



The Via Negativa and the Aura of Words

RAOUL MORTLEY 

Bond University, raoulmortley@gmail.com

Abstract: The negative capacity is essential to creative thinking; we find it in the transcendentalism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, though the Neoplatonist explanation of unknowing goes far further than simply pointing to the beyond; the idea of aura provides some understanding of how a word retains its influence even when negated; words or names are crucial in the move upwards in the mystical journey, and in the Neoplatonist and Christian tradition names or words are said to be fundamental, despite the *via negativa*; the linguistic ontology of Platonism underpins the existence of the names: but we do not have to believe in the ontic status of names for their aura to operate as we meditate over them.

Keywords: aura, *via negativa*, unknowing (*agnosia*), privation, abstraction, names (*onomata*), Plotinus, Plato, Proclus, Damascius, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius

1. Text

The English poet John Keats wrote about the negative capability required of the artist, or of the poet in his case. He says in a letter to his brothers that a writer must have this capacity, to dwell in the land of uncertainty. “I mean Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason ...”¹

In his poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, he focuses our attention on the vase, but draws it away to something other, beyond what is present to our attention and immediately available to the senses, to what lies beyond. He does this by means of the negative – “Heard music is sweet, but unheard music is sweeter.” And also “the spirit ditties of no tone”: that is, music which has no melody. There is also negative modification, which is less than outright denial or removal: “Thou still unravished bride of quietness, foster child of silence and slow time.” The mention of quietness and slow time, as opposed to noise and fast time, uses negation to create a scene where there is a sense of something absent.

The use of the negative draws us away into that land of uncertainty, where we escape the limitation of scientific precision, and it achieves that emancipation of the spirit from the cognitively present and available, which means that we are not arrested by the physical structure surrounding us.

¹ Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 193–194.

We live in an age of strong scientific confidence. Findings are contested all the time, but in general knowledge does seem to move forward, albeit at a slow pace. The impulse to conquest through knowledge is very strong, and some believe that nothing will eventually escape the human cognitive capacity. Aristotle is an ancient example of somebody who appeared to believe that the human cognitive capacity could eventually grasp, classify, and explain every part of reality. This is very different from the allusive capacity of negation which Keats is attempting to suggest: rather than enabling the human mind to go on reaching into the available present, this passage of Keats suggests that that process should stop and give way to an unknowingness. It is important to note that this involves an opening of the mind, rather than a closing of it.

The scientific confidence in the cognitive capacity of the human mind is the driver of much discovery but is ironically also a symptom of the vanity of the human animal. The allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic* warns us to be cautious about being overconfident of the reach of our senses and of our minds.

The negative way explores transcendence, or that which is beyond our minds, and thus appears to be quite open-ended. This paper concerns the way in which the exploration of the negative is subject to controls, and how it may be linked to a disciplined body of thought, such as a dogmatic theology or philosophy. Concern for precision of language can coexist with a radical exploration of the realm of the negative, and the very wide field of that which we do not know, the field of ignorance, or *agnosia*. Unknowing, *agnosia*, becomes a way of apprehending every bit as powerful as knowing itself.

First things first: the *via negativa* and statements of the transcendent. Early Christianity with its Judaic background recognises the transcendent, and the idea that God is beyond our normal understanding. In the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures God is represented as appearing in a burning bush (Exod 3:1–14) and there is even an apparent exploration of the negative: the bush burns but is not consumed. In him there is no variableness or shadow of turning (Jas 1:17–18) – God is a being which does not cast a shadow. In these kinds of examples we start with the known and familiar, but then there is the negation which takes us into the unfamiliar – the bush which burns but never burns up, or the being which is there but does not cast a shadow.

In Stephen's address to the Sanhedrin from the book of Acts, there is reference to the temple not made with hands (Acts 7:48), which again constitutes an exhortation to look beyond the familiar works of human construction, and to avoid having one's gaze constricted by looking only at what humans can do and know. And the Judaic repudiation of idolatry is well known: God is not captured in representations or images such as the golden calf, to which the Israelites dedicated themselves while Moses was communing with God and receiving the ten commandments (Exod 32:1–14).

In each of these examples there is a familiar starting point, followed by a negation: the temple of Stephen is followed by the idea of the temple not made with

hands, the “not built” temple, that other spiritual temple. Stephen the Hellenist is here introducing some of the internationalism which is taken up by Paul, and by which a Judaic cult which originated in the land of the temple comes to be a world-wide religion without parochial or national ties.

