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Appendix II.

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Appendix II

The Modern Via Negativa

i. Sontag

It is not certain that there is a modern *via negativa*, in the sense that a tradition has perpetuated itself from antiquity, through the Middle Ages, and down to the modern era. There may be no organic link between the modern manifestations of the need for silence, and the deployment of the negative way by the ancient Platonists. This is an historical question which concerns the path leading from antiquity to the modern era, and which would require research into the tradition going from Pseudo-Dionysius to Nicholas of Cusa, the Palamite Theologians, Meister Eckhart, the Cloud of Unknowing, the English Platonists, and European figures such as Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. Hegel's exploration of negation is probably a particularly important link between the past and the present. But this is a matter for another inquiry.

What follows will compare several strands of the present view of things, in the field of literature, aesthetics and theology, with a view to establishing whether there are any common threads.

Susan Sontag's *The Aesthetics of Silence*, perhaps most of all of the modern writings here discussed, brings us closest to the ancient perception of the barrier of language. She thinks that art is about "spirituality" (4), and includes writing, painting, and music under the term "art". It is claimed that art does seek to transcend its medium of expression, in that it points to something beyond itself. Sontag makes an explicit and quite lucid comparison:

As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the "subject" (the "object", the "image"), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence. (*The Aesthetics of Silence* 5)

She refers to the tendency of the various types of art to turn against themselves, in order to point beyond themselves. This procedure is clear to all in contemporary painting, which appears to consist solely in self-indictment. If Pliny felt that art stopped with Lysippus in the fourth century B. C., and that Hellenistic art was not art at all, one wonders what he would have thought about modern art. Since painters and musicians began the destruction of form, art has continued to make the anti-art statement referred to in the above quotation. Form and structure were attacked, then the notion of the subject, and the object; in painting, representation, and finally the idea of the

image itself were overthrown. Modern art achieved all this through art itself, but was aided by language, in that language articulated and interpreted the gestures made by art. But the question must be asked of it, whether these negations expressed within its own statements are negations which point to transcendent being or experience. There is indeed a possible resemblance between the negations in discourse of the Neoplatonists, and the plastic negations of art.

However it is not clear that the parallel is well founded. Is art's self-criticism directed towards the signalling of the transcendent? It is more likely a message to itself *about itself*, about how the work of representation is to be carried out. It is a self-destruction prior to the building of new representational modes, in which form, matter and medium will presumably have a new relationship. These new modes will harden, then ossify, and will eventually form the subject of a new attack, by art itself. The negation of contemporary art does not go beyond art itself: it is a dialogue with itself about itself. Not that art does not point beyond itself: it does. But its negations are not part of this process; they are part of an intra-art dialogue about how it carries on its work.

However, Sontag develops her view along the lines that art is an attempt to capture the transcendent: spirit seeks "embodiment in art", and clashes with the "material character of art" (loc. cit.). It is the concrete and mediating character of art, she claims, which constitutes a trap for itself. Art in its contemporary expression, whereby it displeases or provokes its audience, is participating in the "ideal of silence" (op. cit. 8).

Art's use of its power to negate brings it closer and closer to this ideal of silence (op. cit. 8). In answer to the practical question of how silence can actually exist in art, a number of answers are given by Sontag. Firstly, silence may be asserted by a decision such as that of the exemplary suicide of certain artists. Secondly, it may exist in the exemplary madness of certain artists, such as Hölderlin or Artaud, and constitutes a punishment meted out by society for the artist's spiritual non-conformity. But most importantly, Sontag argues that silence cannot "exist as the property of artwork" (9). If a work exists at all, then it articulates: silence can only be an element in it. Silence can only ever be suggested or implied, but never fully realised. Further, John Cage is quoted to the effect that there is no such thing as silence: that what we call silence is always invaded by some sound or other. This appears to be true: the therapeutic and restful silence of nature is actually the substitution of different and less invasive sounds than those of city life. But there appear to be some problems here.

