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The impact of ‘exile’ on thought: Plotinus, Derrida and Gnosticism

STEFAN ROSSBACH

ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of ‘exile’ – as an individual or collective experience – on how human experience is theorized. The relationship between ‘exile’ and thought is initially approached historically by looking at the period that Eric Dodds famously called the ‘age of anxiety’ in late antiquity, i.e. the period between the emperors Aurelius and Constantine. A particular interest is in the dynamics of ‘empire’ and the concomitant religious ferment as a context in which ‘exile’, both experientially and symbolically, appears to assume an overbearing significance. Plotinus’ narrative of emanation and epistrophe as well as a group of narratives often classified as ‘Gnosticism’ are juxtaposed as two radical examples of a wider spiritual trend at the time according to which ‘exile’ could be considered constitutive of human experience. By way of an historical analogy, the insights gained from this study of late antiquity are then used to guide an analysis of the current, ‘restless’ epoch, in which experiences of displacement and exile on a mass scale undermine traditional notions of belonging, thus reviving the gnostic vision of cosmic reality as an alien, exilic environment. The article concludes with a discussion of Jacques Derrida’s work as an example of contemporary gnosticism, in which a ‘metaphysics of exile’ is presented in the guise of an ‘exile from metaphysics’.

Key words alienation, Jacques Derrida, empire, exile, Gnosticism, negative theology

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars agree that more than ever before in human history 'migration, in its endless motion, surrounds and pervades almost all aspects of contemporary society'. In the rapidly growing volume of literature on the subject it has become commonplace to point out that globalization, displacement and exile are concomitant phenomena. Although exile, as an experience and motif of thought, has accompanied recorded human history from its beginnings, the scale and complexity of 'movement' today, it is argued, have never been witnessed before, turning the current age into a 'restless' epoch in which notions of 'belonging' are increasingly undermined. (Papastergiadis, 1999: 1–2; Castles and Davidson, 2000; Friedman and Randeria, 2004).

A key author on the subject, Edward Said, famously described exile as the 'unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted' (Said, 1984: 49). The 'fact of migration', Said explained, was 'extraordinarily impressive' to him: 'that movement from the precision and concreteness of one form of life transmuted or imported into the other . . . and then of course the whole problematic of exile and immigration enters into it, the people who simply don't belong in any culture; that is the great modern or, if you like, postmodern fact, the standing outside of cultures' (Said in Howe, 2003). The 'standing outside of cultures' as a mass phenomenon, the loss of one's bearing in the world, turns the current age into an 'age of exile'. The appropriate response of intellectuals, he added, was to adopt the identity of the 'traveler', whose creative influence did not depend on power but on motion, on being in between, and who was thus able to understand 'a multiplicity of disguises, masks, and rhetorics. Travellers must suspend the claim of customary routine in order to live in new rhythms and rituals . . . the traveler crosses over, traverses territory, and abandons fixed positions all the time' (Said in Howe, 2003).

Said's writings on the subject cover the entire spectrum of the exilic condition: from the 'essential sadness' and suffering to the creative and critical potential that 'displacement', as an intellectual notion, entails. Said also draws attention to the fact that the experience of displacement and 'exile', taken both literally and figuratively, is at the heart of the problem of identity because it is this experience that turns identity into a problem. Said's observations and personal reflections are echoed in current academic discourses on borders, border crossings, hybrid identities, fluid identities, diasporas, flexible citizenships, migration and exile. Over the last 25 years, these notions have proliferated to the extent that today the theme of 'exile' – often indirectly and implicitly, especially in relation to discourses on 'identity' – permeates almost the whole of the human sciences.