So the issue is this: is the familiar starting point a necessary part of the *via negativa*, and does it provide an anchor for the flow of spiritual or philosophical thought which follows the negation of one aspect of the familiar? Does something of the aura of the original term dominate the exploration of the “not this” which follows? Does the word “temple” still influence our meditation over the non-temple, the one not made with hands?

The term aura is familiar from both Latin and Greek, and in both languages it denotes the breeze, perhaps from the sea, and eventually the sweet odour given off by incense, or some other attractive object of sense perception. The word aura in Greek took a decisive turn with Socrates in the *Republic*, who speaks of the importance of craftsmen and the beauty of their work: he says that the influence which comes from a work of beauty may waft over us like a breeze (*aura*) which brings health from elsewhere, from some healthy region, a “breath of fresh air” as we say in English. The word aura now refers to the emanation of spiritual beauty and the way in which its presence has its impact on us: this is close to the breeze of beauty from the work of art, which wafts over us, in the words of Socrates who was of course originally trained as a sculptor.²

Later, in Virgil, we find another meaning of the word *aura*, the Latin word simply having been transliterated from the Greek: in the famous passage of *Aeneid*,³ we have the golden bough which Aeneas had to carry through the underworld to guarantee safe passage. Here the aura is the gleam of the gold perceived by Aeneas, contrasting with the green of the leaves of the tree.

We now understand the aura to be the impenetrable spiritual strength given off by a work of art or a person of some particular charismatic gift. In this we benefit from a transition in the meaning of the word aura, this transition being created by the language of Socrates in the *Republic*, combined with the language of Virgil, who sees the aura as the gleam of the gold, a gleam of light, (*aura auri*) in the golden bough.

Does the aura of a word hang over it even when negated? If in my meditation I choose to see God as the good shepherd (John 10:11, 14),⁴ and if I begin to negate aspects of that image, so that I imagine a shepherd who is of course good, but without the staff, and without a physical location, then I begin to explore through

² Plato, *Resp.* 401C–D.

³ Vergil, *Aen.* 6.204.

⁴ Notice that Jesus in this story contrasts the good Shepherd with the “not good” Shepherd, who is simply a hired hand and does not own the sheep. He uses a negation to clarify the original image.

the *via negativa* the unknown side of that image. Then I may remove the image of the good from my mind. But does the aura remain? Does the shepherd of the mental picture continue to hang over my meditation so that the aura of that original image is retained? So that wherever I go with it, the original image continues to exert its influence? Or is the negative way a kind of complete abandonment of the familiar and the known, a complete departure. Is there no breeze of beauty, as per Socrates, wafting over us, coming from the original language and the original imagery? This is the question to be explored in this paper.

2. Jewish Judaeo-Christian Transcendentalism and the *via negativa*

The *via negativa* as it develops in Platonism, both pagan and Christian, is a systematic exploration of the negative. This is fundamentally different from ordinary Judaeo-Christian transcendentalism, in that not only does it recognise that there is something beyond, but also involves an exploration of that which is beyond.

The *via negativa* begins in a narrow form, with privation (*steresis*) as the main instrument for refining thought. But Plotinus develops the *via negativa* in probably its earliest complete form and turns in the end to abstraction (*aphaeresis*) as the purifying technique most appropriate to the negative way.

Interestingly enough, Plotinus is also very concerned with the precision of language, its exactitude. This comes out in the discussion of the *touto*, “this.” Plotinus is here commenting on the passage of Plato’s *Timaeus* which concerns the permanent flux, a problem inherited from Heracleitus, which Plato addresses by wondering whether the demonstrative pronouns “this!” or “that!” can actually be used where there is continuous flux.

Plato told a story which illustrates his point perfectly: imagine a goldsmith making all kinds of figures out of gold, and imagine that he then proceeds to melt them down and remake them into every other figure, so that one figurine, say a triangle, then becomes one of the others, and vice versa. If we were to point to one of the figurines and ask what it is, knowing that it is about to change into the shape of something else, the safest answer would be that it is gold. But as for the various shapes which were formed: “... one should never describe them as ‘being’ seeing that they change even while one is mentioning them; rather one should be content if the figure admits of even the title ‘suchlike’ (*toioutos*) being applied to it with any safety.”⁵

The question is whether, if change is continuous, we can ever justifiably use the word “this,” as the thing in question may have already become something else. Plato was raising these questions against a background of philosophers questioning

⁵ Plato, *Tim.* 50B (LCL 234).

where names came from and what their purpose was, and facing the additional question of the idea of permanent change which had been advocated by Heraclitus. If change was continuous and the idea of permanent realities was an illusion, what then was the point of language and of naming things?