In the first place, the broad definition of art as including linguistic, the plastic, and the performance activities, leads to difficulties. Writing and painting, for example, are very different processes, and discourse is a higher order activity than painting, which merely reflects things. The claim of painting

to be grasping after transcendent truths is little more than coquetry; the art of discourse on the other hand is a pursuit capable of abstraction, and continual conceptual refinement.

One can readily see, however, that Beckett's assault on the canons of novel-writing, such as the notion of temporal and logical sequence, or the notion of the omniscient authorial perspective, can be seen as a parallel to the assault on form of Picasso, or to that on the image by de Staël. Thus negative postures are being taken in both writing and the plastic arts, which seem to involve a similar self-criticism. But this intra-art dialogue is nothing to do with either the *via negativa*, or with silence. Such *auteurs* are really making points in the history of ideas through the practice of their craft. They are in fact points which need not be made *ad nauseam*, but which continue to be. They are points which can be equally well expressed in language, in a hermeneutic. The content of a Picasso painting cannot be put into words, by some sort of transmogrification, but his assault on form can. It is the one appeal of his art which can be expressed verbally, rather than merely described. Similarly, the way in which Beckett is at odds with the traditional novel can be expressed in another form of words. These writers are making statements about the need for revolutionary change in the practice of their craft, and their art comes to be dominated by the making of this statement.

The difficulty of the present world of art is that it has taken these points about art to be art itself. A fetishism for these negations of certain artistic canons has developed to such an extent, that such observations about the practice of art have been taken to constitute art. A statement which said: "not this way any more" has led to a host of disciples parroting "not this way any more", and calling it art. These statements are really laying the groundwork for a new, positive, and forceful vision, but instead of doing so they have merely produced a school of artists who mistook "not-this-way" for art itself.

This has led to the current attempt to find significance in the negative statements implied by modern art. The *via negativa* has been employed to make some sense of what is in fact a stalling of art. In the first place, it should be said that the silence of the mystical tradition is not connected with the *via negativa*. Silence is an abstinence from language, recommended by metaphysicians and moralists. It simply cannot be achieved, or suggested, by speech, painting or anything else. It either is, or is not. Any attempt to create silence through art would be a cacophany. It could be argued that in the interstices between words lies silence; that in the gaps, the visual arts can create silence. But this is never the case. The gaps between words may contain silence, but the words themselves bind with each other and look to each other: the only use for silence here is that it creates the possibility of words. The divisions provided by silence make the creation of words possible, but the purpose of this form of silence is actually the bringing into being of speech! The

mystical silence is a renunciation of all language, and can only exist in the total absence of the linguistic, or of the plastic.

It should also be recognized that the negative way is supremely linguistic. For Proclus, who was its greatest ancient exponent, it represented a use of language. It was an exploration of the logical qualities of the negative, and of how a negative statement could reveal a wider positive concept. In Proclus, systematic negation is succeeded by silence, but these are two separate stages. It is not the intention of the negatives, such as "the One is not knowable", to somehow suggest, or encapsulate silence. It is not the intention of such a statement to produce silence in the mind, or set silence ringing in the ears; but rather to explore the meaning of the negative, with its positive implications. This is the significance of the hypernegation, and this activity is a profoundly linguistic activity.

It is understandable that this confusion has occurred. The negative looks like a denial of language. It appears to be a way of causing a statement to disappear, to be endowed with not-being. However this is not the way it was perceived in the classical *via negativa*, and in modern philosophy too there is some interest in the fact that a negative statement could in fact be expressed positively, were a different form of words to be chosen. It is this possible inversion of the negative which the Neoplatonists seem to be exploring. Thus Proclus claims that "negation is the mother of positive statements"; there is always the sense that a positive statement underlies any negation, but it is also believed that the negative statement is more powerful, and more revealing. But the fact remains that negation is a linguistic act, and the *via negativa* is a development ("exploitation") of linguistic resources.

