumb at the time of prayer and then you will be able to pray".[28] Thoughts, even great storms of thoughts, may indeed be present, but the person intent on prayer does not allow the attention to be stolen by them, thus avoiding whipping up commentary on the thoughts.[29]

The churning of passionate thoughts, however, is not the only problem. There are subtler problems with thoughts that Evagrius is well aware of: just because someone is free of these disturbing patterns does not necessarily mean that a person truly prays. "It is quite possible for one to have none but the purest thoughts and yet be so distracted mulling over them that one remains the while far removed from God".[30] So it is not just the frenzied grasping of obsessive thoughts that presents a problem to the person at prayer. Indeed the problem is not so much whether the thoughts are passionate thoughts or so-called pure thoughts. The problem is the "mulling over them", the discursive churning of ratiocination, inner chatter, running commentary.

This inner chatter, this "mulling over" of thoughts passionate or pure, is but one of a host of discursive mind-games that threatens the depth of one's prayer. Evagrius is quick to expose, for example, how prayer can easily be turned by the mind into posturing before others, trying to get others to watch us being prayerful: "Observe whether you truly stand before God in your prayer or whether you are under some compulsion that drives you to seek recognition from people, strive after their approval. When indulged to this end your protracted prayer is nothing better than a pretext".[31] Indeed this mind-game at the service of self-centered discursive strategies is a real obstacle to prayer, but the sense of the text is not "don't do this" but "observe it", "be aware of it". When one becomes aware of the discursive strategies of grasping, one can be liberated from them. To push them away rather than indulge them would be just another discursive strategy. Evagrius counsels, therefore, inner awareness, vigilance: "Stand guard over your spirit, keeping it free of concepts at the time of prayer so that it may remain in its own deep calm".[32]

The practice of vigilance (*nepsis*)—be aware, observe, stand guard, be watchful—is the Evagrian remedy for the discursive coordinates of identity that present an obstacle to prayer. It is one of the ways Evagrius addresses the problem of discursive strategies in prayer without replacing one discursive strategy with yet another discursive strategy. Far from suggesting that distracting thoughts should not be present, Evagrius presumes that they will be present, and that "we will run to see them" like a compelling internal video.[33] The advice is to allow them to be present without "mulling over them", without getting caught up in commentary on them. This is the antidote to the problem of discursive activity in prayer.

Giving advice to fellow monks, he says: "let him keep careful watch over his thoughts. Let him observe their intensity, their periods of decline and follow them as they rise and fall. Let him note well the complexity of his thoughts, their periodicity, the demons which cause them, with the order of their succession and the nature of their associations".[34] What he is suggesting is not the relationship we usually have with thoughts during prayer. The normal response is a highly habituated tendency to meet a thought with

another thought, with a commentary of some sort; with lightening-quick speed we end up reacting to or acting out of this. But Evagrius is suggesting a far more direct encounter; the difference is subtle yet profound: meet thoughts not with commentary but with simple awareness. Because our cognitive-emotional habits of reacting to thoughts are so deeply ingrained, Evagrius's counsel is easier said than done. He is nevertheless convinced that this is the way for the contemplative art to develop.

In order to assist in the cultivation of vigilance, of meeting afflictive thoughts without getting caught in commentary on the thoughts, Evagrius suggests simply naming the thought: "Now it is essential to understand these matters so that when these various evil thoughts set their own proper forces to work we are in a position to address effective words against them, that is to say, those words which correctly characterize the one present".[35] This practice of naming the thought as it arises does three things. By naming the thought (but without commenting on it) the contemplative allows the thought simply to be, thereby subverting the egoic strategy of pushing away or latching onto thoughts, feelings, or images. At the same time, simply naming the afflictive thought breaks the highly habituated pattern of whipping up a commentary on the thoughts and getting caught in a pile-up of thought upon thought upon thought. Evagrius is aware of how quickly the discursive mind works; hence, this awareness must be cultivated to a vigilant stillness, like a spider on its web.[36] Evagrius therefore advises: "we must do this before they drive us out of our state of mind. In this manner we shall make ready progress, by the grace of God".[37] As a result, the contemplative gradually disidentifies with this discursive chatter as constitutive of self.

