

## Jean-Luc Marion's Dionysian Neoplatonism

"Jean-Luc Marion's Dionysian Neoplatonism," *Perspectives sur le néoplatonisme, International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, Actes du colloque de 2006*, édité par Martin Achard, Wayne Hankey, Jean-Marc Narbonne, Collection Zétésis (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2009), 267–280.

A retrieval of Neoplatonism is a powerful, widely, and significantly present, but little recognised, feature of twentieth-century French philosophy, theology, and spiritual life.<sup>1</sup> It begins about one hundred years ago with Henri Bergson (1859-1941) with whom also its purposes and the modifications contemporary Neoplatonism undergoes begin to show. Two major characteristics appear: it is opposed to the Western metaphysical tradition insofar as this is understood to determine modernity. It is also anti-Idealist, endeavouring to link the sensuous and corporeal immediately with an unknowable first Principle, a descendent either of the Neoplatonic One-Good or what is ineffably beyond that. This second characteristic sets the twentieth-century retrieval in opposition to that in the nineteenth-century and to the ancient and medieval Neoplatonisms generally. Jean-Luc Marion (born 1946) works within this movement where he belongs with Michel Henry (1922-2003), Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), and Henry Duméry (born 1920) for whom the relation to Neoplatonism passes by way of Phenomenology. Marion, however, not only despite, but also because of his abiding devotion to the mystical theology of Denys the Areopagite as he understands it, denies that his or Denys's thought are Neoplatonic. I propose to exhibit some problems with this denial.

My enterprize has been encouraged by Marion's inaugural professorial lecture at the University of Chicago: "*Mibi magna quaestio factus sum*: The Privilege of Unknowing." Set under a text from Augustine, it connects the unknowability of the human to that of God in order to oppose late medieval and modern ontology and the contemporary objectification of human life. This lecture continues the persistence in Marion of "the unspoken but rampant neo-Augustinianism of twentieth-century French philosophy," which has been identified by Jacob Schmutz, who places Marion among its adherents and speaks of its reproduction of Neoplatonic gestures.<sup>2</sup> Both the neo-Augustinianism and the neo-Neoplatonism are a "critique of the Western metaphysics of being" and of modernity, and they call, as Schmutz writes:

for a new form of religiosity that would take the place of metaphysics which had reached its closure, and whose political or "civilizational" function would be to regain or barely safeguard something spiritual against the sensation of emptiness of the modern ponderously administrated world.<sup>3</sup>

I begin by placing Marion in relation both to the Augustinianism of Maurice Blondel (1861-1949), which was intellectualist and ontological, and to the Proclean henology of Jean Trouillard (1907-1984).

### I. Marion's Refusal of Augustinian Ontology and Proclean Henology

---

<sup>1</sup> See W.J. Hankey, *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History*, published with *Levinas and the Greek Heritage* by Jean-Marc Narbonne, Studies in Philosophical Theology (Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> J. Schmutz, "'Escaping the Aristotelian Bond: the Critique of Metaphysics in Twentieth-Century French Philosophy,'" *Dionysius* 17 (1999): 169–200 at 199, 171 and 186–199.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 199–200.

A retrieval of Neoplatonism is a powerful, widely, and significantly present, but little recognised, feature of twentieth-century French philosophy, theology, and spiritual life.<sup>1</sup> It begins about one hundred years ago with Henri Bergson (1859-1941) with whom also its purposes and the modifications contemporary Neoplatonism undergoes begin to show. Two major characteristics appear: it is opposed to the Western metaphysical tradition insofar as this is understood to determine modernity. It is also anti-Idealist, endeavouring to link the sensuous and corporeal immediately with an unknowable first Principle, a descendent either of the Neoplatonic One-Good or what is ineffably beyond that. This second characteristic sets the twentieth-century retrieval in opposition to that in the nineteenth-century and to the ancient and medieval Neoplatonisms generally. Jean-Luc Marion (born 1946) works within this movement where he belongs with Michel Henry (1922-2003), Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), and Henry Duméry (born 1920) for whom the relation to Neoplatonism passes by way of Phenomenology. Marion, however, not only despite, but also because of his abiding devotion to the mystical theology of Denys the Areopagite as he understands it, denies that his or Denys's thought are Neoplatonic. I propose to exhibit some problems with this denial.