For these reasons the negative elements in modern art do not resemble the ancient *via negativa*. They are not signs of the transcendent. They are signs of the immanent, and the imminent decay of certain styles of the immanent. They call for "new speech, words that have not been uttered", in the terms of the ancient Egyptian apocalypse. They signal the death of old forms, and the possible emergence of new ones, which we await. The arid character of the present artistic environment results from the failure to move forward, and from the elevation of the burial rites of the old forms, into art itself. The death-throes have been mistaken for a way of life. The negations of art do, like the ancient negations, suggest a positive obverse side, but this is about the practice of art itself: it is not the transcendent, but is intra-artistic.

The difficulty is that art has developed pretensions about itself. Instead of providing a transformed representation of the immanent, it has sought to excel itself, by providing intimations of the immortal. People have led themselves to conceive of the artist as seer, ascribing to him the ancient prophetic role as unveiler of the transcendent. But art is about material life itself and our perceptions of it. It is perhaps indeed the negative character of contem-

porary art which has provoked this explosion of vanity. A fetish has been taken for a statement of transcendental significance. A set of Hegelian categories has been brought in (the "negative", the "other") in order to provide a supporting hermeneutic for this new role which the artist desires to arrogate to himself.

Art has moved into a vacuum created by the absence of actual prophets and metaphysicians, and by the absence of theology from the broad cultural spectrum. However, as Plato pointed out, art simply cannot be called upon to play the role of unveiler: it is about the immanent, or the veil itself. The negations of the *via negativa* always point to the essence; it is not simply that any randomly chosen feature of human experience is negated, but there is a certain tradition of epithets selected for this purpose. These are epithets which purport to describe the transcendent, but which are explored through negation. There is no comparison between this procedure, and the disaffection with certain styles of aesthetic expression.

ii. *Derrida*

Derrida's association with the deconstructionist school of literary criticism may or may not be relevant to the question of the negative way. However he is having an influence over some contemporary theology, whether or not his philosophy bears a relation to the historic western negative theology (see Al-tizer et al.). And it is clear that he is making an influential contribution to the contemporary understanding of language and literary texts.

His view takes its impetus from three articles on Plato's *Phaedrus*, initially published in *Tel Quel*, but now part of the book entitled *La Dissémination*, and these are worthy of consideration. Plato's suspicion of writing, and his preference for dialogue, is well-known. There is a manifest paradox in the fact that his influence has sprung from the dead word of his writings, rather than the living word of his speech.

We have noted Plato's legend about the invention of writing in volume one. Derrida's long analysis of it is unusual, since the *Phaedrus*, and particularly this passage at the end of it, is not often discussed. Derrida's interest in it is part of his view that there has been an overwhelmingly strong tendency in the history of Western philosophy to give primacy to logos, the spoken word, or at least the unwritten word, over *graphie*, the written word. His articles, under the title *Plato's Pharmacy*, set out to examine this tendency in Plato.

Derrida's general intention is to use Plato to buttress his case about the logocentricity of Western philosophy. If we take the following words from p.182-3 (*La Dissémination*), we may gain an insight into how Derrida approaches the *Phaedrus*:

What law determines this "contradiction", this self opposition of what is said against what is written, an utterance which is uttered against itself as soon as it is written, as soon as it writes its self identity and takes its property against this written backdrop? This "contradiction", which is nothing other than the self-relation of diction in opposition to scripture, gives chase to itself in pursuing what is properly speaking its bait; this contradiction is not contingent. It is sufficient to note, in support of it that what begins in western literature with Plato does not fail to recur at least in Rousseau, and then also in Saussure. In these three cases . . . the exclusion and debasement of writing must, in the very statement of this, sit alongside.

- (1) a general writing, and in it with
- (2) a "contradiction": the written statement of logocentrism, the simultaneous statement of the being-outside of the outside and of its infamous intrusion into the within.
- (3) The construction of a "literary" work . . . the work of Plato can be read, beyond and independently of its logocentric "content", which is no longer there except as an integral "function", within its anagrammatic texture.

