

## Black Metal's Apophatic Curse

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Dire et/ou maudire Dieu par la musique  
Praising and/or Cursing God Through Music

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### Résumé de l'article

Le *black* métal utilise du langage négatif et de la négation comme une affirmation contraire à la tradition mystique chrétienne. Ici, je soutiens que le *black* métal pousse la direction de la négation jusqu'à sa conclusion appropriée en se détournant de Dieu plutôt qu'en utilisant le langage négatif pour faire l'éloge de Dieu. Ma première affirmation est que tout culte est une forme de malédiction où la théologie négative démontre l'inadéquation du langage dans sa tentative d'attester la chose même qu'il vise à affirmer. Je soutiens que le *black* métal démontre une cohérence dans la pensée apophatique où l'approche mystique de Pseudo Denys et de Maître Eckhart échouent. En appliquant la théorie du désir de Mèlem et la théorie du renoncement, et en utilisant des paroles de groupes de *black* métal, je soutiens que plutôt que de nier le soi, l'approche apophatique du *black* métal réaffirme l'existence matérielle du soi en opposition à Dieu. L'affirmation enracinée dans la négation de la nature physique bornée de l'humanité est la source d'où émane une malédiction contre le Dieu chrétien.

# Black Metal's Apophatic Curse

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« Mouth talkin' dirty, but may lips so clean. »

– (DJ Khaled, ft Beyonce & JayZ)

« That stony law I stamp to dust; and scatter religion abroad  
To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves. »

– (William Blake. *America*, v. 63-64).

« The darkness illuminated and penetrated everything. The Unfathomable  
depth of the abyss was so high that no-one could reach it. I will not  
attempt now to describe how it was formed, for there is no time now to  
speak of it; and I cannot put it into words. »

– (Hadewijch Vision 11 The abyss of omnipotence, p. 289)

Hadewijch's vision of the Abyss of Omnipotence, from which the above quotation is taken, is replete with linguistic paradox and tantalizing dissatisfaction for the reader. At its heart though, is an utterance that is common to the language of negative (apophatic) theology. In trying to express anything concerning God and time, use of these terms ends up expressing an inadequacy, both of language and thought. At once when one grasps their meaning, meaning is lost. Indeed, the apophatic tradition and nega-

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tive theology is about, in part, the attempt to express the inexpressible or to say the unsayable thus from its outset its articulation under certain conceptions, invites the recognition of failure. There is a sense in which black metal, a form of extreme heavy metal music, has become part of the apophatic tradition. Nicola Masciandaro's key and arguably the first black metal theory article on metal's originary song, Black Sabbath by Black Sabbath, gives shape to black metal as having an apophatic nature (Masciandaro 2012, 8-10). Here I will make a case that in lyrical and to and to an extent sonic examples show that black metal uses the apophatic to support the cursing of the Christian God, a discovery that has not gone unnoticed in the black metal theory movement. In this paper, I aim to explore some instances of black metal's utterances of the apophatic in terms of curse, making use of Bruce Milem's desire theory and renunciation theory (Milem 2003) in the process. Apophatic expressions in the Christian tradition are ultimately aimed at a deeper understanding of the deity; however, black metal uses negative language and negation as affirmation in the opposite direction. That is, rather than the rejection of God being a mere (dull) logical negation, I treat it more as a perambulatory negation, using the language of God but expressing the cursing of God as a recognition and a walking away from, in a state of disappointment, lament and sorrow. I shall argue that this exploration leads to the assertion that all worship is a form of curse, where negative theology demonstrates the inadequacy of language in its attempt to attest to the very thing it is aiming to eulogise. In this sense my position goes counter the idea of black metal as maintaining a dark love of the Divine, as presented by Edia Connoles and Nicola Masciandaro's *The Floating Tomb*, and makes the case that through a series of lyrical examples, curse is followed by a complete turning away from God, a turning away even from mysticism to embrace only the physical, material realm. I retain the idea that in concert with Connoles and Masciandaro, black metal's apophasis mirrors the mystical tradition, but instead of black metal's negative apophasis as being opposite to religious apophasis, it leaves it behind.

Extreme metal and religion have been of general interest to scholars in recent times, with its identification with being anti-Christian (Purcell 2003, 41), the peculiar phenomenon of Christian heavy metal (Moberg 2012; 2013), heavy metal and Islam (Hecker 2012a, b), but also studies that have looked at extreme metal's relationship to paganism and the occult (Granhölm 2011), as well as agnostic and atheist positions (Till 2010, 25). Owen Coggins' exploration of the extreme metal subgenre of drone metal

and the work of Michel de Certeau treats drone as a mystical text (Coggins 2014) and as a way of «using language against itself in order to gesture towards the unsayable» situating drone metal squarely in the apophatic tradition (Coggins 2013, 21; 2018). Black metal as a form of negative liturgy is deeply involved in exploring opportunities for transcendence. However for black metal's spiritual interest, its interest in negative language «concerns not a presumption of a Christian pre-given lifeworld, but rather a transgressive, diabolical goal that is nihilistic to its core» (Scott 2014). It must be noted that although black metal has become a wide-ranging form of musical expression, not all of it can possibly be directly concerned with the subject matter of this article. Yet at its heart it can be claimed as Graham does, *pace* Masciandaro, that it is thoroughly apophatic in that it is both «haunted by the possibility of its own explanation» and «renounces that explanation in a queer moment of apophasis» (Graham 2016, 228). Graham's study of extreme metal also draws attention to the importance of the sonic landscape created by black metal, which in turn can feed into apophasis. This is because the musical form, both in the often incomprehensible screamed and growled vocals, fast tremolo guitar picking and blast beat drumming, is akin to form of unsaying, where silence is substituted for noise, where its necro sound is «voice detached from meaning» (Connole 2017, 193). Using Benjamin Noys terminology describing black metal's «pathos and bathos» (Noys 2009, 125) on the simultaneity of noise that erupts and counters any apparent ideological and sonic paradox in black metal, Graham refers to its performative complexity as a queer and bathetic nihilism (Graham 2016, 234). Although my discussion is predominantly concerned with the lyrical input from selected bands regarding black metal's apophatic curse, Graham reminds us that there is breadth and complexity to be explored in black metals «efforts to stage confrontation through extremity» (Graham 2016, 234). This suggests that further exploration of apophasis expressed through black metal music and performance is ripe for analysis, but not strictly the aim here.

In the Christian tradition negative theology is most strongly associated with the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, argued to be the «Founding Father of the use of negative/apophatic language in Christian mystical texts» (Nelstrop, Magill, and Onishi 2009, 43), and the medieval Dominican Meister Eckhart (1260-1328). Debates and writings on apophatic theology involve both issues of language, desire and mysticism spanning ancient Greek medieval and poststructuralist traditions (Franke 2007). Ian Almond comments that there are similarities between medieval

interest in the limits to which one can refer to, or talk about God and the pursuit of postmodern discussions on whether one can even «talk meaningfully about the world» (Almond 2003, 150). The concern of negative theology in terms of linguistic strategies has preoccupied many debates on the subject in the light of Derrida's poststructuralist treatment of negative language. In defining negative theology, Mary Jane Rubenstein identifies Kevin Hart's two directions in research and traditions of apophatic theology. One that concerns the use of language to talk about God, the other concerns the *via negativa*—the mystical experience of God. The former involves philosophical and linguistic strategies, the latter aims at union with God. Ultimately, she argues this distinction breaks down (Rubenstein 2003, 394). Bruce Miley (2003) reduces the theorising on apophatic theology to four modes. One is a metaphysical theory in which a causal perspective of the divine as the cause of all is presented; the second he calls a desire theory, where negative theology expresses a desire for something unknown, the third is negative theology as foundational in mystical experience; and the fourth is a theory of renunciation- the renunciation of self-interest. In this paper, I will be only dealing the desire theory and the renunciation theory and how black metal responds to these in terms of curse, a turn away from the infinite to the finite, from the mystical to the material.

### 1. The Apophatic and Black Metal: All Worship is Curse

Black metal theory, in part, has provided an arena in which the apophatic utterances and sounds of black metal can be explored under the gaze of philosophy, literary theory, cultural studies as well as art and performance. The first black metal theory symposium held in Brooklyn in 2009 found expression in a number of works that touched on black metal and the language of negative theology. Black metal theory has been initially defined in terms of negation- a quadruple negation, leading to affirmation. In Nicola Masciandaro's phrasing black metal theory is «Not black metal. Not theory. Not not Black metal. Not not theory» (Masciandaro 2009).

It must be remembered that as Benjamin Noys articulates, «Black Metal itself is a deliberately fractured field, a fields of perpetual war between different articulations of consistency» (Noys 2009, 107). Black metal, although at the fringes of the extreme metal subgenres, has an incredibly diverse subject matter and sonic complexity. The music's lyrics as well as its performance and overall *weltanschauung*, despite its scope,

focuses frequently on apophatic language of negation despair, lament sorrow and curse. Giving evidence of this feature, black metal theorist, Edia Connole in an interview with Dominic Irtenkauf claims that both black metal and the theoretical work of Nicola Masciandaro articulate that «apophasis [...] is a powerful, widely, and significantly present, but little recognized feature of black metal », continuing: « Most black metal theory [...] is unknowingly driven by the defining phenomenological features of apophasis — the negative way of unknowing and unsaying — we find in black metal » (Connole 2014). This commitment to unknowing and unsaying is not just evident in the lyrical content of black metal, but also in its performance—in the unintelligible screaming vocalisations and in its gestures and utterances of a transgressive refusal.

Gary Shipley, in a violent, putrefied expletive laden performance entitled « The Tongue tied Mystic. Aaaarrrrgghhh! Fuck them! Fuck you! » at the Mors Mystica symposium at the St Vitus bar in Brooklyn, testified to this apophatic performative content opening with the claim: « The only thing left to say is nothing left to say » (Shipley 2015, 201). He describes black metal and black metal theory as God's antithesis, a « negative expression of nothing » (Shipley 2015, 201), claiming that « black metal screams what cannot be told [...] ». Where one of the goals of the Christian mystic to go beyond language and be left with only worship of the ineffable, this is inverted by black metal. Shipley writes:

Black Metal's inversions, like all inversions are in harness to that which is inverted [...] Back for light, variants of ungod for God, earth and hell for paradise, violence for peace, hate for love, the bleakest of death for the eternal life, the abyss of bodies for the transcendence of souls, the empty for the full, the mournful for the celebratory, the fire and the burnt for the holiness of water, demonology and witchcraft for liturgy. (Shipley 2015, 201)

The inversion however, is a not simple turning upside down, it employs a mimesis of language and symbols (Shakespeare and Scott 2015, 2) Rather than a simple inversion, which could face the error of substituting Satan for God, the inversion is paired with negation, a turning upside down and a departure. Thus, the logic, rationale and justification of the apophatic language of the Christian mystic is accepted and used, but also abandoned in favour of a curse.

The act of expressing a curse is commonly found in Christian writings, both used in God's favour and against God. It is found in Exodus in the command against blasphemy and speaking out against leadership: « Do

not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people » (Exodus 22: 28) In Job 2: 9 as Job's health deteriorates, his wife calls on him to « curse God and die », effectively asking Job in his suffering and afflicted state to renounce God. She suggests it is better to die than to live on in physical and spiritual suffering. A more contested and difficult passage concerns Corinthians 5: 5. In the context of incest, and expulsion of immoral believers from the church, Paul writes: « Hand this man over to Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord ». Questions arise as to whether this passage is a curse or not and is the subject of a lengthy study by David Raymond Smith (2008). Smith argues that this text is indeed best treated as part of the tradition of cursing in the Jewish and Greco Roman world. Smith's study offers a detailed analysis of cursing language in the old and new testament, further associating curse with exclusion. In the context of this paper, black metal's curse is treated as the opportunity for humanity to exclude God, but more than this, where worship will always fall short of God as it must, according to the apophatic tradition, worship in its limited expression excludes God in the manner of a curse. This dual hypocritical capacity that man has, is expressed in James 3: 9 « With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness ». Thus it can follow that it is not just humans that curse one another qua human, God *in* man is being cursed too, insofar as man is made in God's likeness.

The black metal curse, the negative negation of nothing is in a sense truly apophatic according to its etymology—apo- away from; phatic-, that which is spoken or that which is affirmed. In other words, a turning away from the Word, against the opportunity for union with God. The complexity of black metal's inversion is its subversive inversion, thoroughly confounding the function of negative language and demanding consistency on its own terms. Thus, where for the negative language of Dionysius in his delineation of what God is not, a complete stripping away of all description and reference (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 141), the goal of this process is to complement the cataphatic and ultimately worship God by unsaying. The notion of God being beyond all beings demands both a denial and affirmation. It is important to note that for Dionysius in the *Mystical Theology*, affirmation and denial are not things that are opposed to one another (Franke 2007, 174); rather, they are paths to « See the darkness beyond being which is hidden by the light in beings » (Pseudo Dionysus, in Franke 2007, 177). Rubenstein interprets Pseudo-Dionysius as holding

wishfully that «if only we get beyond knowledge of “God” [...] we could praise God as God» (Rubenstein 2003, 404). How though can this be done without the use of affirmative language, as a secretive motive hiding behind the aim union with God? Meister Eckhart famously wrote in Sermon 52: «I pray to God to rid myself of God» (Meister Eckhart, in McGinn 2006, 440), but this not a statement of exclusion; rather it is one that has the ultimate goal of union with God. It has more to do with ridding oneself of limited human understanding of God. Charlotte Radler writes of Eckhart aim at fusing identities, «which occurs via detachment», confirmed in his text: «The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love» (Radler 2006, 113). This is reinforced by Eckhart further: «[...] if I am to perceive God without a medium then I must become Him, and he must become me» (Meister Eckhart 1981, 208). The Christian apophatic tradition appears to use negation in order to affirm. However, as is clear from Shipley's cursing above, black metal is more truly apophatic in its negative cursing of nothing. It arguably takes the conclusions of negative theology seriously. Worship of God suffers a double failure- it uses cataphatic expressions that negative theology maintains fail, if God is seen as ineffable. In addition, where worship falls short of the apophatic goal expressed by Pseudo-Dionysius, treating God as neither being nor non-being, in other words properly no-thing, its failure implicitly draws attention to the accuracy of black metal's curse. One wonders whether silence can be appropriate in cursing God—doing so by not speaking about God. This thought is based on the idea that God must be spoken about as a necessary feature of worshipful praise; God as ineffable on the view of the logic of negative theology, so nothing can be said about god. Is then everything said about God in a manner a way of cursing god? But black metal refuses to be silent, instead of silence it boasts total noise, the possibility of an eternal scream, sound as warfare; «Black metal is Krieg!» (Nargaroth 2001).

Black metal's cursing may start with a «restlessness of apophatic desire» to use Rubenstein's phrase. However, it is from this position that black metal offers up multitudes of curses against the Christian God, for example Watain's address to the «Inferior lord of heaven», whose «might shall fade, Jesus has wept, On goathorns Impaled» (Watain 2001). It also stands as a momentous all-encompassing cosmic curse: «I know thy name/ from the book of shadows/ the curse to uncreate/ thy kingdom will fall/ speak out this name backwards/ and eternity will rot» (God Dethroned



1992, *The Christ Hunt*). The scope of the curse is given explicit voice in the Swiss black metal band Stortregn's song *Negative Theology*, whose lyric draws attention to the apophatic as a turning away in terms of instigating a cosmic chaos and also the renunciation of the 'I' in favour of the self, to which we turn in the final section below:

By our absolute beings,  
 Judging our fate by misleading thinking  
 Toward our innocent mind  
 Together as one, Together as none  
 United for harmony, united for loss  
 Negate to reach answers beyond words  
 Apophatic chaos reveal the anti-cosmic path!  
 Apophatic theology  
 Seeing our acts  
 Through our never ending wars  
 Strengthen our minds  
 To transcend the I and affirm the Self  
 (Stortregn 2013, *Negative Theology*)

The aim of black metal in cursing God, the route to be taken towards the affirmation of material being in affirming the self, leads to cursing as dissatisfaction with a predicament of knowing but not being able to know. The walking away from God involves a retreat into the visceral. This is not dissimilar to Sartre's Roquentin who as Iris Murdoch observes, « feels himself as an empty nothing which has been crowded out of the opaque world of objects [...] he is haunted by thoughts about the melodies and circles which seem to have a perfect satisfying intelligible mode of being which lifts them out of the fallen world of existence » (Murdoch 1998, 135). It embraces a form of Satanism that is a commitment to the « flesh » but also a commitment that recognises the sorrow in walking away from God, from the Word. Thus where the book of James proclaims the worshipful « With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness » black metal effectively suggests an inversion of this relationship: With the tongue we praise human beings and with it we curse God who has been made in human likeness. Living under a curse, and expressing a curse in return leads to a negative walking away, a retreat, cursing and lamenting the failure of God. As Satyricon proclaim: « and still we must walk the path of sorrow » (Satyricon 1993). We can re-phrase Job's wife and hear her exclaim « Curse God and live! » The walking away from God into

unknown territory is akin to Connole's use of Georges Bataille regarding lack in the understanding of loss and self-loss. On the one hand self-loss leads to a unification with God for the mystic, as Meister Eckhart explores, yet on the other it pays no attention to those who embrace the turning away which «is satisfaction for those who desire only to be lost without being found» (Bataille, in Connole 2017, 175) The desire to be lost is predicated on cursing God and is a profound renunciation that is both verbal and physical in its act in pursuit of a desire that *can* be satisfied.

## 2. The Janus Head of the Apophatic and the Misdirection of Desire

Apophatic theology, despite its attempts to rid oneself of the possibility of ever being able to use language to meaningfully talk about God, still expresses a desire to bring about some kind of mystical union with God as is evident from Meister Eckhart's writings alluded to above. In the desire theory of apophatic theology, Bruce Millem describes the Dutch theologian and philosopher Adriaan Peperzak's assumption that desire is fundamental to human life, holding that it is possible for desire to precede knowledge. That is to say that the awareness of desire occurs before any knowledge of its source. (Millem 2007, 192). Peperzak furthermore holds that most desires are often never (fully) satisfied; he designates the term «Desirable» to that something which «evokes» all human desire. However, this «Desirable», configured as the highest good, although sought out, is never found. Religion identifies the highest good with God and theology, both through apophatic and cataphatic expressions which are tools that can be used to orient oneself to this good. For Peperzak, according to Millem, the physical world has a reflective capacity that give one a fleeting insight into the nature of God. However, Peperzak maintains that comparing God to the ordinary facets of the world can only mislead and ordinary things are ultimately unsatisfactory. It is the inadequacy that one finds oneself encountering in this relationship between the ordinary and desire for the Desirable, the unsatisfactory state that negative language is turned to, in order to deny the «Similarity between the highest good and ordinary things» (Millem 2007, 193). Quoting Peperzak, Millem adds «What we most desire and search for goes unfound, and this afflicts us with "the deepest form of suffering and utter disappointment".» For the theologian, being able to articulate a desire for God is a desire for something that is recognised as an absence, as it is dissimilar to the physical world, yet also a grounding condition for it.

Theology provides both cataphatic and apophatic language to engage with the peculiar otherness of the Divine.

However, where Peperzak argues that there is a «deep human desire that cannot be satisfied by anything in the world, then there must be something outside the world that can satisfy it» (Milem 2007, 193), it does not follow that this can be an argumentative grounding for God's existence. «There must always be another new statement», Michael Sells says of apophatic language and desire (Sells, in Rubenstein 2003, 395, n. 43) in search of saying what is proper to God. In response to this apophatic chaos black metal articulates a frustrated scream of pointlessness to «Negate to reach answers beyond words», as Stortreggn announce above.

Having a desire, but with no hope of its satisfaction opens the door, Milem argues, for the possibility of an atheistic negative theology (Milem 2007, 194). Meister Eckhart's suggestion that «the spiritual subject» is one who's desire is oriented to God yet encounters since the burning bush the «burning of all signs» is a subject who paradoxically also is wanting nothing else (de Certeau 1995, 177). Eckhart maintains that this subject is born out of exile and responds to the call: «I have no other name than what makes you leave!» (Eckhart quoted in de Certeau, 1995, 177). The departure of the subject is one that ultimately seeks satisfaction in the desire of union with God. However, where on the one hand, the response to the call is one that invites the mystic in, on the other hand it can just as easily be interpreted as leading to a cruel rejection, making the subject leave. The spectre of Tantalus being teasingly punished by the Gods is repeated in a monotheistic context being given both desire and desire for something (God, transcendence) that can never be reached. This Divine rejection, eventually culminates in a dissatisfaction. For the examples used from black metal this is felt as rejection as mentioned above but expressed as curse, sorrow and lament<sup>1</sup>. The cursing of God in venomous indignation

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1. As mentioned in the opening stages of this piece, there is a great deal of diversity in the extreme metal genre. As an alternative to the cursing outlook of black metal presented so far, the positive language of ascent to affirmation, the shedding of knowledge to gain insight is found in the work of the band Yob, in their appropriately titled album «Clearing a path to ascend». This work located in the subgenre of Doom metal, a close but more ponderous and slow, down-tuned extreme metal. Yob spins a much more positive outlook than many of their counterparts in extreme metal's subgenres. However, counter to the frenzied high tempo blast and burst beat of black metal, both lyrically and sonically Yob offer a slowing down to open a space for contemplation. Tom O'Boyle describes their music as infusing "fathomless depths of intuitively grooving heft with an introspective questioning search for spiritual

is uttered with a degree of perplexity, as to why God, as the ground of being, would leave humans in such a state. Black metal's response is then an altogether different kind of unsaying— «The project of Black metal is to remove the object to which it attests to and contests » (Scott 2009, 229). The object to be removed is the God that failed.

The failure of satisfying this desire is expressed as a lament with regard to nature and the earth, as well as the destructive direction that modernity has taken humanity. Arguably, this is a destructive path trodden in the context of Christian colonialism and its very own capacity for subjugation and violence. The Cascadian black metal band Wolves in the Throne Room give voice to this failure and sorrow:

Why are we sad and Miserable? Because our culture has failed, we are all failures. The world around us has failed to sustain our humanity, our spirituality. The deep woe inside Black Metal is about fear that we can never return to the mythic, pastoral world that we crave on a deep subconscious level. Black Metal is also about self-loathing, for modernity has transformed us, our minds, bodies and spirit, into an alien life form; one not suited to life on earth without the mediating forces of technology. (Smith 2006).

The predicament that humankind is left to is taken on by the blackened death metal work of Behemoth in *The Satanist*, an album replete with curse and affirmation, elevating Satan, denigrating God, yet expressing the torment of being unable to fulfil even the desire that apostasy of Satan directs one towards. The reason for the cursing of God is placing man in this predicament of straddling two realms, of knowing but not being able to know. Being aware of limits and what those limits delimit; how they prevent humanity's access to the deity. The paradox presented in Satan's voice in Behemoth's song *In The Absence of Light*:

I throw out each flaw, any idea.  
I trust not any abstraction.  
I believe not in god nor mind [...]  
enough with these gods.  
Give me a human.

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transcendence" (O'Boyle 2014). Yob's drones provide an aural contradiction to the lyrical aims—down tuned distorted guitars played slowly, reminiscent of Sunn0)))'s minimal drone and guttural vocal descents are followed by lyrical ascents. In this sense we are musically involved in an uprooting of thought as undergrowth. We are encountering a sonic negation that goes below, which Julian Cope has referred to in his description of Black Sabbath's *Masters of reality* as «low low highs» (Cope 2012, 496).

Let him be just like me, just like me [...]  
 Dull, unripe, unfinished, not dark, and not bright.  
 So that I may with him dance, play with him,  
 with him fight, in front of him pretend,  
 give him thanks, and him, rape [...]  
 fall in love with him, through him recreate myself,  
 grow through him, and sprouting this way,  
 wed myself, in the church ov man

...contrast this though, with the following lyric in the same song:

Oh lord, whence came this doubt?  
 Thou doth know I am all and everything  
 Let loose my shackles  
 Let chaos reign  
 Infecting moral arteries [...]  
 (Behemoth 2013, *The Satanist*)

These lyrics reinforce, in the turning away from God, whilst cursing God, a turning to the material visceral, physical body. Black metal's capacity for critical self-reflection turns apophysis towards the aberrant material finite. Hunter Hunt-Hendrix, vocalist of the band Liturgy, instigator of what he refers to as 'transcendental black metal' asserts this as a form of nihilism, yet one that is "a double nihilism and a final nihilism, a once and for all negation in the series of negations" (Hunt-Hendrix 2009, 61). In what is effectively his manifesto for transcendental black metal we find an expression of dissatisfaction in the creative output of black metal, a dissatisfaction that is motivated away from failure, leading to the evolution of new negations, new sounds and new forms of black metal. He accounts for the history of black metal as a culmination of extreme metal ending in hyperborean black metal as its peak, which he asserts is itself a culmination emerging from the death of God. The hyperborean realm, the arctic realm of darkness and ice that gave birth to black metal's most notorious phase, in Norway in the early 1990s, reaches both the peak of black metal, but is also immediately confronted by its own stagnation, frozen in its perspective of having achieved a sonic purity, a goal of annihilation simultaneous to a kind of disappointment. Hunt-Hendrix, in describing the fall from this peak into a haptic void, writes that this gaze into the void and fall is close to a mystical apophatic experience for the black metal musician: « But there he learns that totality is indistinguishable from nothingness. He learns that it is impossible to leap into the horizon » (Hunt-Hendrix 2009, 57). This realisation leads to stasis and subsequently to atrophy for

Hunt-Hendrix; his response is to announce a form of black metal music that negates all negations, embraces hypertrophy and rejects atrophy. Hunt-Hendrix's manifesto for transcendental black metal resonates strongly with the language of Pseudo-Dionysius, in his view that God has to be beyond affirmation and negation. Like Hunt-Hendrix, the metaphor of ascent is used by Pseudo-Dionysius: «the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is discernible» (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 139). For Pseudo-Dionysius, this ascent is directed away from knowledge to silence. For him the shift is in a direction away from the what is seen and unseen and «plunges into the mysterious darkness of unknowing» (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 137). For Meister Eckhart, God is the negation of finite being and thus the negation of negation, hence affirmation and as addressed above is approached by wanting nothing. Arguably, this is the thought that drives the monastic aestheticism associated with the mystic. However, rather than leading to God, Hunt-Hendrix's apophatic language turns to an affirmation of the physical finite realm. This significant difference is where for Hunt-Hendrix the negation of negation as affirmation draws one into an embracing of the physical bounded world, a turn away from mystery, an affirmation of physical being and to a further creative exploration of the finite. It can be furthermore be read as a cursing of God as infinite. Hunt-Hendrix declares: «The infinite is obvious and everywhere. To engage in the finite takes courage and produces hypertrophy. God is infinite, nature is infinite. The infinite is everywhere and cheap. It is the finite that is rare» (Hunt-Hendrix 2009, 62-63). Although «Negative theology aims to disrupt any "concept" that tends to encompass the divine [...]» (Rubenstein 2003, 394), dissatisfaction expressed through failed desire allows black metal to disrupt any Christian attempt at negative theology being successful at all to the core. If this apophatic unknowing for the Christian mystic is «the telos of the intellect» (Rubenstein 2003, 395) which aims to reach union with God by a ceasing of the function of intellect, it is an unknowing ultimately spilling over into love. But, halfway up in the process of knowing, when rejection is experienced, engaging in the finite allows for black metal's turning away and cursing. HATE takes over: Shipley's «Fuck them! Fuck you!» is the «mystic union turned sour, pumping the emptiness of godlessness into unsuspecting detractors like some devout army of the antichrist» (Shipley 2015, 202).

### 3. Black metal as renunciation

There is a darkness blacker  
 Than anything ever seen by man  
 So violent, so cruel and pernicious  
 For an eternity have I searched thee,  
 In each continent and land  
 I long for you presence as  
 Your absence is driving me mad

Through timeless halls,  
 Forgotten rooms, the void awaits in silence  
 The majestic nothingness, I submit to thee  
 Nothing can come between us,  
 Not a single ray of light  
 All hail the darkness,  
 Et spiritus sancti  
 (Shining 2012, «Hail darkness, hail», *Redefining darkness*)

Where desire to reach mystical union with God fails for black metal turning to an affirmation of the finite opposed to the infinite, renunciation of God is articulated in black metal's curse. However, in the Christian apophatic tradition, renunciation is also encountered, albeit as a renunciation of the self. Bruce Miley's renunciation theory of negative theology (Miley 2001, 197), treats the goal of apophatic thought as a process of negation that leads to «a giving up». It concerns a renunciation of concepts of God in order to be rid of self-interested desires, complementing Meister Eckhart's ridding the self of God to find union with God. It assumes that both positive and negative language about God are bound up in satisfying some kind of human desire—including fulfilling and satisfying knowledge. Furthermore, most theories of negative theology are in some way about God, they take God as their object and such claims according to Miley «cannot be negated» and all appeal to self-interest, including the idea that in searching for ways of expressing what God is not, 'I' am trying to satisfy my understanding. Thus, giving up all concepts of God spills over into a renunciation of self-interest as well as removing any way in which the term God can mean anything at all. This giving up is clearly presented in Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*: «By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted in the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is» (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 135). In the renunciation theory,

either God can only be described as nothingness, or it can go even further and lead to no longer equating God even with nothingness. The renunciation of all self-interest in this sense is encountered as a grounding for the behaviour of self-denial for the mystic and ascetic. Milem describes this as a resistance to any inadequate, and therefore idolatrous, concepts of God. Through renunciation, the believer is allowed to move from describing God to instead only worshipping God. The annihilation of the self is the self's highest goal (Rubenstein 2003, 399). Nevertheless, why should I be forced to renounce myself by a Christian God who has cursed me and cursed the earth, the black metal musician may well ask? Where worshipping God as presented above will only and always fall short of God, it is the rarity of human finitude that is to be celebrated, rather than worship of the ubiquitous infinite. However, this view may not be as stable or widespread as it seems in the world of black metal, with Watain's dark profession wanting to search beyond the material:

Let's make one thing clear; the world you live in it hollow. It is plain and simple and contains only matter, which in itself does not possess anything of lasting value. The only way to create something of dignity, of true beauty in this world is by looking beyond its borders to search outside the mundane and enter into connection with that which lies beyond the safety of established form. (Danielsson 2012, *Opus Diaboli*)

Thus the very mundane realm that Hunt Hendrix promotes as rare, counter to the ubiquity of infinity and nature, Danielsson renounces. This demonstrates that not all thought in black metal expressions are unified and complementary as evidenced by Benjamin Noys' comment on the fractured nature of black metal. Referring to the implied role of black metal music, he continues:

To step into the realm of liberated wilderness of untamed fire and of that ancient chaos for which every true and potent artist has been a mouthpiece. There is a great abyss between this world and that place, an abyss which very few are able to cross. But by means for magick and communication with the Divine there are ways to penetrate into that vast darkness into that which lies beyond. To build bridge and open gateways to that terrible and wondrous place that lies outside the borders of the world. This is why we have chosen to look upon the spiritual characteristics of our world and this is why it is Divine. It acts as a mediator between high and low and a link between two worlds, and we have chosen to call it Watain. (Danielsson 2012, *Opus Diaboli*).



It is unclear whether Danielsson is referring to Divinity postulated perhaps an « other » itself or whether it is the art and music of black metal (and Watain as a project) expresses divinity. However, it is possible to read Danielsson's words presenting the idea of black metal music and the art form that does the transcending mystical spiritual work, not God. As such, it would contain a satanic twist that can complement Watain's turning away from the Christian deity. Certainly the latter reading would square with music as having a transcendent quality, a capacity for unsaying, that can take one beyond language, as Theodor Adorno claims in his essay on music and language. For Adorno, music is similar to language, and contains what he calls a theological dimension in being capable of simultaneous revelation and concealment (Adorno 1956). Adorno's thoughts on Schönberg's renunciation of the material in his compositional direction could well be applied to black metal's renouncing the structure of negative theology's renunciation. Indeed Eduardo de La Fuente (1999) has argued for music as negative theology in its ability to express the inexpressible. However, (unlike Adorno) de la Fuente claims that « negative theology is not the discourse of the devil; it is the impossible discourse of western reason and its eternal fracturing ». He argues that music outlasts the influence of the devil on negative theology; a criticism that black metal in its affinity with a spiritual quest should take heed of. For apophatic black metal thought however, Watain's suggestion is the music and the arts mediate the gulf between this world and another in a manner that is thoroughly diabolical. What we see, in line with the inversion and negation of negations mentioned in Shipley above, is the suggestion of a renunciation of renunciations.

In these terms, the black metal band Watain announce their own renunciation. This renunciation is made explicit in their lyric in *Legions of the Black Light*, Watain write a devilish request of revelation and insight: « I ascend/ As thy light descends/ Darkening the I to reveal the Self » (*Legions of the Black Light* 2007, *Sworn to the dark*). This a sentiment that appears initially to go counter to Hunt Hendrix's embracing of the finite and turning away from the infinite. Instead, Erik Danielsson of Watain calls for a giving up, but also a deepening of the revelation of the self. Danielsson's renunciation is anti-material, but it is arguably, an inversion of the Pseudo-Dionysian ridding of the self. Instead, we could speculate that darkening the 'I' is the Cartesian 'I' which is renounced in order to reaffirm the self, the very same Cartesian 'I' that posits confidence in the existence of God through awareness of its own affirmation. Shakespeare

and Scott refer to the success of the self-overcoming the 'I' as echoing « the mystical heretical coincidence of the self with the absolute, experienced not simply as pure ascent, but as the darkness, heaviness and aridity of being itself » (Shakespeare and Scott 2015, 6). Embracing of the finite leading to a creative perpetual unfolding of the self, cursing and turning away from infinity is reflected in the Swiss Stortregn's Negative Theology's closing line: « Strengthen our minds/to transcend the I and affirm the self » (Stortregn 2013, *Evocation of Light*). To embrace the finite is also an embrace and acceptance of the finality of death: curse God and live in order to die. Mayhem's Grand Declaration of War spell out the apophatic descent, the turning away that proudly boast beyond the curse: a capacity to go where even the Christian mystic cannot reach:

Into the night we must go into the darkest abyss  
 To a level of consciousness unknown to Christendom  
 We want life we crush the dream of heaven  
 As we bring the blade down one swift move  
 We are the chosen ones chosen by will to life  
 (Mayhem 2000, « In the lies where upon you Lay », *Grand Declaration of War*)

### Final remarks

In this piece I have aimed to show that the apophatic themes in black metal take negative theology's own rationale and turn it against itself—all worship becomes curse, because apophatic approaches to what can/cannot be signified or represented through language always fail. Black metal utters this curse in total noise whilst simultaneously turning away from God, in a negative perambulatory gesture. The desire implanted by the divine that can never be satisfied because of the bounded physical nature of humanity is the deepest source from which a curse against (the Christian) God emanates. Hunter Hunt Hendrix shows that this involves a return to finitude away from the infinite, and turn from the mystical to the material. The mystical tradition's loss of the self that is found again in God is renounced in a double renunciation in favour of the finite, material self.

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## Résumé

Le *black* métal utilise du langage négatif et de la négation comme une affirmation contraire à la tradition mystique chrétienne. Ici, je soutiens que le *black* métal pousse la direction de la négation jusqu'à sa conclusion appropriée en se détournant de Dieu plutôt qu'en utilisant le langage négatif pour faire l'éloge de Dieu. Ma première affirmation est que tout culte est une forme de malédiction où la théologie négative démontre l'inadéquation du langage dans sa tentative d'attester la chose même qu'il vise à affirmer. Je soutiens que le *black* métal démontre une cohérence dans la pensée apophatique où l'approche mystique de Pseudo Denys et de Maître Eckhart échouent. En appliquant la théorie du désir de Milem et la théorie du renoncement, et en utilisant des paroles de groupes de *black* métal, je soutiens que plutôt que de nier le soi, l'approche apophatique du *black* métal réaffirme l'existence matérielle du soi en opposition à Dieu. L'affirmation enracinée dans la négation de la nature physique bornée de l'humanité est la source d'où émane une malédiction contre le Dieu chrétien.

## Abstract

*Black metal uses negative language and negation as affirmation in the opposite direction to the Christian mystical tradition. Here, I argue that black metal completes the direction of negation to its proper conclusion in a turning away from God rather than using negative language to eulogise God. My first claim is that all worship is a form of curse, where negative theology demonstrates the inadequacy of language in its attempt to attest to the very thing it aims to affirm. I maintain that black metal demonstrates a*

*consistency in apophatic thought where the mystical approach of Pseudo Denys and Meister Eckhart fail. Applying Miley's desire theory and renunciation theory, and using lyrics from black metal bands, I argue that rather than negating the self, black metal's apophatic approach reaffirms the self's material existence in opposition to God. The affirmation rooted in negation of the bounded physical nature of humanity is the source from which a curse against the Christian God emanates.*