My enterprize has been encouraged by Marion's inaugural professorial lecture at the University of Chicago: "*Mibi magna quaestio factus sum*: The Privilege of Unknowing." Set under a text from Augustine, it connects the unknowability of the human to that of God in order to oppose late medieval and modern ontology and the contemporary objectification of human life. This lecture continues the persistence in Marion of "the unspoken but rampant neo-Augustinianism of twentieth-century French philosophy," which has been identified by Jacob Schmutz, who places Marion among its adherents and speaks of its reproduction of Neoplatonic gestures.<sup>2</sup> Both the neo-Augustinianism and the neo-Neoplatonism are a "critique of the Western metaphysics of being" and of modernity, and they call, as Schmutz writes:

for a new form of religiosity that would take the place of metaphysics which had reached its closure, and whose political or "civilizational" function would be to regain or barely safeguard something spiritual against the sensation of emptiness of the modern ponderously administrated world.<sup>3</sup>

I begin by placing Marion in relation both to the Augustinianism of Maurice Blondel (1861-1949), which was intellectualist and ontological, and to the Proclean henology of Jean Trouillard (1907-1984).

### I. Marion's Refusal of Augustinian Ontology and Proclean Henology

Initially Marion's refusal of ontology and metaphysics, especially as developed within modernity, was also a rejection of Augustine. In his *Dieu sans l'être* of 1982, Marion detached himself from Augustine's theological ontology, finding that his interpretation of Exodus 3.14 is at the root of the conception of God as *idipsum esse* and that "Augustinian thought... finds

---

<sup>1</sup> See W.J. Hankey, *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History*, published with *Levinas and the Greek Heritage* by Jean-Marc Narbonne, Studies in Philosophical Theology (Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> J. Schmutz, "'Escaping the Aristotelian Bond: the Critique of Metaphysics in Twentieth-Century French Philosophy,'" *Dionysius* 17 (1999): 169–200 at 199, 171 and 186–199.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 199–200.

itself...explicitly taken up according to the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics.”<sup>4</sup> Augustine joined Aquinas who already in *The Idol and Distance* of 1977 had been roundly criticised for standing within the tradition of onto-theo-logy, because he made being the first of God’s names.<sup>5</sup> First in the English edition of *God Without Being* (1991) and later he recanted these charges against Aquinas.<sup>6</sup> His “In the Name. How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology’” of 1999 defends the teaching of Thomas against the accusation of falling within onto-theology:

Even if Dionysius (or some other) understood the question of God on the basis of Being, this simple fact would not be enough to establish that he is inscribed within onto-theo-logy. That is, as we have tried to show in the privileged case of Thomas Aquinas, if an onto-theo-logy wants to attain conceptual rigor and not remain at the level of a polemical caricature, it requires first a concept of being, next a univocal application of this concept to God and creatures, and finally the submission of both to foundation by principle and/or cause. If these conditions are not met, if in contrast Being remains an inconceivable *esse*, without analogy, indeed *penitus incognitum*, then the mere fact that Being comes up is not enough to establish an onto-theo-logy.<sup>7</sup>

According to Marion, Aquinas places an irreducible difference between metaphysics and sacred doctrine allowing him “to think Being by the unknowability of God.”<sup>8</sup> Thomas’ doctrine has been Neoplatonised by Marion so that it has become a kind of theo-onto-logy. God is before being which he gives even to himself. Marion’s evaluation of Augustine might, in principle, if his theology is found to subordinate being to God, follow the same path as his reevaluation of Aquinas. This seems to have happened in “*Mibi magna*.”<sup>9</sup> Significantly this lecture, like earlier reevaluations contains a strong criticism of Heidegger’s assimilation of Biblical revelation and Greek ontology.<sup>10</sup> Marion’s modification of his following of Heidegger remains nonetheless incomplete, especially as compared to the thorough criticisms made by Jean-Marc Narbonne which enable a restoration of the Neoplatonic unification of religion, mysticism, and philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Marion gets around Heidegger through a separation of the religious from the philosophical in a way that Augustine, Aquinas, Denys and the later Neoplatonists would not allow. On this account he cannot explain the unknowability of the divine *esse* in the three Christian theologians through an historically accurate embrace of their Neoplatonism. In fact, Marion has shifted Augustine and Aquinas toward Denys, and all three of them toward their Neoplatonic sources.