Derrida therefore discerns in Plato a dilemma: his tendency to devalue the written word is riddled with self-contradiction. Writing is necessary to the rejection of writing. There is more than just this logical point however: Derrida believes that Plato uses writing, the incarnate logos, as a clue to the nature of logos itself. In other words, the structure of the written language provides a model for understanding real language, logos itself, what the Stoics will call *logos endiathetos*, or the internal logos. Plato, says Derrida, reasons from the nature of letters and syllables in order to arrive at his understanding of true discourse. Hence the contradiction: the despised *graphe*, writing, leads us to an understanding of logos itself. Thus Derrida's expression: the outsideness of the outside, and its scandalous intrusion into the within. *Graphe* is seen as outside, yet it intrudes in providing a model for the understanding of discourse. This intrusion of *graphe* is a disgrace, but a disgrace which is essential to Platonism, in Derrida's view.

Socrates, at the end of the *Phaedrus*, tells us a story of Egypt. *Phaedrus* complains (275B) that Socrates is always making up stories about Egypt, and all sorts of other places, but we will take his story seriously nonetheless. The God Theuth, who invented geometry, astronomy, draughts and dice came to the Pharaoh to display his latest invention. It was the art of writing, and Theuth declares that this invention will make Egyptians wiser, and will improve their memories. "It is", he says, "the elixir of memory and wisdom". The word for elixir is *pharmakon*, or "drug", "potion": the Pharaoh Thamus refers to him as the father of letters, but goes on to claim that they will not produce memory and wisdom, but forgetfulness. People will cease to use their memories, and rely on writing: ". . . their trust in writing produced by other characters outside will discourage the use of memory within them" (275A). (We see here the beginnings of Derrida's dichotomy between the

within and the without.) Lacking practice, therefore, the memory will wither up. The Pharaoh says "You have discovered not the elixir of memory, but of reminding". Not the φάρμακον of μνήμη, but of ὑπόμνησις.

Writing is like a mnemonic: it brings things to mind rapidly, and gives the appearance of wisdom. Socrates goes on to say that writing is completely inert, like the figures in a painting, which cannot be interrogated and cannot respond. There is another kind of logos, he says, which is the authentic logos: it is written with *episteme* in the soul of the learner. It is able to defend itself, and knows when to speak and remain silent. We note again the contradiction to which Derrida alludes. The real logos, the legitimate brother of the bastard logos, in Socrates' words, is in the soul: but it is *written* in the soul. Thus Derrida's "intrusion néfaste dans le dedans" – the disgraceful entrance of the external into the internal.

Now of course there is an ambiguity entertained by Plato himself. The word *pharmakon*, which inspires Derrida's title Plato's *Pharmacy*, can refer to a drug which will harm, or a drug which will cure. It is either a therapy or a poison, and this ambiguity is played upon by the Pharaoh, when he says it is not a *pharmakon* of memory that has been discovered, but a *pharmakon* of reminding, with all its consequences, of the appearance of knowledge, of fraudulent wisdom, and so on. It is this ambiguity which provides the starting point for Derrida's articles.

He notes some uses of the word *pharmakon* early in the dialogue – Socrates says to Phaedrus, for example, "you've found a drug to make me go out" (230D). Is this whetting our appetite for the crucial play on words later in the dialogue, Derrida asks? But true to the deconstructionist method of interpretation, he does not talk of the real meaning of the text, or seek it in terms of Plato's intention as an author. We never find Derrida saying: "what Plato really means is ...", and concluding that this is *the* meaning. The author disappears under this analysis, since all language is in fact written text for Derrida: there is no primary internal logos dictating the collocation of words like a puppeteer dancing his marionettes. Text simply emerges, and Derrida puts the question of these linguistic coincidences like this: Is it by chance or by harmony that these associations occur? (p.81). In a world where all language is text, there are cases of chance groupings of words, and cases of harmonies emerging (presumably by chance also). Language, or text, simply has that character, as it emerges.

Derrida places a great deal of emphasis on the fatherhood of writing. On the one hand the father (the Pharaoh) rejects it (p.86), and writing is therefore always under suspicion. Moreover Socrates says that the logos encased in writing always needs its father to help it, since it cannot reply or defend itself. Derrida thus perceives a sexist model operating within the *logos*/writing dichotomy. Writing is the child of a father, an offspring, an inferior, controlled by and given adequacy by, its father. It is indeed striking that Socrates

uses the model, and it may be that the patriarchal model might lie behind the whole development of logos theory in Greek philosophy, wherever there is a dichotomy between a higher mental, inner, form of logos, and a lower externalised form of it.