It was even the case among the followers of Heraclitus that brevity and terseness of speech were much valued, as the subject of the conversation might imminently disappear, owing to the ever present flux – or so Proclus tells us much later.⁶ Speedy communication was necessary. One had to strike while the iron was hot or run the risk of there being no iron.

Plato even suggested that we might have to do away with the demonstrative pronoun “this,” and content ourselves with the word “suchlike” (*toioutos*). It is interesting to note that even the adjective suchlike suggests some form of knowledge of what we are dealing with in the physical world, if the object we are looking at is simply “like this” then we are admitting some permanent substance which returns, albeit in different formations.

Plotinus quite assertively disagrees with Plato and wants to preserve “this”: “the *this* is not empty of meaning ...”⁷ In fact the whole of *Ennead* VI turns on the question of linguistic precision, in that the ontological categorisation carried out by Plotinus is always accompanied by the question of the exact meaning of words. So that for Plotinus language has a precise demonstrative function: certain words or names belong to certain things. There is a thing underlying the thought, and we use the term “this” demonstratively, instead of using the name.⁸ Some language is possible.

Side-by-side with this Aristotelian-style concern for the precision of language, we find articulated the beginnings of the *via negativa*. Plotinus looks at the idea of privation (*steresis*) in order to determine whether this is the appropriate terminology for the negative way which he wishes to outline, but the previous definition of the term by Aristotle means that privation relies on a being for it to be operated, as it posits the absence of something which is familiar and known, and which might normally be expected to be there: one might “deprive” the white swan of its whiteness, through privation, but this whiteness is known and would be expected to be present. Privation applies to familiar entities which belong to the substrate. The other similar term, *aphaeresis*, or abstraction, is more appropriate to the negative way as it involves a systematic removal of predicates for exploratory reasons: this is the beginning of mysticism. In an earlier work I dealt with this, likening abstraction to the gradual removing of encrustations on reality until a new vision is achieved.⁹

⁶ Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria* (Duvick, 14).

⁷ Plotinus, *Enn.* I.6 (34).13,57 to 59ff.

⁸ Plotinus, *Enn.* I.6 (34).13,57 to 59ff.

⁹ Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, II, 57.

In the course of its journey through Neoplatonism, the *via negativa* becomes much less about the refinement of concepts, and much more about the exploration of that which is beyond thinking, the area of unknowing, or *agnosia*. There is a process of removing that which is lower level physical concept formation, based on the visible and the familiar, but there is also the exploration of that area beyond, once the process of removal has been achieved. This is the capacity for unknowing, and the 6th century Platonist Damascius takes the idea of unknowing to its most developed extent. The felt need for language becomes an impotent psychological state, the state of desiring words and desiring to express things in words is there, but “all that we can say here is but vain rhapsody.”¹⁰

Damascius takes an important step in that he views unknowing as a capacity of the subject, just as knowledge of lower things is also a capacity of the subject. It is a mistake to focus on the unknowability of the object, but rather we should focus on our own internal capacity for unknowing, for pursuing the mystical and wandering in the landscape of the not known.¹¹ This presentation of unknowing as a human subjective capacity completely reverses the idea of negative theology being based on cognitive inadequacy, and turns it into an instrument of the human soul, using its capacity for mystical apprehension as a positive way forward.

There is a radicalism here in pagan Platonism which finds some echoes in the Christian tradition, and may be represented by the Christian Platonism of Dionysius, itself closer to the Platonism of Proclus, who seeks to avoid gaps or any discontinuity in the chain of being.

The author of the medieval work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, sees the negation of the imagination as the necessary prelude to the mystical vision; the tyranny of the imagination is due to original sin. Before Adam sinned, imagination was obedient to reason, and was the servant of reason: now it is different, in that the imagination “never ceases, whether we are asleep or awake, to present various unseemly images of bodily creatures, or else some fanciful picture, which is either a bodily representation of a spiritual thing or else the spiritual representation of a bodily thing. Such representations are always deceptive and compounded with error.”¹²

The image making capacity of the imagination is what must be done away with in the course of the negative pathway. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* goes on to say: “... A man can never, by the work of his understanding, arrive at the knowledge of an uncreated spiritual thing, which is nothing except God. But by the failing of it, he can. For where his understanding fails is in nothing except God alone; and it was for this reason that Saint Denis said, ‘the truly divine knowledge of God is that which is known by unknowing.’”¹³

10 Damascius, *Dubitationes* 7 (Ruelle, 14); see also Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, II, 124–126.

11 See Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, II, 126.

12 [Anonymous], *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 65.