---

<sup>4</sup> J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being, Hors-Texte* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 215, note 50.

<sup>5</sup> J.-L. Marion, *The Idol and Distance, Five Studies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 142 & 212.

<sup>6</sup> J.-L. Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin et l’onto-théo-logie,” *Revue thomiste* 95:1 (1995): 31–66 at 33 & 65.

<sup>7</sup> J.-L. Marion, “In the Name. How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology’,” in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. J. D. Caputo and M. J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20–53 at 30–1.

<sup>8</sup> Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin,”: 65 note 82; see also 33 note 2. For a later treatment of Aquinas, see idem, “The Idea of God,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-century Philosophy*, ed. D. Garber and M. Ayres, 2 vol. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), i, 265–7.

<sup>9</sup> J.-L. Marion, “*Mibi magna quaestio factus sum*. The Privilege of Unknowing,” *Journal of Religion* 85:1 (2005): 1–24 at 4–7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*: 20–22.

<sup>11</sup> J.-M. Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)*, L’âne d’or (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001).

In reflections on Blondel's *Action*, he found something in Augustine which blends with what his following of Lévinas enabled him to locate in Denys: the infinity of the will as converted to charity in the Christian tradition leading from Augustine. Thus, Marion's attempt "to shoot for God according to his most theological name – charity,"<sup>12</sup> and to move "hors-texte," transcending the historical conditions of philosophy, is also Augustinian. Augustine's voluntarism attracts him and, like Trouillard, he finds in Blondel "the conversion of the will," or charity, by which he turns to God without metaphysics.<sup>13</sup> These reflections touch the central theme of *The Idol and Distance*, because he recognises that Blondel is also concerned to find how will transcends "all its objects as so many idols."<sup>14</sup> Trouillard, Duméry, and Marion meet because in charity a Neoplatonic move to the One - Good beyond being, and to the will as free beyond the determinations of the *noetic*, are united. Emphasising will and charity in Augustine is not, however, to move against Plotinus, for whom we are related to the One through "Intellect in love," as István Perczel shows<sup>15</sup> and George Leroux has reminded us of the Plotinian origins of the notion of a undetermined free good will.<sup>16</sup>

When he turns to Denys,<sup>17</sup> Marion locates his corrective to Western onto-theology where Trouillard and Duméry found it: a theology without ontology. Although from his first book on, he adopts from Denys what the Areopagite owes to Proclus and Damascius, Marion refuses to follow them into henology. In 2001 he declared:

I have never been convinced by the argument that one can pass beyond Being to the One: this still remains within metaphysics by the simple conversion of the transcendentals. [Henology] is a insufficient evasion!<sup>18</sup>

Something of his motivation may come out in comments where he unexpectedly associates himself with Claude Bruaire (1932-1986), almost uniquely a French philosopher both calling himself Catholic and identifying with Hegel's Absolute Idealism.<sup>19</sup> It was justly said of him:

Nothing is more foreign to the philosophy of Bruaire than apophatic theology which he repudiates as atheism, and which he situates with good reason inside the sphere of influence of Neoplatonic metaphysics.<sup>20</sup>

Moving from negative to mystical theology, Marion quotes Bruaire:

---

<sup>12</sup> Marion, *God without being*, xxi; see idem, "The Idea of God," i, 270–2.

<sup>13</sup> J.-L. Marion, "La conversion de la volonté selon 'L'Action'," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 177:1 (janvier-mars, 1987): 33–46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*: 38.

<sup>15</sup> See I. Perczel, "L'«intellect amoureux» et l'«un qui est». Une doctrine mal connue de Plotin," *Revue de Philosophie Ancienne* 15 (1997): 223–264.

<sup>16</sup> G. Leroux (éd.), Plotin, *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l'Un [Ennéade VI, 8 (39)]*, Histoire des doctrines de l'Antiquité classique 15 (Paris: Vrin, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> See my "Denys and Aquinas: Antimodern Cold and Postmodern Hot," in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, ed. L. Ayres & G. Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 139–184 at 150ff. and idem, "Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine: Problems for a Postmodern Retrieval," *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 4 (1999): 83–123 at 93–98, for his understanding of Augustine.