The word *pharmakon*, for Derrida, occurs in a chain of meanings, which are more or less systematic. Not that they derive this system from the mind of Plato, but they spring from language and culture itself. Derrida accepts the translation of *pharmakon* by "remedy". But, he says, Theuth turns the word on its "strange and invisible pivot, and presents it under one, the most reassuring one, of its poles". Let us note in passing the peculiarity that Derrida allows Theuth, a character in the dialogue, to have an authorial role in determining the use of words, yet he will not ever say that Plato is turning words on their pivots, or such like. Despite himself, Derrida derives meaning from the intention of a subject. There is a real contradiction here: it is impossible, in speaking of a text with explicit resonance such as this, to escape talking as if choice had occurred, as if a design were being put into effect. Derrida refuses this role to the author, but under the compulsion to admit the subject's choice of words, has to turn to the expedient of having a character in the dialogue make the choice.

The term *pharmakon* for Derrida means a remedy, a therapeutic drug. But, he says (p.110), the reply of the Pharaoh deploys its other meaning. The *pharmakon* aggravates the problem, instead of remedying it. This is a not uncommon point, and Derrida continues with a more or less classical philological analysis. "Remedy", he says, is a translation which obliterates the dynamic virtuosity of the word *pharmakon* in Greek.

Plato uses it (thus Derrida) like the medical writers of Cos, in that the *pharmakon* is seen as something which runs counter to natural life. Even a natural illness should be allowed to develop along its own lines, and to follow its own norms. The Timaeus says that one should not aggravate an illness by the use of remedies (89A–D). Derrida comments that the poisonous character of the remedy, the *pharmakon*, emerges just at the moment at which one seemed able to translate the word in its positive, health-giving sense. The *pharmakon* is something outside the system, a supplement, without which the system is capable of evolving normally towards its proper ends. In other words, *pharmakon* is almost always pejorative. Its treatment is always a rough interference in a natural cycle, a sort of blow to the system, which runs the risk of worsening it.

Thus in Derrida's reading of Plato, the *pharmakon* of writing is always something from outside, an interference in the natural functioning of the inner logos. "... If the *pharmakon* is disgraceful, it's because ... it's not from around here. If comes from yonder, it is external or foreign ..." (p.119). The *pharmakon* assumes the status of a magical power, surrounded by precautions, hopes, fears and superstitions.

Thus Derrida very nearly overthrows the usual way of looking at the *pharmakon* of writing, in that he very nearly unifies its meaning into a single line whereby the *pharmakon* is always a damaging act of violence. (Though there are points at which he talks of the ambiguity, and even the *coincidentia oppositorum* inherent in the two meanings). But by and large he stresses the damaging function of writing, and makes this the Platonic view. This corresponds to a private purpose of Derrida's, namely to attack Plato as the key influence in depreciating writing, and in attributing the prime significance to the inner logos. For Derrida, all is text, and the paternal logos within is a fiction. He overstates the Platonic hostility to writing in order to make Plato the first great exponent of phonocentricity, or logocentricity.

Let us look more closely at the text of the Phaedrus, and this famous ambiguity in the word *pharmakon*. In fact it is true that the King rebukes the inventor of writing, and takes up his pharmaceutical image in another way. But he does not dispute the good effect of writing. He merely raises the question of how this effect will be applied. And it will not be applied to memory (*mneme*), as its inventor had suggested. It will merely help us to recall things in a more or less external way. The King raises no doubt about the ability of writing to remind us of things, but he does claim that this will actually cause a decay in real wisdom and in the real faculty of memory. The memory will atrophy from lack of use (275A). And we know the importance of memory in the Socratic/Platonic view of knowledge.