13 [Anonymous], *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 70.

This is the path of the negative way as it evolves in the Western tradition: the exploration of unknowing. Unknowing does not mean ignorance, but refers to the exploration of the region beyond thought and ordinary comprehension.

3. Words and Names

As patristic philosophy developed, there was an increasing problem over names or nouns (*onomata*). In his work on Gregory of Nyssa, Martin Laird has coined the word *logophasis* in order to characterise the final stage of the negative or apophatic meditation: in this account of the thought of Gregory, the logos is the supreme state of faith-based apprehension, and infuses everything. This logophatic state transcends mere words with – how shall we put it? – language of a higher order, discourse, or faith-based understanding. There is of course available in ancient Greek the term *kataphasis*, which means assertion or affirmation, and provides the counterpart to *apophasis* which means negation: one assumes that Martin Laird bypassed this ordinary word in pursuit of the idea of a higher form of language or discourse. And it is true that Gregory does not want to do away with all language in the final analysis.

It is interesting that for Gregory the higher form of cognition is faith, as in the process of transcending the mundane, it is the eye of faith which sees things which are not available to the mind. This alliance between faith and mysticism becomes very strong, and the *via negativa* provides a role for faith in this higher form of cognition, which is beyond the intellect. In his sixth homily Gregory comments¹⁴ on the Song of Solomon “on my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loved” and he discusses the ascent of the bride, starting by her move into darkness which designates the ascent through the *via negativa*: she seeks her beloved and expects to find him by means of faith. She says, in Gregory’s words, that the beloved escapes the prison of her thinking but she continues to seek. In passing through the heights she asks the angels whether they have seen the object of her love, but they keep silent, and the silence of the angels is interpreted as pointing to the ungraspable character of the divine nature.

Yet as Laird points out, the bride is guided by the Word, and from her mouth come the riches of the Word.¹⁵ There is clearly an issue about preserving names, at least in some form or at some level. The impulse towards wordless contemplation of the divinity is tempered by the need for some kind of anchor, in some kind of language.

¹⁴ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Cant.* 6. 181.6.

¹⁵ Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 168.

This issue goes back to the *Cratylus* of Plato, in which the topic is the correctness of names. Whilst there appear to be a number of fanciful derivations and etymologies on display in this dialogue, and whilst there is a comic element, there are of course serious issues at stake. The giving of names, or nouns, is the question and where they come from: the issue is whether names are purely conventional, or they are there “by nature.” The perpetual flux as discussed above is mentioned as a problem,¹⁶ and against this is set up the possibility that there is a permanent reality lying behind: is the beauty of a particular face just a stage in the flux or is there an absolute beauty standing permanently behind it? Plato seems to be seeking a way of underpinning the permanence and strength of names, and tries different hypotheses: one is that the name has a resemblance to the object, in the same way that an artwork has a resemblance to the scene portrayed.¹⁷ One might, for example, step up to a man and say here is your portrait, it obviously resembles you; and similarly one might say here is your name, it obviously belongs to you. This hypothesis does not really work but throughout Plato seems to retain the idea of a name-giver, whose job it is to ensure the correctness of names. Another hypothesis attempted is the view that names naturally bear the imprint of the reality they designate and are formed by nature itself. Yet another hypothesis is that there was a name-giver, a form of intellect which was responsible for name-giving and also the correctness of the names given: in other words, the correctness of names is not a result of a natural encounter with language, on which they live their imprint, but the results of intelligent design.¹⁸ We are left with a kind of unsolved problem in the *Cratylus* in that names are obviously part of the natural order and have come into being through the same process as other beings, yet they bear a specific relationship to certain entities as their names: they in some sense belong to those entities, and represent them, and so the question is how are they created and how do we explain this matching relationship? Throughout the dialogue there is a concern to uphold the rightness of names, alongside a typical Platonic exploration of why this view is difficult.

But the key, for Plato, is probably a passage of the *Philebus*, in which Socrates expresses the great awe in which he holds the names of the gods, which is “beyond the greatest human fear.”¹⁹ This is a view that the right name is the key to real piety, and that it enables us to grasp something real and transcendent: the name is not just a matter of communication, a code developed by human artifice in order to pass information in a human way, but a real pathway to the divine and entry into the presence of the divine.