<sup>18</sup> D. Janicaud, *Heidegger en France*, 2 vols. Idées (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), ii, *Entretiens* 210–27 at 216.

<sup>19</sup> D. Leduc-Fagette, "Claude Bruaire, 1932-1986," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 177:1 (janvier-mars, 1987): 5–19 at 13.

<sup>20</sup> X. Tilliette, "La théologie philosophique de Claude Bruaire," *Gregorianum* 74:4 (1993): 689–709 at 689.

It is therefore necessary to assign negative theology its official place, to give it its exact status, apart from the pious sentiments which cover with a sensible outer layer, with religious scraps, the unalterable absolute, sign of the Nothing: negative theology is the negation of all theology. Its truth is atheism.<sup>21</sup>

For Marion henology goes along with atheistical nihilism.

## II. Marion and Denys: Negative and Mystical Theology

Marion's became attached to Denys when a student and understanding what he makes of him is assisted by attention to one of the priest scholars recuperating Neoplatonism, René Roques (born in 1917), who produced the most important studies of Denys in the last century. Marion offered a paper to Chanoine Roques' class of 1972-73 at the École Pratique des Hautes Études whose title is not far from that of a section in *The Idol and Distance*: "The Distance of the Requisite [*aitia*] and the Discourse of Praise: Denys." Duméry writes of the interpretation of Denys by Roques:

M. Roques shows precisely that Denys only received Neoplatonism inasmuch as he was able to adapt it to the inviolable structures of the Old and New Testaments. He was not a Platonist who would arrive at Christianity as an added extra; he was a Christian who, without sacrificing any of the demands of his faith, made Platonism serve as a cultural tool to express what he believes and practices.... Denys' Platonism does not render his Christianity suspect; it grafts itself upon it and remains subordinate to it.<sup>22</sup>

In *The Idol and Distance* the religious and apophatic side of Neoplatonism provides a passage around Heidegger's naming of the idols of Western ontology. However, Marion accomplishes his purpose by opposing Denys' *Mystical Theology* to Neoplatonic theory:

Ascent coincides with the negation of attributes. It is necessary to note that the denials bear just as easily on the names taken from the sensible (corporeal, figurable, measurable, variable, etc.), as on the intelligible names themselves, including the most conventional within Neoplatonism: "neither One, nor Unity, nor Divinity, nor Goodness." The most appropriate name is found, therefore, no more in the Plotinian One than in the grossest sensible idol.<sup>23</sup>

Marion puts the apophatic "distance" he finds in Denys against the objectifications of ontological metaphysics and representational subjectivity. Denys' requirement that "divine things be understood divinely" demands:

---

<sup>21</sup> J.-L. Marion, "In the Name," (1999) 49, note 8 quoting Bruaire, *Le Droit de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1974), 21. He quoted the same passage of Bruaire for the same purpose in *The Idol and Distance*, 146.

<sup>22</sup> H. Duméry, *Regards sur la philosophie contemporaine* (Paris & Tournai: Casterman, 1956), 38.

<sup>23</sup> Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 146.

radically prohibiting that one hold God as an object, or as a supreme being, distance escapes the ultimate avatar of the language of an object—the closure of discourse, and the disappearance of the referent.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, no Neoplatonist would allow the One to be an object, a subject of predicates, or an intelligible predicate, and—not alone among the Neoplatonists—Damascius, whose teaching Denys knows and follows, places the Absolute beyond the One. Marion uses Denys as a weapon in his battles against contemporary critics of Christian theology by contrasting his position to the Neoplatonists who bear all its sins. This requires misrepresenting Neoplatonic transcendence as reaching no higher than the theoretical and as only the abstraction produced by negation—a Heideggerian understanding of Neoplatonism. Marion's procedure provides yet another proof that we cannot tell the truth about the history of philosophy until we have mastered our fear of Heidegger.<sup>25</sup>