So the *pharmakon* may have a positive advantage for one skill, though over the years it will cause others to lose their effectiveness. The *pharmakon* of writing is like a quick fix, which gives a feeling of instant joy; it causes a lack of activity, which in the long run is harmful.

The extent to which the *pharmakon* image is pejorative is extremely limited. The *pharmakon* does a good job in its limited way. But in the end Derrida's emphasis on the foreignness of writing is a helpful one for understanding the Phaedrus. The cure is from outside the system. If relied on, it produces distortions, and eventual collapse of the intellectual faculties. It is not a natural part of the intellectual cycle.

Derrida's view about the primacy of the mental/spoken word is an accurate reflection of Plato. It is true that this polarisation is operating in Plato. Derrida touches on the patriarchal imagery involved: this is not developed by him, but is capable of development. Greek thinkers considered that life was created by the male, through his semen. Life was complete in the male semen, and given to the woman, who merely provided the place for this semen/life to develop.

It seems likely that these biological ideas constituted a model for intellectual experience: reason was formed whole and entire, secretly and abstractly in the mind, to find a later fleshly development in sound, and eventually a heavier, more material incarnation, in writing. This is how the Greeks

thought of it: the understanding of how life was generated was a very dominant cosmological and epistemological model.

This intuition is confirmed in many ways. One may take two examples. Firstly the Stoic idea of the *logos spermatikos*: the "sperm-reason" lies at the heart of reality and fertilises all existence. Like semen, logos gives its essence to everything, indeed creates everything. We may also refer to the Gnostic Marcus, who said that the beginning of everything was the beginning, i.e. the word *arche*. Each letter generated another word alpha, rho and so on, and levels of voicing were ontological levels. The purest word was the unuttered, vowels or voiced sounds are at a level lower, and consonants or unvoiced sounds, are at an even more material level. This example, no doubt unknown to Derrida, is a strong argument in favour of his case about phonocentricity.

Derrida's writing about the Phaedrus looks like free association: he appears to be saying anything that comes into his head. In this he is guided by his principle of "différance". In part a reinterpretation of Hegel's concept of *Differenz*, Derrida's view adds an element. To begin with, he adds an "a" to the French word difference – "différance". This gives an active meaning: it refers now to the act of creating difference. But "différance" in French means not only differing, it also contains the sense of referring – so "différance" is the creation of references. That is how speech operates: it creates strings of references. And this is how Derrida writes: it looks uncontrolled, but is in fact the exploration of chains of association. "Seme" conjures up the word "semen", for example (Positions, p.62).

Thus the authorial role is diminished – language is not created ex nihilo by the author, but flows into the author. We do not ask what Plato means, but what Greek means.

One difficulty in Derrida's writing here is that he seems to run together "speech" and "reason". "Phonocentricity" and "logocentricity" seem to merge, as the alternative to the written word, and there is a further set of distinctions to be made. It is surely impossible to identify speech with unvocalised reason.

Deconstruction takes us away from the tyranny of the present text (see Derrida, Positions p.62). To this extent it provides a hermeneutic which interrogates and develops the text. The text is regarded as a temporary closure of language, and so it must be reopened by the principle of "différance". The natural relationship of words will be reassumed through this process. Every text can be developed into a proliferation of further texts. This makes the work of the critic and the interpreter crucial: the creative task now falls upon the critic, who must open up the text, exploring the textuality of experience. Text is no longer permitted to be a "closure" of thought, limiting it to a visible confinement.

Much of this understanding of reading can be found in antiquity. Clearly, the allegorical school of interpreters, from Philo to the Alexandrian Chris-

tians, intend to open up the text by their exploration of the "undersenses" of the text. However this exegesis is carried out according to recognized principles: the liberating of the text is a regulated procedure. Further, this form of reading is applied only to texts of sacred significance, thought to be capable of yielding an understanding of the transcendent. We have noted a similar tendency with Augustine, in the *De Doctrina Christiana*, to advocate a mode of reading the scriptures which enlarges the text, rather than narrowing it down. Yet with Christian antiquity there is always a strong sense of authorial purpose: the science of exegesis is deployed with a view to discovering *what is intended*. Modern deconstructionist criticism shares in the general post-Marxian tendency to make the subject and his purposes disappear.