¹⁶ Plato, *Crat.* 439D.

¹⁷ Plato, *Crat.* 430A–B.

¹⁸ Plato, *Crat.* 416C–D.

¹⁹ Plato, *Phileb.* 12C.

4. Names and the Negative Way

So we have a real tension between the developing idea of exploring unknowingness (*agnosia*), and the preservation of some language, whether the kataphatic language of Gregory of Nyssa, or the principle of the rightness of certain given names. The aura of language hangs over these discussions, the breeze coming from the higher regions, to use the language of Socrates. Quite why the names are correct and solidly implanted in the transcendent world is not entirely clear, but they are given and must be held in the highest awe, to use the language of the *Philebus*.

This seems to be the position of Pseudo-Dionysius, the great exponent of negative theology who influenced so much of subsequent Western philosophy and theology. Dionysius is the heir to a debate in Platonism²⁰ over names and their value, and unlike Damascius he will not dismiss the human capacity to operate through names.

There is a probable pathway here through Proclus, the Athenian Platonist of the fifth century AD, who represented a kind of flowering of paganism at that time. He espoused a sophisticated and developed paganism which was shortly to see its end, in the West at least, and which had come to resemble Christianity in its theology and its practice. This could of course be put differently, in that Christianity and Paganism could be said to have come to resemble each other at that time. Proclus and his colleague wrote a commentary on Plato's *Cratylus*, and throughout this document we see him grappling with the problems raised by Plato in that dialogue, namely the problem of whether names exist, the nature of this existence, and how it comes about that there is a relationship between names and that which they denote.²¹

Proclus deals with the claim that names are merely conventional: Hermogenes had argued that they were, but there was nevertheless a correct set of conventions so that not just any word would do. Proclus and the Excerptor colleague dispose of this quite quickly, arguing that if names are merely conventional people in different places would call different things by different names, and there would be chaos.²²

There is an interesting section on whether naming is the same as speaking, and the conclusion the commentators draw is that a name is a part of speech, and the conclusion is that naming is speaking, albeit only a part of speech. One supposes that the underlying problem here is that it is difficult to explain the existence of a name if there is no utterance: how does it subsist, what is its role?²³ Later the commentators go on to explain that the name is an instrument (48) and an instrument must be used like a tool: if the name is picked arbitrarily or conventionally and it will not match

²⁰ See Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, II, chapters on Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa.

²¹ This commentary, *On Plato Cratylus*, has been annotated and translated by Brian Duvick, edited by Harold Tarrant.

²² Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, section 30, 31.

²³ Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, section 45.

the task which is called upon to do, and so the name is tied in with the doctrine of function: the name is the appropriate tool for the utterance to be made.

In their view there is something sacred about names, in that the lawgiver has established them: the commentators on the *Cratylus* associate the idea of the lawgiver with the platonic demiurge, known from the *Timaeus*, the creator God himself, and here associated with Intellect. The benefits of using the names as given are twofold, one being that communication is enabled and the other is the appreciation of sameness or difference, which is again the province of intellect.²⁴

The Proclus text envisages the demiurge as threefold in character, and there is no doubt that names are given from above: “to the extent that he knows himself and all the other divine genera together, partakes of them all, and is distinguished by his own particular substance, each of the gods supplies subsistence to the divine names, which are incomprehensible (*agnosta*) and ineffable (*aphthegkta*) to us, inasmuch as all of the intellectual and the divine entities exist in us spiritually.”²⁵

We note that the names are given substance by the divine triad, and so they are nourished ontologically from above. In addition, they are of the realm of the unknown (our translator has given “incomprehensible” above), but they are also ineffable. The translation “ineffable” possibly hides a point of importance: the Greek here really suggests that these words or names are not spoken, they are not voiced; not so much that they are unspeakable. They simply rest in the realm of unknowing and are considered in silence. As we saw above, Proclus has a distinction drawn between the speech act of using a name, and simply the knowing of a name in a speechless way. Voicing a name is using it as a tool, but the highest names remain unvoiced.

5. Dionysius, the *via negativa*, and the *Divine Names*

Proclus and his collaborator have provided us with the context for Pseudo-Dionysius, who was inspired by theological Paganism at its highest point. What he gives us is the platonic respect for names, and an attempted demonstration that the names he collects from biblical sources are compatible with this platonic theology. The theology he lays out is highly reminiscent of Proclus, who systematises the explorations of Plato’s *Parmenides* and the *Symposium* as well as the other dialogues, and this theology is based on the developing tradition of Neoplatonism: in this way Proclus gives us a fully formulated “platonic theology.” Dionysius is very much in this tradition, and the *Divine Names* should be seen as an apologetic work, in defence of and for the perpetuation of Platonism. There are selected biblical quotations – lists

²⁴ Plato, *Tim.* 51.19.

²⁵ Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, section 135 (Duvick, 78).

collected in a possibly cursory study – and there is of course the knockout quotation of St Paul on the Areopagus hill, and the question of the unknown God. Perfect material for an apologist seeking to subordinate scriptural teaching to the pre-eminence of Platonism. He is somewhat like Clement of Alexandria in another key, Dionysius attempting to present Judaeo-Christianity as easily included in and subordinated to Platonism. Whereas Clement scattered pagan wisdom throughout his writings on biblical issues, Dionysius scatters occasional biblical allusions (only occasional) throughout a narrative of platonic theology: it is the Platonism which is always developed at much greater length. Taking for example the section about the good in the *Divine Names*:²⁶ “But now let me speak about the good, about that which truly is and which gives being to everything else. The God who transcends everything by virtue of his power. He is the substantive cause and maker of being, subsistence, of existence, of substance, and of nature. He is the source and measure of the ages.”²⁷

For these last words, the translator, Colm Luibhéid, with Paul Rorem, refers us to a possible biblical source, Heb 1:2 as a background: even this is dubious, though it may come close to being a biblical allusion. The point is that the whole passage is an exposition of what might be called standard processional ontological Platonism, as if the meaning of the biblical texts were not clear enough to be understood without this scaffolding.

Daniel Jugrin has written on Dionysian unknowing as well as the unknowing of Gregory of Nyssa, which culminates in the language of assertion, as we have seen with the term *logophasis*.²⁸ He quotes the *Divine Names* 872A, to the effect that God is known both through knowing, and through unknowing. They are both treated as capacities, and as we have noted, this is the position of Damascius; they are given equal weighting. Dionysius emphasises that the unknowing of that which is beyond being, is itself beyond speech, mind or being itself,²⁹ and here we find the differentiation between speech and language which was noted earlier in relation to Proclus. It is one thing to know the divine names, and another thing to utter them. Meditation in silence may take place, using the divine names.

Dionysius lists all the available biblical names in 596A and thereafter, but prefacing his list with the statement that the divine is the nameless One. Having given a long list of biblical names he concludes that though nameless, he is the cause of all and “has” the names of everything that is, “for he is their cause, their source, and their destiny.”³⁰

It is this view that underpins the attachment to names in the negative theology of this period, and in particular that of Dionysius: the names are part of an ontological

²⁶ Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 817C–D.

²⁷ Luibhéid, *Pseudo-Dionysius the Complete Works*, 98.

²⁸ Jugrin, “*Agnōsia*,” 102–115.

²⁹ Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 588A.

³⁰ Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 569C (56).

procession in the course of which they are brought into being, as much as any other being. They are not “given” in the sense that a Mosaic commandment might be given (the demiurge is in no way like Moses), but they are part of the ontological structure of the real. They themselves have being, so they need not be spoken, and they express themselves in their own reality. They are part of what is given.

We began this paper with the idea of aura, and the flavour or tone of the word which can last beyond the presence of the word: we do not find this idea used here, because the ontological guarantee of the names does not leave open a need for any other explanation of their binding character, or of the influence they possess in the course of a meditation. They are simply there. The idea of the ontological underpinning of the names, which comes from the processional generation of reality, emanating from the One, crowds out other thinking about the power of words.

The issue is that there must be something which prevents unknowing from simply becoming wild speculation, or a maenadic dance of random character. This factor is the anchoring power of names. In addition, names are necessary for orthodoxy, any kind of orthodoxy.

The refreshing breeze, or aura, coming from the beauty of the arts which we saw with Socrates, may well apply to the words drawn from the context of Judaean-Christian teaching. The good Shepherd is an image which is extremely powerful, and continues to flavour any meditation, even that which goes beyond words. Words, even if negated, provide the comfort of their own presence, through the aura which they generate. The aura remains, despite the denuding of content effected by the *via negativa*.

It is not necessary to have recourse to the linguistic ontology of the Neoplatonists to be able to savour the compass of a word when one has gone long beyond it. And so at the end of antiquity we find ourselves returned to its beginning, with the *Philebus* principle that the divine names must be regarded with the utmost awe.

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