“In the Name” gives Marion's most extended consideration of Denys and of Neoplatonism since *The Idol and Difference*. Despite the decades between the two works, many fundamental concerns, judgments, and positions are the same. The first is concerned with the question of whether all theology is assimilated to onto-theology and with the “surprising *coup de force*” by which “negative theology” “finds itself...reintegrated within onto-theology.” In it Marion regards Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) *différance* as leading “us further forward, certainly not in the way of an answer, but in the seriousness of the question.”<sup>26</sup> “In the Name” confronts these same matters through staging an encounter between “the two questions of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ and of ‘negative theology’.”<sup>27</sup> Derrida's treatment of these questions becomes central and is critically surveyed. His objections to negative theology are blamed for their “crudeness;”<sup>28</sup> he aims “to stigmatize ‘negative theology’s’ persistence in making affirmations about God (in particular the affirmation of existence)—while denying that it does so.”<sup>29</sup> By a third way, “de-nomination,” beyond affirmation and negation, Marion trumps Heidegger extended through Derrida:

De-nomination, therefore, does not end up in a “metaphysics of presence” that does not call itself as such. Rather, it ends up as a *pragmatic theology of absence*—where the name is given as having no name, not as giving the essence, and having nothing but this absence to make manifest; a theology where hearing happens....But if essence and presence, and therefore *a fortiori* ground and the concept of being, are missing from this name, one can no longer speak of onto-theo-logy or of metaphysics or even of a “Greek” horizon.<sup>30</sup>

Marion attempts again to get around the reintegration of negative theology into onto-theology by presenting Denys and his Christian predecessors and successors as

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>25</sup> See my “Why Heidegger's ‘History’ of Metaphysics is Dead,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 78:3 (2004): 425–443.

<sup>26</sup> Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 231–2.

<sup>27</sup> Marion, “In the Name” (1999), 20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Marion, “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of It,” in *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. R. Horner and V. Berraud, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 132.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

engaged in mystical theology, prayer, and praise. These Marion sets against Neoplatonism, which belongs to metaphysics and the rejected “Greek horizon.” It is no more than a form of philosophical *theoria*, and its First Principle consists in a mere substitution of the One or of the Good for Being—a representation consistent with his judgment on the relation of henology and ontology. Having pointed to the priority of Good over Being for Denys, Marion opposes him to the Neoplatonists:

It is not enough simply to declare the horizon of Being to be overstepped by goodness if one wants to think this transgression. What must be understood by goodness? In contrast to the Neo-platonists who overcome Being only for the sake of coming unto the One and would pass beyond the One only in order to retrieve it, Dionysius not only does not privilege the one which he paradoxically places in the last position of the divine names; he also does not accord any essential privilege to goodness—while nonetheless still granting it the title “most revered of names.”<sup>31</sup>

Because Denys, in contrast to the Neoplatonists, subordinates negative theology to mystical theology, he has found “de-nomination”:

With the third way, not only is it no longer a matter of saying (or denying) something about something, it is also no longer a matter of saying or unsaying, but of referring to the One who is no longer touched by nomination, a matter no longer of saying the referent, but of pragmatically referring the speaker to the inaccessible Referent. It is solely a matter of de-nominating.<sup>32</sup>

Marion advises us not to ignore:

the fact that the work of the Greek Fathers consisted precisely in freeing the Christian theological concepts from the Greek (and perhaps metaphysical) horizon where they first arose.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to affirmation in prayer and praise or negation in apophatic theology, Marion grounds the “de-nomination” of Christian mystical theology in a God who is nameless by excess. In the “third way as saturated phenomenon” “where mystical theology is accomplished”:

no predication or naming any longer appears possible, as in the second way [apophasis], but now this is so for the opposite reason: not because the giving intuition would be lacking...but because the excess of intuition overcomes, submerges, exceeds, in short saturates, the measure of each and every concept.<sup>34</sup>

I shall not analyze Marion’s characterisation of Denys’ thought—inquiring, for example, whether his representation of the place of the One or the Good in Denys’ theology illuminates or obscures. I shall rather extend my remarks about his attitude to henology. I

---

<sup>31</sup> Marion, “In the Name” (1999), 31–32; see 23, note 11; 31–32; idem, *The Idol and Distance*, 146 & 173.

<sup>32</sup> Marion, “In the Name” (2002), 142.