Prayer and Thinking about God

Evagrius speaks at great length of the battle with afflictive, passionate thoughts, but he is well aware that these are not the only thoughts that present obstacles to the contemplative. Evagrius is also highly critical of pious thoughts, thinking about God, images of God. These likewise present an obstacle to the unfolding of pure prayer because they too involve objectifying, discursive thinking. As with any discursive thinking, an object of thought or objectifying ratiocinative process is required as well as an objectifying thinker. "When the spirit prays purely without being led astray, then the demons no longer come upon it from the left side but from the right. That is to say, they suggest the semblance of God to it in the form of some image that is flattering to the senses, in the hope of leading it to think it has attained the aim of its prayer".[38] By "being led astray" Evagrius intends not so much being led into sin but being led into discursive thinking, which requires not only objectifying thinking, ratiocination, but an objectifying thinker. In the non-discursive awareness of pure prayer, "the subject-object distinction disappears".[39] The sign that the contemplative has been led back

into discursive, objectifying thinking is the manipulation of images (in this case images of God) by the clinched fists of conceptual thinking. This creates in the discursive awareness the impression that God is an object and that union with God is something objective to be acquired.

The impression that God is situated at the end of a ratiocinative search is generated by the discursive mind and, according to Evagrius, marks the victory of the demons's attempt to distract the contemplative from the vast open space of pure prayer. "Beware of the traps your adversaries lay for you. For suddenly it may happen when you are praying purely, free from all disturbance, that some unusual and strange form appears so as to lead you into the presumptuous thought that God is actually situated there as in a place. This is calculated to persuade you . . . that God is something quantitative. But God is without quantity and without all outward form".[40]

For Evagrius the struggle with thoughts, whether pious or passionate, godly or afflictive, is not a question of having no thoughts, but rather a matter of cultivating through vigilant awareness the open space that lets thoughts be without discursive commentary on them, what he calls giving them "mental consent",[41] "mulling over them".[42]

"Be aware." "Be on guard." "Watch." The awareness itself is stillness.[43] This still awareness is the vast, open country of pure prayer: "When your spirit withdraws . . . and turns away from every thought that derives from sensibility or memory or temperament and is filled with reverence and joy at the same time, then you can be sure that you are drawing near that open country whose name is prayer".[44] The metaphor, "open country", is Evagrius's way of signaling non-discursive awareness, which does not perform ratiocination.[45] It simply unites. Therefore, in that "open country whose name is prayer", God is not a discursive object of prayer, and there is not confirmation of the independent pray-er. The stillness of vigilance deconstructs the cognitive-emotional coordinates of self. With no ratiocination to objectify God, there is no objectifying thinker, just simple, vast awareness.

Recollecting the Mind by the Prayer-Word and Breath

The cultivation and practice of inner vigilance described by Evagrius is one way of affronting the problem of the wondering, roving discursive mind. Other teachers speak of recollecting the discursive mind with the aid of a *versiculum* or prayer-word, often combined with the breath. A brief look at representative authors reveals similar concerns regarding the problem of images and thoughts during prayer.

A key figure in this regard is the fourth-century Greek bishop, Diadochus of Photice.[46] "When we have blocked all its outlets by means of the remembrance of God, the intellect requires of us imperatively some task which will satisfy its need for activity. For the complete fulfillment of its purpose we should give it nothing but the prayer 'Lord Jesus'. . . . Let the intellect

continually concentrate on these words within its inner shrine with such intensity that it is not turned aside to any mental images".[47] This particular text is important because it is one of the earliest references to the use of the Jesus Prayer.[48] Like Evagrius, Diadochus knows the problem that the discursive mind poses to one who prays. Even when the attention's tendency to flit all over the place has been brought to a state of recollection by the "remembrance of God",[49] Diadochus is aware that the mind remains active. His advice involves no attempt to obliterate the discursive mind, but rather to give it something to do; give it the Jesus Prayer to repeat. With the attention concentrated on the tranquil repetition of the Jesus Prayer, the attention will not be stolen by images flowing through the discursive mind stream.