This article investigates the impact of 'exile' – as an individual or collective experience – on thought, i.e. on the manner in which human beings

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conceptualize their own being, their very own 'human condition'. I am particularly interested in accounts of human existence that incorporate narratives of exile, such as, for example, in Genesis 3 in the Old Testament. There are many competing religious and philosophical symbolisms in which the significance of 'exile' is dramatized to the point where 'exile' is no longer the tragic or liberating consequence of human actions but rather a constitutive condition that defines human existence as such. In the following, I will refer to such symbolisms as manifestations of a 'metaphysics of exile', in which exile is both a permanent and extraneous feature of human existence in that it pre-configures and constitutes its reality. I will argue that such symbolisms cannot be dismissed as esoteric and irrelevant because their profound and varied impact can be felt across today's human sciences.

By addressing 'exile' at this level of abstraction, I do not wish to de-politicize the issues involved; on the contrary, this article emphasizes the political nature and context of abstract, self-reflective thought. My starting point is the assumption that the condition of exile can play a prominent role in human self-understanding only to the extent that it resonates with the concrete experiences of concrete people. Therefore, in order to be able to understand, for example, the metaphysics of exile, attention must be paid to the experiential context in which it arose and to how the relevant experiences were articulated and woven into an account of human existence. This process of articulation, self-reflection and theoretization in abstract thought usually requires time, thus raising considerable methodological problems for analysing the impact of the contemporary 'age of exile' on thought. I therefore propose to approach the question via a detour: I will initially investigate the relationship between exile and thought *historically* by looking at narratives of exile from the period that Eric Dodds famously called the 'age of anxiety' in late antiquity – the years between the emperors Aurelius and Constantine, 'when the material decline was steepest and the ferment of new religious feelings most intense' (Dodds, 1965: 3). Investigating a well-documented period such as late antiquity allows me to consider the entire range of issues pertinent to my interests, from the experiential context to its reflection in thought. The insights gained from this investigation will guide and structure the analysis of the present in that they will give me an inkling of what it is that I should be looking for. The analysis as a whole, therefore, assumes the form of an historical analogy that places a particular configuration of experience and thought from late antiquity next to key features of the present epoch.¹

Accordingly, my article is divided into three parts. The first part outlines the experiential context that turned late antiquity into another 'age of exile'; the second part summarizes and juxtaposes two narratives of exile from this period: Plotinus' tale of emanation, *epistrophe* and *ekstasis*, and a 'sheaf' of narratives known as 'Gnosticism', which includes an inverse reading of Genesis that celebrates Adam and Eve's disobedience as humanity's first revolution against its oppressive creator. The final part offers an analysis of

the present in analogy with the structures identified in this article's first two sections. I will argue that narratives of exile are central to poststructuralist and postmodern thought, and that these narratives are in many ways analogous to Plotinus' negative theology and to 'Gnosticism'. I will briefly discuss Jacques Derrida's work as an example of contemporary 'gnosticism', which presents a metaphysics of exile in the disguise of an exile from metaphysics.

PART 1: ECUMENIC EMPIRES AND THE RELIGIOUS FERMENT OF 'GLOBALIZATION'

What turns a historical epoch into an 'age of exile'? For the limited purposes of this article, I suggest approaching this question within the confines of political science. What are the *political* structures that turn exile, migration and diaspora into mass phenomena? Following Eric Voegelin, I propose that an 'age of exile' is commonly caused and shaped by the rise, the expansion, the decline as well as the collapse of empires. This is particularly true whenever one or more of the empires involved in the struggle present themselves as 'ecumenic empires' (Voegelin, 1974: 121–33).

'Ecumenic empires' are empires that are, in a sense which I will elucidate in the following, 'limitless'. The first theorist of the 'ecumene' was Polybius, who was himself a victim of the Roman conquests, one of the many who were 'exiled' very much against their will. He was Greek, the son of Lycortas, the statesman of the Achaean League, who had fought and lost against the empire at the Battle of Pydna in 168BCE. Polybius was one of the 'thousand' Achaeans who were deported to Rome as hostages (Allen, 2006: 201–23; Eckstein, 1995: 1–16; Walbank, 1972: 1–31). There he was allowed to stay in the house of Aemilius Paullus, who had led the Romans to success at Pydna, as the tutor of his sons. Only in 151BCE, 17 years later, was he allowed to return home. Two years later, he found himself in Roman diplomatic service, accompanying his former pupil, Scipio Aemilianus, on the campaign against Carthage.