<sup>33</sup> Marion, “In the Name” (1999), 37.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

point to a characterisation of Neoplatonism within the contemporary French retrieval which is the very opposite of Marion's, and note that precisely what he ascribes to Denys in contradistinction from the pagan Neoplatonists is understood by these scholars as their proper doctrine. I conclude with some passages from Proclus where he seems to teach exactly what Marion attributes to Denys.

### III. Jean Trouillard in Company with Ancient and Contemporary Henology

Contemporary French Neoplatonic scholarship demonstrates both that for the Neoplatonists the One is nothing and never properly nameable because of its inconceivable fullness, and also that Proclus and Damascius have anticipated the criticisms of negative theology and Neoplatonism by both Derrida and Marion.<sup>35</sup>

For Duméry the mysticism of Plotinus belongs to the realm of grace:

Plotinus...seeks salvation only through the mediation of the intellect, and yet he demands that the intellect declare itself dependent and insists that attaining the intelligible is only a stage, although an indispensable one, on the journey toward the One, toward ecstasy. And since the One is transcendent, the final ecstasy presupposes a grace. As Jean Trouillard observes, only those who link "the idea of grace to that of contingency" can dispute the fact that Plotinus professed a mysticism of divine gratuitousness and liberality. Once the transcendence of the One is admitted, the Plotinian ecstasy must be understood as a religious experience beyond the intelligible order. This amounts to understanding philosophy as an intermediary between two presences of the One to the spirit: the one a latent and unperceived presence, which constitutes the source of all spirituality; the other, a recognised and willed presence, which, in the dark night of language and meaning, of the senses and the understanding, consummates the marriage of intelligence with the Absolute.<sup>36</sup>

In the *Elements of Theology* of Proclus, Trouillard says he encountered "the self-constituting character of all authentic being and this made evident to me that in a monadological perspective the entire procession is intrinsic to each psycho-noetic subject."<sup>37</sup> Once Proclus is properly understood, the Neoplatonic doctrines of transcendence and of the soul must be reconceived:

Neoplatonic transcendence is not an absence, but an excess of presence, since it is for each spirit its interior home of liberation. It is less an end than a point of departure, less a superior term than a prior state, never participated, always communicated. It is only exterior to us inasmuch as we are exterior to ourselves... Since the soul is not only the term of the internal procession, but also the spontaneous recapitulation of the entire procession from the One to matter, we are

---

<sup>35</sup> This begins with Bréhier's seminal although largely unappreciated "L'idée du néant et le problème de l'origine radicale dans le néoplatonisme grec," but becomes central with Trouillard, Duméry, Joseph Combès, and Stanislas Breton.

<sup>36</sup> H. Duméry, *Phenomenology and Religion: Structures of the Christian Institution*, Hermeneutics 5 (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1975), 99.

<sup>37</sup> J. Trouillard, *L'Un et l'Âme selon Proclus*, Collection d'études anciennes (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1972), 3–4.

able to resume everything... in a single formula...:“The soul is the perfect mediation because it is the plenitude of negations....It is in this that it is self-moving.”<sup>38</sup>

Coming to union with the Principle is not the work of abstracting reason. In its transcendent and unparticipated anteriority, the One is without relation to any being or intellect; its self-communication in the centre of the soul is, therefore, not a substantial presence, but pure negativity of being. The universe is a series of “rays diverging from the same universal center.”<sup>39</sup> The soul coincides with that center, as does all authentic being. Her return is a progressive negation of all that the One is not, and this purifying mediation is the soul’s construction of herself and the entire cosmos. As with Denys, union requires theurgy because:

the divine is, in effect, absent from nothing, but it is present equally to all. That is why, even in beings of the lowest rank, one will discover the divine presence. For the One is everywhere in the sense that each being owes its subsistence to the gods and that, in proceeding from the gods, none leave them entirely, but everything is rooted in the divine.<sup>40</sup>

For Trouillard the most attractive Christian system is Eriugena’s where historically the unification of Augustine and Denys has its first instance.<sup>41</sup> His absence from Marion is revealing. In Eriugena, according to Trouillard:

God does not know himself. And the reason for this ignorance, is that God is nothing... Because it is in the image of God our mind is nothingness, and this is why it expresses the totality of the universe. Becoming the meanings which it emits, it creates itself in them, and nevertheless refuses to define itself by its own creations.<sup>42</sup>

As image of God our mind does not comprehend itself—a common Neoplatonic and Augustinian notion. This is the doctrine of Marion’s “*Mibi magna*” but Eriugena’s unification of Denys and Augustine on this point is not mentioned in his lecture. Is this because with Eriugena the Neoplatonic foundation of both becomes indubitable?