A similar approach to the problem of the discursive mind is seen in John Climacus: "Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath. Then indeed you will appreciate the value of stillness".[50] By "calling to mind" Climacus does not necessarily mean to think about Jesus in a discursive meditation, but much like Diadochus: the use of "Jesus" as a means of recollecting the discursive mind. This draws the discursive mind to stillness, to silence.[51] But Climacus does advocate something that we did not see Diadochus mention: the role of the breath.

It is not really clear how the breath was utilized by the ancients. Above and beyond aligning the Jesus Prayer with the rhythm of breathing in and breathing out there was perhaps a slight pause between the inhale and the exhale. What is important is that we see incorporated into the early teaching of contemplative practice the role of the body in bringing stillness to the discursive mind. Climacus does not say what the meaning of silence is; it cannot be said, for it is beyond all concept, word, image.

In a story preserved in a seventh- or eighth-century Coptic text we see Macarius, the famous teacher of Evagrius, likewise advocating the use of the breath. Tormented by thoughts, Evagrius went to Macarius and asked for advice. Macarius responds:

> Bind the rope to the mast as you would to keep up the sail, and by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the boat will cross the diabolical billows, the waves of the deceiving sea, and the dim darkness of this vain world". Evagrius asked: "What is the boat, what is the rope, and what is the mast?" Macarius replied: "The boat is your heart: look after it! The rope is your mind: lash it to our Lord Jesus Christ; he is the mast who masters the waves and the diabolical billows that beat against the saints. Is it not easy, in fact, to say with every breath: "My Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me?. . . ."[52]

This text shows the same concern for the problem of the mind's ratiocinative activity that was voiced by Evagrius and Diadochus. Macarius does not elaborate on the problem, but there is every reason to presume that he, like

his pupil Evagrius, is likewise aware of how both afflictive thoughts as well as pious thoughts about God present an obstacle to prayer. The attention must not be given over to them; instead Macarius suggests binding one's attention to the Jesus Prayer, and the repetition of this *versiculum* is to be combined with the breath.

The practice of vigilance or watchfulness that was the concern of Evagrius is not at odds with the recollecting practice of the Jesus Prayer. Both are means of becoming aware of that inner silence that runs deeper than the discursive movements of the mind. The eighth-century monk, Hesychius says, "Watchfulness and the Jesus Prayer, as I have said, mutually reinforce one another; for close attentiveness goes with constant prayer, while prayer goes with close watchfulness and attentiveness of intellect".[53] For Hesychius both watchfulness and the practice of the Jesus Prayer can be stabilized and strengthened by incorporating them into the body's breath: "With your breathing combine watchfulness and the name of Jesus . . .".[54] Hesychius says this inner silence is "unbroken by thoughts. In this stillness the heart breathes and invokes, endlessly and without ceasing, only Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and Himself God".[55] To enter this stillness, this open country whose name is prayer, is to be free of discursive thinking, whether afflictive or pious. Thoughts may indeed be occurring, but the attention remains free from latching on to them and whipping up commentary—theological or otherwise—on them. "If you really want to cover your evil thoughts . . . to watch over your heart without hindrance, let the Jesus Prayer cleave to your breath and in a few days you will find that this is possible".[56]

Contemplative Practice, Unselfing Self, Ungodding God

Whether it is the self-forgetful cultivation of interior watchfulness that reveals the vast inner landscape of prayer beyond concepts, or the recollection of the discursive mind through a *versiculum* such as the Jesus prayer woven into the breath, or yet other contemplative disciplines that bring the discursive mind to stillness, contemplative practice would seem ideally placed to enter into postmodernity's dialogue with the Christian apophatic tradition. "The way to be lifted to the God beyond all knowledge is to abandon that self which 'knowledge' constitutes, and the way to abandon the self-as-knowing is to make knowledge *fail*".[57] By now it should be obvious that Evagrius, Diadochus, Hesychius and a host of other contemplative authors, share not a few of postmodernity's theological concerns. Contemplative practice abandons this knowing self. The relentless critique of thoughts in prayer, whether afflictive, obsessive thoughts or pious thoughts is precisely the attempt "to make knowledge *fail*". Gregory of Nyssa, Denys the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, Meister Eckhart likewise speak to this; they strongly denounce the idolatry of discursive thought,[58] that God is beyond both discursive affirmations and denials.[59] But

the contemplative disciplines we have considered take a far more practical approach; they are the spiritual exercises that make knowledge fail. Evagrius is not interested in the discursive formulation of an adequate apophatic theory. Conceptual strategies of whatever sort, obsessive ranting, theological musing, and spiritual strategies to acquire, are all movements of ratiocination that must be let go of. His way of letting go of thoughts is achieved through the practice of vigilance; one witnesses these thoughts as they arise and fall. That which is aware of these thoughts is free of these thoughts. The effect of this practice of vigilance is the gradual disidentification with the discursive movements of the mind. It is this disidentification that makes knowledge fail.

Insofar as the self is constituted by its conceptual images,[60] the fruit of vigilance is the destabilizing of these images and, hence, the deconstruction of what one has taken to be oneself: a mass of thoughts, images, and feelings. When through vigilant stillness this comprehending mass no longer steals the attention, the attention being rooted in either the expansive simplicity of awareness itself (and not the objects in awareness) or in the Jesus Prayer (which opens onto this same dimensionless depth), it registers in the discursive mind as nothing at all, a vast and flowing nothing, that evokes from the discursive mind the metaphor divine presence, which itself slips away. Eckhart refers to this vast nothing as "breadth without breadth, expanseless expanse.[61] Contemplative practice disposes one to "the radical departure" as Rubenstein has put it, "from the self that knows itself as knowing".[62] What is abandoned in contemplative practice is precisely this self that knows itself as knowing, this "epistemologically constituted self". What is revealed is an unselfed self.

When contemplative practice has blossomed there is no longer an epistemologically constituted subject-self that seeks an object-God thought to be divine, a conceptual God as the object of an independent *"cogito* at the other end of the world".[63] The cultivated practice of vigilance or the practice of the Jesus Prayer leaves one vulnerable to the gracious liberation from all identification with discursive movement. Evagrius, among others, would be quick to remind us that this does not mean the cession of afflictive thoughts or ratiocination of a more noble sort. These remain. But one can no longer truthfully identify with them; one can no longer identify oneself as "epistemologically constituted", with a self that "knows itself as knowing". By the same token, there is no separation from ratiocination. Thoughts, feelings, images appear in the stillness of vigilant awareness, the way weather, good or bad, appears or does not appear in a valley. To shift metaphors, there is no river without a riverbed, and yet the riverbed is not the river. The riverbed is like the unshakeable calm of awareness vigilant and still. It receives water and lets water go in one and the same act; engaged reception and open detachment are one happening.[64] The distinction is a matter of perspective and is itself a discursive movement. In the deep calm cultivated by contem-

plative practice, the self that "knows itself as knowing", the "epistemologi-
cally constituted self", the emotive-ratiocinative objects of awareness, are
like the river. But the riverbed is pure, vigilant awareness itself.

Thoughts appear and disappear in awareness. They neither constitute the
self nor are they separate from it. The sense of being a self, the sense of a
separate identity—I am this and not that—is pasted up out of thoughts and
feelings. Obviously none of this is of any interest to a closed circuit TV
camera; it is an inner fruition, a realization signaled by the comparative irrel-
evance of the subject/object distinction. The purpose of contemplative prac-
tice is to enable this response to grace that leads to the liberating realization
that one's self is *no-thing*, that the self is unselfed, to use Rubenstein's clever
phrase.

It is well to note that Evagrius, Diadochus, Hesychius, and many others
ground their teaching on contemplative practice in an epistemology that was
part of the cultural inheritance of Late Antiquity. The ancients distinguished
between discursive and non-discursive cognitive states, each with its respec-
tive faculties, functions, and properties.[65] The discursive faculty is *dianoia*.[66]
It performs ratiocination. In order to comprehend, it requires a cognitively
circumscribable object. Because God is not circumscribable, *dianoia* is of no
use. However, since *dianoia* generates momentum in such a way as to be a
dominating cognitive state, the contemplative disciplines focus on *dianoia* by
drawing it into stillness, through, for example, recollection (the repetition of
the Jesus Prayer) or the practice of inner vigilance (*nepsis*) and attentiveness
(*prosoche*). This enables the non-discursive faculty called *nous* to flower.[67]

Nous is a unitive faculty and its cognitive state is unitive awareness. It does
not require cognitively circumscribable objects. It unites directly, without
intermediary, without the ratiocination that characterizes *dianoia*. With *nous*
the subject/object distinction disappears. *Nous* is not constellated by con-
cepts and bares no sense of being a self, an independent *cogito* (this would
be handled by *dianoia*).[68] The contemplative practices we have considered
attempt to press the domineering habits of *dianoia* into the humble service
of *nous*, allowing *nous* to blossom as "pure prayer".[69]

The type of unitive knowing that characterizes *nous* is not opposed to the
discursive, subject/object knowledge of *dianoia*, but its flowering. The con-
templative practices we have considered appear, from the perspective of
dianoia, to destabilize its dominating hegemony; in actual fact contemplative
practice allows the full development of the mind by facilitating the full-
flowering of *nous*. The "apophatic abandonment" that contemplative
practice cultivates is at once discursive intellect's "destruction and its con-
summation",[70] an ignorance that is a learned ignorance, a *"docta ignorantia"*.[71]

When the self flowers in contemplation as an unselfed self, not only is
it no longer epistemologically constituted, no longer knowing itself as
knowing, but also it is not reductively an objectifying epistemology that
renders God "nothing more than a grounding . . . concept".[72] God is no

longer known through concepts. With the self unselfed, God is ungodded and allowed to be that "great speaking absence between the cherubim".[73]

Conclusion

Contemplative prayer and its supporting way of life have not been adequately integrated into the dialogue between deconstruction and the Christian apophatic tradition. The purpose of this essay has been to redress this oversight by showing how contemplative practice is an essential component of a way of life that radically destabilizes an objectifying, epistemologically constituted "self" and "God".[74] Contemplative practice, and especially its fruition as contemplative prayer, what Evagrius calls "pure prayer", is seen to lie at the heart of postmodern theology.

Rubenstein says "Negative theology removes 'knowledge' from its place of ontotheological privilege, so that presence is always inflected with absence, selfhood is only constituted through radical otherness, and knowing is only possible in and through unknowing."[75] This removal of knowledge from its place of privilege and its consequent consummation by unknowing is one postmodern way of viewing the goal of contemplative practice. That Rubenstein sees this as theology's role places her quite close to Evagrius in one of his most famous aphorisms: "if you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian".[76] Neither Rubenstein nor Evagrius are using the term "theology" in the usual academic sense characterized by discursive reflection. For Rubenstein theology must "depart radically from the self that knows itself as knowing".[77] For Evagrius, "theology" and "theologian" are technical terms that indicate prayer beyond words and concepts and presuppose the discovery of interior stillness.[78] Surely a postmodern theology that merely thinks its critique of ontotheology is just another symptom of the problem and not a remedy.

NOTES

1 Examples that are especially worthwhile include Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); J. P. Williams, *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, eds., *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
2 See Kevin Hart, "The Experience of Nonexperience" in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, pp. 188–206.
3 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. M. Chase, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
4 Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology after Ontotheology", *Modern Theology*, Vol. 19 no. 3 (July 2003), pp. 387–417.
5 Rubenstein, p. 392. She refers to Arthur Bradley, "God *sans* Being: Derrida, Marion and 'A Paradoxical Writing of the Word *Without*'", *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 14 (2000), p. 302. Marion himself gave a very clear account of his differences with Derrida at Villanova

University, subsequently published as "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology' " in John Caputo and Michael Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 20–53. Rubenstein also reminds us of a less dismissive appraisal of negative theology in Jacques Derrida, "Letter to John P. Leavey", *Semeia*, Vol. 23 (1982), p. 61. See also Martin Laird, "Whereof we Speak: Gregory of Nyssa, Jean-Luc Marion and the Current Apophatic Rage", *Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 42 (2001), pp. 1–12.

6 Rubenstein, pp. 392–393.
7 Rubenstein, p. 393.
8 *Ibid.*, p. 393.
9 *Ibid.*
10 *Ibid.*
11 *Ibid.*
12 *Ibid.*
13 *Ibid.*, p. 396.
14 *Ibid.*, p. 394.
15 *Ibid.*, p. 400.
16 *Ibid.*
17 *Ibid.*
18 See for example, Robin Darling-Young, "Evagrius the Iconographer: Monastic Pedagogy in the *Gnostikos*", *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 9 (2001), pp. 53–71; Jeremy Driscoll, *Evagrius Ponticus: Ad Monachos*, Ancient Christian Writers 59 (New York: The Newman Press, 2003); William Harmless and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, "The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus", *Theological Studies*, Vol. 62 (2001), pp. 498–529; David Linge, "Leading the Life of Angels: Ascetic Practice and Reflection in the Writings of Evagrius of Pontus", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 68 (2000), pp. 537–568; Robert Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Columba Stewart, "Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus", *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 9 (2001), pp. 173–204.
19 The main source for Evagrius's life is Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, trans. R. Meyer, Ancient Christian Writers 34 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1965), pp. 110–114. See also Gabriel Bunge, *Evagrios Pontikos: Briefe auf der Wüste*, (Trier, Paulinus Verlag, 1986), pp. 17–111.
20 See S. Marsili, *Giovanni Cassiano ed Evagrio Pontico*, (Rome: Herder, 1936), pp. 74–144, and pp. 150–158; Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 36–37 *et passim*.
21 *Chapters on Prayer*, chapter 70. Unless otherwise noted I will use the translation of John Eudes Bamberger, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, Cistercian Studies Series 4 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981).
22 *Chapters on Prayer*, chapter 70 and chapter 72.
23 Rubenstein, p. 396.
24 Vivid description of these eight passionate thoughts (gluttony, impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, pride) can be found in *Praktikos*, chapters 6–14.
25 Evagrius, *Praktikos*, chapter 6.
26 Evagrius, *On Prayer*, chapter 9.
27 Rubenstein, p. 394.
28 Evagrius, *On Prayer*, chapter 11; see also chapters 53 and 54.
29 On the importance of the practice of attention (*prosoche*) as a spiritual exercise see P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 130–136.
30 *Ibid.*, chapter 55.
31 *Ibid.*, chapter 40.
32 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
33 See *Praktikos*, chapter 54; see also chapter 75.
34 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
35 *Ibid.*, chapter 43.
36 Hesychius uses the image of a spider as a metaphor of vigilant stillness in, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, chapter 27, *The Philokalia*, Vol.1, trans G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 166.
37 Evagrius, *Praktikos*, chapter 43.

38 Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, chapter 72. In the spiritual topography of the fourth century desert, the demons had the specific function of suggesting the thought that would excite the passions; the practice of vigilance did not prevent the appearance of thoughts only the excitement of the passions, i.e., the emotional-cognitive commentary.

39 Kallistos Ware, "Evagrius of Pontus and the Macarian Homilies" in R. Waller and B. Ward, eds., *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, (London: SPCK, 1999), p.16.

40 Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, chapter 67.

41 Evagrius, *Praktikos*, chapter 75. Another way which Evagrius expresses this is drawn from the metaphor of a seal being pressed into wax: "When you are praying do not fancy the Divinity like some image formed within yourself. Avoid also allowing your spirit to be impressed with the seal of some particular shape. . . .' *Chapters on Prayer*, chapter 66.

42 *Chapters on Prayer*, chapter 55.

43 Hesychius will state this plainly in *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, chapter 5, *The Philokalia*, p. 163: "Attentiveness is the heart's stillness, unbroken by any thought."

44 Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, chapter 61 (translation altered).

45 On the role of landscape as metaphor of prayer see Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

46 For an excellent orientation to the teaching of Diadochus see Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, "The Jesus Prayer in St. Diadochus of Photice" in *Aksum-Thyateira: A Festschrift for Archbishop Methodios of Thyateira and Great Britain*, (London: Thyatiera House, 1985), pp. 557–568; see also the introduction by E. des Places, *Diadoque de Photicé: Oeuvres Spirituelles*, Sources Chrétiennes 5 (Paris: Cerf, 1966); *idem*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Vol. 3 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1957), s.v. Diadoque de Photicé, col. 817–834.

47 Diadochus, *On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination*, chapter 59, in *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 270.

48 See Kallistos Ware, "The Jesus Prayer in St. Diadochus of Photice"; *idem*, *The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality*, (Oxford: Fairacres, 1974).

49 On "remembrance of God" as a state of recollection see *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 363.

50 John Climacus, *The Ladder of Perfection*, chapter 27, trans. Colm Luibheid, Classics of Western Spirituality, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 270.

51 On the meaning of *hesychia* see Kallistos Ware, "Silence in Prayer: The Meaning of Hesychia" in *The Inner Kingdom*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2000), pp. 89–110.

52 Though the Macarius in question was the teacher of Evagrius, the text is a seventh- or eighth-century Coptic text, *Virtues of our Righteous Father, the Great Abba Macarius*, cited in Antoine Guillaumont, "The Jesus Prayer among the Monks of Egypt", *Eastern Churches Review*, Vol. 6 (1974), pp. 66–71, at p. 67.

53 Hesychius the Priest, "On Watchfulness and Holiness" chapter 94, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 178. Hesychius's dates are uncertain, he is thought to have been abbot of the Monastery of the Mother of God of the Burning Bush at Mt. Sinai in the eighth or ninth century; see *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 161.

54 *Ibid.*, chapter 189, p. 196.

55 *Ibid.*, chapter 5, p. 163.

56 *Ibid.*, chapter 182, pp. 194–95; see also chapter 100, p. 179.

57 Rubenstein, p. 397.

58 See Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II, 165, trans. Everett Ferguson and Abraham Malherbe, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 96.

59 Denys the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology*, chapter 5, trans. Colm Luibheid, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 141.

60 Rubenstein, p. 399.

61 Meister Eckhart, Sermon 29 *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, Vol. I, trans. M. Walshe, (Longmead, Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1987), p. 216.

62 Rubenstein, p. 393. I say "dispose" rather than suggest that contemplative practice itself accomplishes this. Contemplative practice is not just another strategy of acquisition.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 396.

64 The technical term for this aspect of calm that is not the opposite of turmoil but the ground of both turmoil and peace, is *apatheia*.

65 The *locus classicus* is Plato's Allegory of the Line in *Republic* VI, 509d–511e.

66 There are other terms, but *dianoia* is a standard one.

67 Again, words other than *nous* can be used; moreover, in some authors *nous* can be discursive. One must pay attention to context.

68 For a succinct discussion of the difference between *dianoia* and *nous* see Kallistos Ware, "Evagrius of Pontus and the Macarian Homilies" in *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, pp. 15–19. For a more sustained discussion see Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 34–62.

69 Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, chapter 70. The distinction between discursive and non-discursive is carried into the Latin tradition as the distinction between *ratio inferior* and *ratio superior*. See, for example. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, XII, 1, and Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a q. 79, a. 9.

70 Rubenstein, p. 395.

71 *Ibid.* "*Docta ignorantia*" originates not with Nicholas of Cusa, but goes back at least as far as Augustine; see his Letter 130, 15.28.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 393.

73 Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses*, (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1994), p. 101.

74 See Rubenstein, pp. 393–394. I say "essential component" to avoid giving the impression that contemplative practice was the only component of the lives of the authors we considered. Each lived a full liturgical life alongside demanding pastoral, administrative, and community responsibilities. In the case of Evagrius see, for example, Luke Dysinger, "The Significance of Psalmody in the Mystical Theology of Evagrius Ponticus", *Studia Patristica*, Vol. 30 (1997), pp. 176–182.

75 Rubenstein, p. 393.

76 Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, chapters 60.

77 Rubenstein, p. 393.

78 See Kallistos Ware's note on the meaning of "theology/theologian" in *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 367.