There is no real comparison to be drawn between the classical *via negativa*, and the contemporary deconstructionist school. The use of the negative in a systematic way is not a part of deconstructionist criticism: the latter relies more on the use of the complete semantic field surrounding a text, than on the negation of a text. Further the *via negativa* concerns itself with ontological questions: the issue of what the essence *is*, preoccupies all genuine users of the *via negativa*.

iii. *Theology and the via negativa*

It should be observed firstly that there is almost no formal *via negativa* in the Christian thought of antiquity. Dionysius is of course a clear exception, if he was a Christian writer. Clement of Alexandria at least formulates the technique, though he does not display it at work, in comparison with Plotinus, who uses it constantly, though he says little in a formal way about the procedure. The Cappadocians are only partly aware of what the *via negativa* is, quite apart from using it. The explanation appears to be that the *via negativa* is a technique conceived for Greek intellectual problems, and was only useful to Christianity insofar as it became Hellenized.

In fact the *via negativa* was a technique of abstraction proper to Greek Neoplatonism. It was less highly developed in Plotinus, but reached its peak with Proclus, who enriched it with a thorough examination of the logic of negation, which was partly contributed by his predecessors and their study of Aristotle. The *via negativa* is rejected, avoided or ignored by almost every major Christian philosopher in antiquity, at least so far as the great church is concerned. One locust does not make a summer, and mere statements about the mysteriousness of God do not constitute the *via negativa*.

The absence of the *via negativa* in ancient Christian thought may be explained by the fact that the nature of God is scarcely an issue in Christianity. It is in the character of Greek thought, from its Presocratic origins, that ontological questions predominate; the traditional Greek question is: "What is X?" If one reads the teaching of Jesus as reported in the Gospels, one notes

an absolute lack of interest in the question "What is God?" The nature of God is not part of the agenda, and the *via negativa* is really a technique for answering this question. Jesus' teaching is about moral attitudes, but also about transcendent issues: yet he never asks ontological questions. He is scarcely interested in God. Even the teaching about the kingdom of God is more about the subjects within it than the King himself: Jesus' teaching always returns to the spiritual posture of the subject. God is assumed, but never analysed: "If you do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive you trespasses" (Mk. 11.26). The point here is really about human behaviour. A possible exception to this is the insistence that God is one God (Mk. 12.29 etc.), and no doubt this is aimed at counter-claims on the subject, but it is nevertheless true that the attitude of the human being quickly returns to become the central concern ("you shall love the Lord your God"). The apocalyptic visions show man poised in time, looking to the future, and at best describe God by his predicted actions alone. Jesus' teaching is highly anthropocentric.

The *via negativa* can scarcely be deployed in relation to the teaching of Jesus, since the latter is almost always directed towards the posture of the subject. It is with the progressive Hellenization of Christianity that questions about the essence of reality come to the fore, and the nature of God becomes an issue. Nothing could be more dissimilar than the Jewish concern with human behaviour and the human spiritual outlook manifested in the teaching of Jesus, and the Greek concern with the essence, definition, and knowing of God in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius.

The *via negativa* is a method inspired by the attempts of the mathematicians to grasp abstract notions, and devoted to the task of declaring God's nature through negations. It presupposes an already existing kataphatic tradition about the issue of God's nature. To the extent that it penetrates Christianity, it is a sign of the Hellenization of the movement through the development of interest in ontological questions. Any modern use of it will have to accept the ontological concern as a fundamental one in theology, or effect a metamorphosis in the conceptualization of the issue.