Stanislas Breton (1912-2005) tells us that in consequence of its reference to the One-Nonbeing of the *Parmenides*, Neoplatonism “is constantly inspired by a self-criticism”<sup>43</sup> and that this auto-critique reaches its culmination in Damascius. Listen to Joseph Combès (born 1920) on Damascius:

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 4–8.

<sup>39</sup> J. Trouillard (éd.), Proclus, *Éléments de Théologie*, Bibliothèque philosophique (Paris: Aubier, 1965), 24.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

<sup>41</sup> See my “*Secundum rei vim vel secundum cognoscentium facultatem*. Knower and Known in the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius and the *Proslogion* of Anselm,” in *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, ed. J. Inglis, (Richmond [England]: Curzon Press, 2002), 126-150 at 141–144.

<sup>42</sup> J. Trouillard, “Érigène et la naissance du sens,” in *Platonisme und Christentum. Festschrift für Heinrich Dörrie*, ed. H.-D. Blume and F. Mann, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum Ergänzungsband 10* (Munster: Aschendorffsche, 1983), 267–276 at 268 & 272.

<sup>43</sup> S. Breton, “Actualité du néoplatonisme,” in *Études néoplatoniciennes* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1973), 110–126 at 123.

The theology of Damascius wants to be aporetic in order to radicalise the apophatism inherent in it, and to shelter the deposit [received from Plato] from all discourse, even that discourse which seems to refuse discourse, but which employs it again in saying that the unique principle of all surpasses all understanding, because by perfection it is transcendent and superior to all... Aporeticism will consist therefore in recognising that the negation of the highest perfections and even of transcendence, in respect to the principle, is demanded at a still higher degree, because these are only “our own conventions in respect to it.”...Solely silence acknowledges, following upon the awareness that the two necessities, criticism and mysticism, are only able to have, when something so ineffable is being dealt with, the same height, and that they come together in it.<sup>44</sup>

Trouillard writes that Damascius:

discloses the risk which in a permanent way Neoplatonism runs just much as does all negative theology. To use language as a defect in the purity of silence can result in our making of silence a counter-expression, of night a secret, and of nothingness a mysterious substance. One inevitably slides into this if one does not practice an incessant purification.<sup>45</sup>

Proclus leads us to the silence of de-nomination. The soul must ascend beyond naming, beyond philosophical work and striving. For him the negativity of the One is not “nothingness,” but philosophy cannot tell the difference between negativity by excess and negativity by defect because we are dealing in both cases with what is unknowable. Hence we need the pre-noetic operation of the gods’ work. Because union is not only the end but also the beginning, “inspired impulse” is necessary to rouse the power of the One in the soul so that she is converted towards God.<sup>46</sup> Reason is inadequate both to the beginning and to the consummation. Proclus writes:

... dialectical operations are the preparation for the strain towards the One, but are not themselves the strain. Or rather, not only must [dialectical activity] be eliminated, but the strain as well. Finally, when it has completed its course, the soul may rightly abide with the One. Having become single and alone in itself, it will choose only the simply One.<sup>47</sup>

The debates between Derrida and Marion over speech, negative theology, and mysticism reproduce the concerns of Damascius and Proclus; the moderns are not more exigent than the ancients. Marion, Trouillard, Combès, Damascius, Denys, Proclus, and Aristotle conclude with silence. Proclus writes “It is with silence, then, that...[Aristotle] brings to completion the study of the One.”<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> J. Combès, “La théologie aporétique de Damascius,” in idem, *Études néoplatonicennes*, 2<sup>e</sup> éd., Collection Krisis (Grenoble: Millon, 1996), 199–221 at 201–21.

<sup>45</sup> J. Trouillard, *La mystagogie de Proclus*, Collection d’études anciennes (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982), 94.

<sup>46</sup> Proclus, *In Parm.*, VI, 1071, 425.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 75K, 603

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 76K, 603: