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The negative theology of matter in Calcidius

Andrea Le Moli

Negative Theology (NT) may be initially defined as a complex matrix of different tendencies that inter-operate. What all these tendencies have in common is a peculiar use of negation as way to gain access to the first principle conceived as God or the Divine. The main presupposition of every NT is that the very gesture of denial obscures what is denied while showing it from another point of view. This act of showing is a sort of counter-movement which results from the same act of denying as a “motorial echo” of it. Another feature of old is formed jointly with this general characteristic. In it, the negation movement is not immediately followed by an act of exhibition. This partial movement may be called a “merely negative” one and it corresponds with what J. Hochstaffl¹ qualified as an «immanent critical praxis of theological thought». Its role as a grounding moment of NT is foremost evident in Jewish theology. In order to reconstruct the context out of which NT expands and develops this analysis is of particular significance. The context is the Mediterranean basin in the first centuries of the Christian Era.

Jewish Theology is full of “prohibition” types. In some cases it may be perceived as grounded on the structures of prohibition and privation, the main features of the Doctrine. This is the case with the role played by theoretical as well as historical schemes such as: 1. The escape from Egypt; 2. the forbidding to make out representations of other gods; 3. the prohibition to make out images of *any* God; the prohibition to utter God’s secret name; the instruction not to work on Saturday. In every one of this schemes a prohibition (a denial) is followed by what is interpreted as a disguised act-of-showing by God – the promise of leading the Jewish people out of captivity to a new earthly realm.

This first – critical – movement seems to also determine the early

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1. See on this HOCHSTAFFL 1976.

Greek tradition of such thinkers as Xenophanes or Socrates. The latter in particular may be seen as a pioneer of NT with regards to the negative *nuance* in which he evokes the archaic (Homeric) notions of *daimon* and *daimonion*. But it will be only Plato who will explicitly tend to combine the act of concealment with an act of showing which proceeds from the same movement of denial. From the time of Plato onwards, the connection between these two instances becomes more and more explicit in thinkers who constantly refer to such doctrines as: Plato's refusal to discuss «the major issues» of his thought in his writings; his inclination to various forms of mystical intuition; his usage of the figure of *arrheton*; his efforts to overcome the predicative structure of thinking in such dialogues as *The Sophist* and *Parmenides*.

In Middle Platonism these two lines become connected. This in turn forms a unitary doctrine in such thinkers as Philo of Alexandria and Numenius of Apamea². The first global theory of NT is thus outlined when Platonic doctrines begin to be enriched and substantially integrated by other influences. We can say that the most ancient tradition of NT is a bundle in which Platonic elements are not prevailing. This also means that a search for the presence of NT in the *Latin* tradition has to integrate the Platonic tradition with other cultural issues. These used to operate during the transition of Greek philosophical matters into Latin ones. The question which now arises is: how much of the doctrinary heritage of the Mediterranean area was fully accessible to Latin writers at the time of Middle Platonism development? And to which extent? By taking inspiration from the methodical assumptions of S. Gersh we may ask: to which extent NT in its unity of critical and revealing component is one of those *philosophemes* which occur in Latin tradition?

The thesis which this paper tries to argue is that Latin tradition builds at least one original pattern of NT which was integrated in Late Neoplatonism to form a steady acquisition of medieval theology. This thesis is confronted with with a main objection: the absence of explicit examples of NT in Latin writers of Late Antiquity. An issue

2. See on this HOCHSTAFFL 1976, p. 72: «Schon im Mittelplatonismus wurde ausgesprochen, dass der Ursprung letztlich nur auf dem Wege der Verneinung erkannt werden koenne. Die Neuplatoniker haben negative Theologie als den Verweis auf eine mystische Begegnung mit dem goettlichen Prinzip begriffen».

which would confirm the existence of a theoretical gap between the two traditions.³ There is seemingly no trace of NT in writers as Cicero. And even the famous ontological sections of Seneca's *Epistulae* LVIII e LXV show no evidence of it. Some hints of NT could indeed be found in the poet Tiberianus (IV century A. D.):⁴

omnipotens, annosa poli quem suspicit aetas,
quem sub millennis semper virtutibus unum
nec numero quisquam poterit pensare nec aevo,
nunc esto affatus, si quo te nomine dignum est,
quo sacer ignoto gaudes, quod maxima tellus
intremet et sistunt rapidos vaga sidera cursus

In Marius Victorinus (*Adversus Arium*, I 49), who speaks of the eminence of the One according to patterns which seem to evoke some schemes of NT, and in Marzianus Capella, who begins his hymn to the transcendent God (*Nupt.* II, 185) with the words: *ignoti vis celsa patris*. But it is definitely too little. Or rather, it seems to be so if we assume that the matrix whose forerunners we are trying to retrace is the one defined by the late one.⁵ Given some relevant differences between the two traditions, it would be more accurate to retrace the peculiarity of the early Latin tradition from the specific authors and themes which lie at the centre of its attention. The first textual gap is the shifting of critical attention from the *Timaeus* to the *Parmenides*. We may quote R. Klibansky by asserting: «considering the fate of the dialogue in the centuries between the closing of the Academy in Athens and the rise of the Florentine Academy, we find that the Latin world of the early Middle Ages knew very little about the *Parmenides*. References to the work are, however, not entirely lacking».⁶ And even when an unpublished commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate*, written shortly

3. Even the most recent contributions about the Platonic roots of NT do not seem to show any particular interest in retrieving its origins long before Plotinus or mature Neoplatonism. Not to mention the total lack of interest in investigating the possible uprise of a *Latin* component of NT before Augustine, Boethius, the Latin translation of Pseudo-Dionysus and Johannes Scotus Eriugena. See, among the others, FRANKE 2006.

4. See on this MATTIACCI 1990.

5. See on this GERSH 1978.

6. KLIBANSKY 1941-3.

after 1148, brings an explicit reference to that dialogue, it would be wrong to assume that the anonymous author of this in many ways remarkable work, had any direct knowledge of the Platonic dialogue. His reference is rather a free interpretation of a passage in that book which, from the days of Scotus Eriugena, served as the main guide to all students of Plato, Calcidius' *Commentary on the Timaeus*.

It is not by accident that Calcidius is now mentioned. Neither does it emerge *ex abrupto* when discussing the historical shift of attention from the *Timaeus* to the *Parmenides*. Nor is it coincidentally used in the search for the authors who contribute to define the supposed Latin pattern(s) of NT. If we analyze his approach to Plato's text and doctrine we may be surprised to find elements which can be re-read in the direction of a theoretical originality rather than a limited understanding of Plato's ultimate teaching. In particular as far as the possible use of *negation* to grant access to the realm of first principle(s) is concerned.

The issue of the unity (The One) emerges in Calcidius' text first of all in the sense of the unity of the All, of *cosmic* unity. This setting already includes a trait of innovation and it is not only a cosmological presentation. In the first instance the sense of unity included in the notion of "material element" and of "mathematical form" is discussed. Unity in the sense of *totum* is a form of connection according to which no part is left aside or abandoned.⁷ The choice of the mathematical model allows the emersion of another central issue. Every harmonic connection between heterogeneous parts can only be brought about by the *mediation* of something which pertains to both domains. So, most of the passages in Calcidius' text show a presentation of Plato's cosmology as permeated by a net of mediation, where every link is basically structured according to a *triadic* scheme. This occurs when discussing the triad as the perfect figure which leads to the formation of an indivisible solid body, as well as in dealing with the world-soul as a mix of the Same, the Other and the Essence. In Calcidius' interpretation, the *Timaeus* thus appears to be a constant comeback of mediation following the triadic scheme. And it is precisely this structure that

7. See Calcidius, *In Platonis Timaeum* VIII, in WASZINK 1962: «opinor, ut *tota* materia *una* et eadem ratione societur eoque pacto eadem sibi erunt uniuersa membra, quippe quorum sit *una* condicio; *unis* porro effectis membris *unum* erit atque idem *totum*». Dunque unum atque totum».

defines the general sense of *unity* which determines the architecture of the dialogue.

According to this perspective, the idea of a non-relational unity as status of the principle does not seem to be retrievable in Calcidius. At least as far as the metaphysical notion of “One” is concerned. What is explicitly discussed is there the notion of *simplicitas* or more specifically of *singularitas*. These two notions only express one side of the complex lexicon of the unity adopted by Calcidius in his Latin rendering of the principles’ problematic status. Correspondingly, the NT elaborated in Calcidius’ *Commentary* is focussed on the last principle in the series: *matter*. More than any other principle, matter embodies the need of self-articulating into triads. Consequently, the section of the *Commentary* about matter is the richest and most interesting one. It begins by ascribing *silva* to what is produced by *necessity* (*necessitas*) as opposed to what is produced by God’s *providence* (*provvidentia*). Here already, a first pattern of NT is somewhat recognisable. How do we effectively experience matter?

Talis quippe natura est initiorum, quae neque exemplis demonstrari, nondum his quae ad exemplum comparentur existentibus, possit nec ex praecedenti ratione aliqua intimari – nihil quippe origine antiquius –, sed *obscura quadam luminis praeseumptione*, non ut quid sit explices, sed contra sublatis quae sunt singulis quod solum remanet ipsum esse quod quaeritur intellegendum relinquo, hoc est, ut universis corporibus, quae intra gremium silvae varie varia formantur mutua ex alio in aliud resolutione, singillatim ademptis solum ipsum vacuum sinum speculatione mentis imagineris.⁸

The second recognisable pattern is the idea that the threefold articulation of the principle is deeply connected to the use of the word “principle” within a *causative* model of explication:

Quod igitur «<ut> faciens» diximus, deus est, quod vero “ut patiens”, silva corporea. Sed quia id quod facit aliquid, ad exemplum aliquid respiciens operatur, tertiae quoque originis intellecta est necessitas. Sunt igitur initia deus et silva et exemplum, et est deus quidem origo primaria moliens et posita in actu, silva vero ex qua prima fit quod gignitur.⁹

8. Calcidius, *In Platonis Timaeum* CCLXXIV, in WASZINK 1962.

9. Calcidius, *In Platonis Timaeum* CCCVII, in WASZINK 1962.

In this way the ground for conceiving *three* principles arises from the assumption of a causative model of explication. This is slightly different from the idea that the necessity of an inner articulation (pro-cession) is implied in the very notion of the principle. Rather, here it is a *reversed procession* which regards the origins of everything out of the *matter*:

opinor silvae opificem necessarium [...] Recta est igitur nostra opinio neque ignem neque terram nec aquam nec spiritus esse silvam, sed materiam principalem et corporis primam subjectionem, in qua non qualitas non forma non quantitas non figura sit ex natura propria, sed virtute opificis haec ei cuncta conexa sint, ut ex his universo corpori et singillatim perfectio et communiter varietas comparentur.¹⁰

It comes out that what occupies the place of the first principle, can no longer be conceived as something *one* in a strict metaphysical sense. And that a full access to the domain of principles can only be gained by including the material aspect. Whereas the latter is nonetheless accessible only through a peculiar use of reason. The aporetic status of matter understanding is confirmed by a reference to the *Parmenides* dialogue, where thus is said:

Etenim est difficilis consideratio propter silvae naturales tenebras, quippe quae subterfugiat non modo sensus omnes sed etiam rationis investigationem intellectusque indaginem. Sive enim per semet ipsam et sine consortio corporum quae recipit spectare curet, nihil esse propemodum videtur, sed cum illis confundetur, nec naturalem ostendet proprietatem estque inter sensum et rationem, neque plane sensibile quid nec omnino rationabile, sed motu animi comprehendenda tali, ut qui contigerit eam nihil sentiat et qui rationem eius animo exerceat «adulterina quadam ratione assecutus esse videatur».¹¹

to conclude that «*<nihil subest silva>, unde recte principalis subiectio est cognominata*».

The way to gain access to the principle through denial is thus primarily outlined with regards to the way matter is accessed. So in *Timaeus* 52 b we read: «matter can be grasped with an illegitimate

10. Calcidius, *In Platonis Timaeum* CCCX and CCCXVI, in WASZINK 1962.

11. Calcidius, *In Platonis Timaeum* CCCXXXV, in WASZINK 1962.

and adulterous act of reasoning» (*notha et adulterina quadam ratiocinatione*). It is no an accident that the mind power which is here involved is called *eikasia – suspicio* in Latin. Those typical modalities of NT such as the dark cloud and obscure perception are purposely addressed. The use of *eikasia* leads us to a conversion of the ascending series of images in the myth of the divided line into a descending one. This series culminating into the grasping of a principle which also lies *epekeina tes ousias*, but at the very other end of the hierarchy.

Conclusion

It may be said that Calcidius' peculiar reading of *Timaeus* contains a proto-model of NT which became integrated into Late Neoplatonism. This doctrine apparently stems from the two sources most scholars agree to put at the ground of his inspiration: the triadic model developed by Porphyrius and Numenius' theory of matter. The first pattern of NT is the triadic articulation which necessarily proceeds from the absolute transcendence of the first principle (God). Or, better said, from the impossibility that it could act *directly* on matter. The triadic articulation is thus a first form of denial of the One which divides it. At the same time, it is the reaffirmation of the instance of unity which involves the transcendent One in a net of relations of which *matter* is a relevant part. Werner Beierwaltes has shown the continuity of this tradition with early modern thought and even with the post-philosophy of contemporary age. But he also pointed out how *Hegel's* position can be seen as the one which better than others succeeded in the radicalisation of this model in Philosophy of Religion. In Hegel's position, the proper (critical) root of NT appears to be maintained without leaving pure reason aside. In Hegel's phrase: «The Absolute is the identity of identity and non-identity» a version of NT may be found within which subjective (human) reason is able to overcome itself and be recognised as a moment of God's own thinking. Hegel's speculative use of language extends itself to give sense even to the phrase, stated in quasi-platonic terms: «The Absolute is the unity of unity and non-unity». In Hegel's perspective, this phrase does not contain any paradox, rather it shows the fully rational character of an Absolute which gains *simplicitas* only through a *kenotic* (negative-critical) movement. The path which culminates in Hegel' speculative thinking starts

from the Greek Platonic tradition. Through its peculiar reception in the Latin World, it conveys an idea into the Modern Age. «Denying the One» may be the proper access to a new principle: the person of Jesus Christ, in whose historical experience the absolute transcendent One (*Father*) wants to be conceived as tri-unity, as trinity. The new figure of trinity (as developed immediately after Calcidius' Age by authors like Augustine) summarises all the historical triadic tendencies and models which ran through late-antiquity. It is a form of unity which expresses its nature by reconciling reason with its immediate opposite, paradox. And by shaping an Absolute which, by constantly denying and reaffirming its *singularitas*, is finally harmonised with the notion of *life*. Indeed, Plato's *Timaeus* main lesson.

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