One example of such a restructuring of the negative approach may be found in an American book published in 1982. Max Myers (in Altizer ed., *Deconstruction and Theology...*, 142) speaks of theology "reconstructing" thought, and concludes with the claim that religious thinking "is destructive of every idol, every work, or symbol which claims to be the center of a structure of meaning, for the sake of this reconstruction" (loc. cit.). The author therefore sees religious thinking as having the negative force of ancient iconoclasm, in that fixations on temporary structures of meaning are destroyed in order that the reconstructive task may continue. The death of Christ is seen (loc. cit.) as an event of negative significance exactly in this manner, since it constitutes an emptying of Christ's message, and an opening up "to

the hiddenness of God behind its appearance". Myers' object is to visualize a theological activity which allows for continual reconstruction in the face of process, the Heraclitean flux of which time consists. In this way he attributes more of a kataphatic, or positive, value to theology than would his ancient counterpart. Myers' series of negations takes place in order to provide for a new phase of positive theology. He is clearly more concerned about theology's relationship to the changing face of social reality, than with the act of negation itself.

A second example of a modern re-presentation of the *via negativa* is provided by a German work, *Negative Theologie*, by Josef Hochstaffl. This author actively seeks to mediate between antiquity and the modern day, with a view which offers a constant advocacy of the need to rethink the method if it is to be used in the modern day. He is concerned with history, and the social order. Using an eschatological perspective (236-7) Hochstaffl sees the modern concern as the unfolding of humanity: "History must be kept open to enable the development of a greater humanity" (loc. cit.).

The first part of Hochstaffl's book, to which we have referred earlier, is an historical analysis of the idea and use of negative theology in late antiquity. However in this concluding note, cited above, he clearly indicates that the question for today must not be couched in terms of transcendence. He rightly observes that negative theology in antiquity is to do with the transcendent, and emerges as a consequence of "relative transcendence". Hochstaffl believes however that for a modern restatement of the *via negativa*, a formulation in terms of the "other" will inevitably be a failure. A translation into historical actuality is required. Hochstaffl recommends a negative dialectic conceived in the context of the fulfilment of history. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ constitute the negative moment of historical failure, followed by the positive affirmation of hope for the future. Humanity will be fulfilled by the establishment of the Lordship of the resurrected Christ. It is in the concrete matter of history and society that this fulfilment is to be found.

It is striking to note that in both modern versions of the *via negativa*, it is the death of Christ which is taken as an event of negative character, an event which under this analysis plays the negative/positive role of the alpha privative in the original procedure. The negative method is thus metamorphosed into a reading of history, and is held to provide a hermeneutic for events, in the unfolding social process. Of the two writers Hochstaffl emphasizes the more strongly the need to formulate the *via negativa* in historical and social terms. Both, however, stress the destruction of idols and their replacement, Hochstaffl in particular by arguing that the interest for the modern world of the *via negativa* is its capacity to *emancipate*. Its function is not to legitimize, but to offer an emancipatory/critical procedure, capable of freeing one from the traditional order.

This liberating function of the negative way as perceived by Hochstaffl

certainly accords with the ancient function of the method. It had a conceptually liberating effect, allowing thought to progress towards unity, away from divisively specific theological concepts. Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed (in the *Via Negativa...*, ed. Mortley/Dockrill) to the way in which such emancipation from theological positions could produce emancipation from ecclesiastical and social divisions, in the time of Nicholas of Cusa.

The value of such re-presentations of the *via negativa* largely depends on the extent to which a post-Hegelian social/material philosophy of human progress is accepted. Many will not wish to write off the ontological and transcendent vision of the Platonist tradition. Modern physics may yet cause us to revive the Platonist ontological vision – not in its exact form of course, since the ontological architecture of a Proclus is far too severely physical for the modern imagination. However the notion of "being" is alive and well in many branches of intellectual life. It may also be observed that a comparison with negating procedures in Buddhist philosophy, itself concerned with the apprehension of "real" reality, makes the *via negativa* appear to be among those intellectual options which are alive today.

The contribution of the *via negativa* is to assert the hiddenness of the divine, both in spite of and because of the revelation of the divine in the face of Christ. The face is a mask for the persona behind it: in revealing it conceals. The *via negativa* establishes the contradiction of revelation, but rather than bearing destruction within itself, it has an enhancing and expanding capacity. Like the breaking of icons, it destroys the narrow focus, and puts an end to theological pharisaism.