Polybius managed to balance his hatred of the Roman conquerors with the admiration he felt as a historian for their successes. In particular he understood the Roman conquests as events of extraordinary significance, acknowledging that the Romans, within only half a century, had subjected 'almost the whole inhabited world [*oikoumene*]' to their sole rule. This represented a turning point in history because, previously, the events of the *oikoumene* had been conducted in separate spheres, 'without unity of purpose, achievement, or locality' (Voegelin, 1974: 123). The Roman conquests, in contrast, gave history an 'organic' character (*somatoeides*) so that the events in Italy and Libya had now become interconnected with those in Hellas and Asia, all leading to one end (*telos*): Roman supremacy (Walbank, 1972: 67–8). Polybius

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thus attributed to these developments a sense of finality, anticipating Virgil's celebration of Rome as the *imperium sine fine*, the empire without end, by about a century. However, in contrast to Virgil and unlike many of his contemporaries, Polybius limited his analysis to the realm of pragmatic politics and history and thus was unable to accept, or even to contemplate, that Rome was the bearer of the meaning of history, the ultimate and final representative of human civilization. He never capitulated intellectually to Roman power (Eckstein, 1995: 234). As a victim of the upheavals he studied, Polybius was silenced to the extent that he could acknowledge the facts of power without being able to analyse them in terms of their meaning (Walbank, 1972: 181–83).

Originally, the term 'ecumene' simply meant the 'inhabited (and civilized) world', but as one of the most important witnesses of the Roman conquests, Polybius included all the peoples in the ecumene who were drawn into the process of imperial expansion. As a result, the ecumene was not a self-organizing society at all but a power 'field'; it was not a subject of order but an 'object of conquest and organization'. The ecumene can be described as a 'graveyard of societies' in that the structures of the 'old' societies – including those of the conquerors! – were increasingly undermined within the new ecumenic context. Eric Voegelin coined the term 'Ecumenic Age' in order to characterize these processes:

The peculiar structure of this field forces us to speak of an Ecumenic Age, meaning thereby the period in which a manifold of concrete societies, which formerly existed in autonomously ordered form, were drawn into one political power field through pragmatic expansions from the various centres. (Voegelin, 1974: 133–4)

According to Voegelin, the Ecumenic Age began with the Persian expansion and ended with the decline of Roman power, 'when the ecumene [began] to dissociate centrifugally into the Byzantine, Islamic, and Western civilizations' (1974: 134).

The ancient, ecumenic empires were 'world empires', power organizations informed by the 'pathos of representative humanity'. The empires formed a 'cosmion' in the sense that their respective societies and social orders were understood to form a cosmic analogue and thus to represent humanity's place within the comprehensive cosmic order. The establishment of an ecumenic empire was thus 'an essay in world creation, reaching through all levels of the hierarchy of being'. Such 'world empires' are more than territory and people; they are driven by a 'desire to express in words a substantive order pervading all levels of being as well as being as a whole' (Voegelin, 1962: 172) – and it is in this sense that they can be described as 'limitless'.

The ambitions of the empires turned the Ecumenic Age into an age of paradox as much as of exile. On the one hand, the imperial conquests and the

concomitant destruction of the traditional community orders and structures pushed the question of the meaning of human existence beyond the tribal and ethnic level enabling qualitative – rather than mere quantitative – leaps in social organization which affected the understanding of human nature (Voegelin, 1974: 95). In particular, from the Ecumenic Age there arose the idea of a new type of ecumenic – ‘global’, ‘universal’ – society, an idea that became a constant feature of western civilization. On the other hand, the military and political conquest did not in itself make the imperial order existentially authoritative; on the contrary, the immediate result of conquest is violence and suffering. The older truths lose their divine authority to the extent that the societies ‘whose reality of order they express lose their political independence’ or even cease to exist, while the new ‘imperial order has, at least initially, no more than the authority of power’ (Voegelin, 1974: 22). It is from within this paradox – this tension – that there can emerge a ‘critical knowledge of order’ on the basis of which the victims of pragmatic destruction can articulate a new truth of existence. Voegelin refers to Confucius and Laotse in China, Buddha in India, the prophets in Israel and the philosophers in Hellas in order to demonstrate that the rise of empires was indeed accompanied by ‘spiritual outbursts’ reflecting the consciousness of having achieved a new understanding of the human condition.

In light of these historical observations it is perhaps not surprising that the prototype of a ‘metaphysics of exile’ was developed in the later stages of the Ecumenic Age, at a time when Rome for the first time had to confront the very real possibility of decline and indeed disintegration. Of course, as Jakob Burckhardt (1949: 216) observed, ‘complaints of evil times are to be found in all centuries which have left a literature behind them’. But, he added, ‘in the Roman Empire the decline is acknowledged in a manner which leaves no room for doubt’. According to Burckhardt, the first ‘genuine crisis’ in Roman history coincided with the ‘migration of the peoples’, a series of events directly related to my topic. But it was especially in the 3rd century that the coincidence of ‘barbarian’ invasions, civil wars, usurpation, increasing economic difficulties and natural catastrophes led contemporary observers to conclude that they were living in an age of serious transformations questioning the very future of the empire. A ‘consciousness of crisis’ was clearly present among the writers of the time (Alföldy, 1974).

In some ways, of course, the empire – *qua* empire – was always in danger of becoming a victim of its own success in that it made social changes possible that threatened to slowly undermine its social order. To many, the peace of the empire meant wider horizons and unprecedented opportunities for travel; it meant that local differences were slowly eroded through trade and emigration; it meant new opportunities for new wealth and hence new criteria of status. As Peter Brown (1971: 60) observed, the Roman Empire ‘dissolved in the lower classes that sense of tradition and local loyalties on

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which its upper class depended'. Large parts of the population felt uprooted and cast adrift from their old life. 'The successful businessman, the freedman administrator, the woman whose status and education had slowly improved, found themselves no longer citizens of their accustomed town, but "citizens of the world"', the Stoic *cosmopolites*, and yet to this group of people, 'displaced' in a broader sense of the word, the world seemed a less intimate, more threatening, lonely and impersonal place (Brown, 1971: 62).

Already Epictetus in his *Discourses* (book 3, chapter 13) had noted the dreadful loneliness one could experience even, or especially, in the centre of the empire, in Rome, 'though such a crowd meet us, though so many live in the same place . . .'. The hallmark of loneliness, according to Epictetus, was not isolation but helplessness, 'for the man who is solitary, as it is conceived, is considered to be a helpless person and exposed to those who wish to harm him'. What removed us from solitude was not the presence of others – such as, for example, 'when we fall among robbers' when we travel – but 'the sight of one who is faithful and modest and helpful to us'. Epictetus, who was a slave in his early life and later freed by his master, implied that, under the conditions of empire, more and more people find themselves in situations where they are 'strangers' who are lonely not because they are alone but because they do not know whom to trust in the crowds in which they find themselves.

The strangers in the imperial power field must have formed a receptive audience for a number of new religious and philosophical movements that spread through the empire. As explained in the Introduction to this article, these movements are of interest to me to the extent that they correlate human existence and 'exile'. The two examples that I will consider in the following – Plotinus' philosophy and the 'Gnostic' systems – were important intellectually but not necessarily in terms of the numbers of disciples that they attracted at the time. And yet they can be considered 'radical' representatives of a much wider spiritual trend in which human self-understanding appeared to revolve around notions of 'exile'. In addition to the developments discussed below, the period witnessed the beginning and immediate, widespread success of various types of asceticism, with St Antony the Hermit and St Pachomius the Abbot as the two most important representatives and founders. The monks and hermits understood their radical practices as a form of exile from the self and society, as a practice of self-displacement. Peter Brown argued that the success of the movement was due to the fact they represented 'a grouping of self-styled "displaced persons", who claimed to have started life afresh' (Brown, 1971: 96–101). In its milder versions, the spirituality of self-displacement was widespread even outside the monasteries. Mathetes' Letter to Diognetus, probably written in the 2nd or 3rd century, shows that indeed most early Christians lived like 'aliens' in their political and social surroundings:

They live in their own countries, but as aliens; they share all duties like citizens and suffer all disabilities like foreigners; every foreign land is their country and every country is foreign to them. (Mathetes: section 5)

Indeed, if Christ's kingdom was 'not of this world' (John 18:36), the faithful were expected to sojourn on earth as aliens; they were 'resident strangers' – the word Augustine uses to describe this attitude is '*peregrinus*', the root of the word 'pilgrim'.

PART 2: NARRATIVES OF EXILE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Exile from the absolute, and exile from exile: Plotinus on emanation and return

In the 'age of anxiety', Eric Dodds singled out Plotinus as 'the last constructive exponent' of the 'great tradition of Greek rationalism' in 'an increasingly anti-rational age'; as 'the one man who still knew how to think clearly in an age which was beginning to forget what thinking meant' (Dodds, 1928: 142). What makes Plotinus stand out is the way in which his philosophy emphasizes the unity and 'one-ness' of the cosmos. The Roman world was about to implode due to the many tensions that came to the fore in the 3rd century. Plotinus' philosophy was an attempt to hold this world together, to balance the tensions, to 'maintain both poles of a taut line, while the more radical thinkers and the more revolutionary movements round them had somehow allowed the line to snap' (Brown, 1971: 73).

Plotinus aimed to articulate the unity underlying the extreme diversity and multiplicity that had come to characterize the Roman world. In order to achieve this purpose, Plotinus attempted to show how every level and every aspect of the visible world had its source in a divine centre, the One. This vision of unity, amid the visible reality of a fragmented and disordered world, was a mystical vision in which the soul was able to 'touch' the ultimate ground of reality. In upholding the very meaning of the world as the outflow from a divine centre, Plotinus' role in the history of philosophy is not unlike Hegel's. It is not at all surprising that Hegel considered Neoplatonism as a 'recovery of the spirit of man, indeed, of the spirit of the world' (quoted in Gatti, 1999: 23).

To assume that reality forms a unity implies that its various diverse aspects must share a common principle or element. However, the more diverse and fragmented the experience of reality, the more difficult it becomes to find such a common denominator among all existents. The diversity of experience almost dictates that the principle of unity must operate in a very subtle way.

On the one hand, for the One to be the universal cause of all things, it must have immanence and omnipresence. On the other hand, the One cannot be one of the existents; rather, its power produces an indefinite potentiality, that is, an entity – a generative radiance, an 'active making possible' – that can 'become all things' (Bussanich, 1999: 51). It cannot be accessible to sense experience because what is 'sensed' of reality, especially in an 'age of anxiety', is primarily change and diversity or, in other words, the 'flux' of reality. And surely, what the senses perceive does not have the capacity to 'become all things'. In fact, for Plotinus, a comprehensive vision of the world could be maintained only by assuming the absolute transcendence of the principle of its unity. Thus, for Plotinus, being everywhere and being nowhere are mutually entailing. The One, as the ground or source of being, is ineffable; it is radically different from sensible and intelligible beings – in fact, it cannot even be understood as a member of the genus 'being'. The One is the cause of being, yet it is completely dissimilar to its effects.

Due its absolute transcendence, the One escapes language. Even the designations used by Plotinus such as 'One' and 'Good', are no more than deficient signs of the One's reality. Language cannot specify what the One is; still, it is possible to say what the One is not. Many of the qualities Plotinus attributes to the One are hence 'negative': self-sufficiency, disinterestedness, impassivity, elusiveness, transcendence, unity, uniqueness, simplicity. In this list, 'unity' specifies, negatively, that the One is nothing other than itself. And where Plotinus occasionally appears to describe the One in 'positive' terms, e.g. by identifying activity, existence and being in the One, he involves the qualifier 'as if' (*hoion*) (Bussanich, 1999: 48). Plotinus thereby becomes one of the key representatives of 'negative theology' – of 'apophatic thought' – that is, of a theology that expresses what a divine nature is not rather than what it is (Hancock, 1992).

Participation in the One is what unites the multiplicity of the existents of the cosmos in one single, all-pervasive reality. And precisely because it forms the centre of reality, the transcendence of the One must be absolute; it is beyond being and essence – it is 'being's begetter' (*Enneads* V, 2.1; Mackenna, 1969: 380; Gregory, 1999: 36).² From these ideas results the tension between the pure, undivided self-presence of the One and between the necessity, acknowledged by Plotinus, to somehow explain the multiplicity among existents. In other words, the One, though supremely self-sufficient, disinterested and impassive, must still somehow be involved in the generation of the cosmos. This tension gives Plotinus' philosophy its depth, subtlety and complexity (Armstrong, 1979).

The One has no need of acting in a creative manner, but it effortlessly 'overflows' and its excess begets an other than itself (*Enneads* V, 2.1; Mackenna, 1969: 380; Gregory, 1999: 36). The generative activity of the One is usually presented as a case of 'emanation', as a flowing, and indeed Plotinus

frequently uses natural metaphors such as the flowing of water, the emanation of heat, and the radiation of light from a luminous source in order to describe the One's causal power. However, for the reasons explained above, these metaphors are to be qualified by the 'as if' clause. In particular, the 'physical' metaphors appear to imply that the One's giving cannot have occurred as, for example, fire cannot cause heat. The One, in contrast, is not compelled to generate reality.

Plotinus analyses the One's causal power in terms of a dialectical process of 'procession' (*proodos*) and 'reversion' (*epistrophe*). Procession is a passage from non-existence to existence, from potentiality to actuality, resulting in the existence of 'lower realities', hypostases, who then 'turn around' and contemplate their generating principle. It is this last step, *epistrophe*, that makes the hypostases an intelligible entity; the 'reversion' rather than the flowing is the determining process of individuation. The various realities that emerge in the unfolding emanation eventually reach into the realm of being, where they not only contemplate but also actualize ideas in the 'darkness' of matter. Matter, the eternally receptive substratum, is the proper medium of differentiation among existents. Matter is completely passive and thus capable of 'receiving' all ideas; it functions as the 'space of the possible' and reflects the darkness of indeterminacy. Therefore, the drama of concrete, material existence resembles a diaspora, where being itself undergoes a process of fragmentation that leads from the One – i.e. from 'beyond-being' – to the material cosmos.

Yet how can embodied human beings, 'exiled' from the Absolute and dispersed in the darkness of matter, find their true selves and 'return' to their true origin? The 'way of return' always begins, of course, in exile, where the soul experiences a 'poverty of being' and longs to possess that which it has 'lost', which is fullness of being. The ensuing spiritual desire is an essential stage in the soul's mystical ascent to its higher part and, further, to the One. As contemplation (*theoria*) is the unifying principle of reality, it is not surprising that contemplation is the key to the soul's journey, but it has to be 'pure contemplation' – contemplation that overcomes the 'constraints' of the multiplicity of matter.

Because each existent contemplates its prior realities, the soul, as it ascends along the various realities that have their source in the One, can participate in their contemplation and is thereby pushed forwards on its journey until it 'suddenly sees – yet sees not how, for the vision fills his eyes with light, a light not the medium of sight but itself the vision' (VI, 7.36; Mackenna, 1969: 590; Gregory, 1999: 122). The soul sees by 'a kind of blurring and obliterating of the intellect that remains within it' (VI, 7.35; Mackenna, 1969: 589; Gregory, 1999: 121). On the last stage of the mystical ascent the soul transcends being and becomes one with the 'completely other'. In union with the One, the soul returns to its origin because the One is 'its beginning and end, its beginning

because it comes from there, and its end, because its good is there. And when it comes to be there it becomes itself and what it was; life in this world of sense being a falling away, an exile, "a shedding of wings" (VI, 9.9; Mackenna, 1969: 622–3; Gregory, 1999: 127).³ The soul experiences this movement, Plotinus explains, as a return to its father and the land of its birth where it is 'nowhere deflected in its being', having attained 'to solitude in untroubled stillness', 'utterly at rest' (VI, 9.7, 9.9, 9.11; Mackenna, 1969: 620–1, 622–3, 624–5; Gregory, 1999: 125, 128, 129). This is the 'end of the journey' (VI, 9.11; Mackenna, 1969: 625; Gregory, 1999: 130).

In union with the One, the soul becomes 'like' the One, characterized by the same properties. Reaching beyond being, in 'another mode of seeing', the soul's mystical insight transcends all duality and difference (VI, 9.11; Mackenna, 1969: 624; Gregory, 1999: 129). In this mystical union, the 'tension' in Plotinus' account of reality is dissolved: transcendence and immanence are the same, and they are experienced as the same in that the soul is incapable of distinguishing itself from the One. The separation of knower and known, characteristic of discursive reasoning, is finally overcome (VI, 9.10; Mackenna, 1969: 623–4; Gregory, 1999: 128–9). Due to its absolute transcendence, the One is never purely and fully 'present', and hence all the soul can 'see', even in this state of mystical elevation, is a 'trace' of its power. Still, the soul gets a 'glimpse of the One's inner life' (Bussanich, 1999: 42), and it can aspire to, and participate in, this dynamics of the One.

As the soul finds itself in union with the One, it finds itself beyond being, completely outside itself. In an important passage, Plotinus uses the term *ekstasis* to describe this process. In classical Greek *ekstasis* and its related terms could be used to describe 'any departure from the normal condition, any abrupt change of mind or mood'. For example, these terms could refer to a state of awe or amazement, a state of hysteria or insanity, a state of possession both divine and diabolic. Philo ascribes *ekstasis* to the Hebrew prophets in the sense that 'the mind in [them was] banished from its house upon the coming of the divine spirit' (quoted from Dodds, 1965: 71–2). According to Dodds, Plotinus was the first to apply the term *ekstasis* to mystical experience. *Ekstasis* is closely related to the term *alloiosis*, which in turn was translated into Latin as *alienatio*, 'alienation' (Rothenstreich, 1989: 3). For Plotinus and the later Neoplatonists, therefore, alienation is a precondition of truth and, in fact, of identity. For the identity of soul and One – transcendence – as experienced by the soul in mystical union is the true identity of the soul as understood in Plotinus' philosophy.

The price that Plotinus paid for holding on to the oneness of reality is the absolute transcendence of its unifying principle, the One. As a result, the material cosmos, though connected with the divine, is the furthest removed from the divine as a lower level of reality. Immersed in the chaos of passive matter, the human soul finds itself in an alien environment, as a stranger

'below', whose true home is elsewhere. Overcoming this 'human' condition requires nothing less than the soul's complete externalization, a being-out-of-herself, *an exile from exile*. Plotinus' philosophy is thus a 'transformative philosophy', aimed at an experiential goal: 'philosophizing about the One has the concrete aim of nullifying itself' (Bussanich, 1999: 42), of uncompromising self-transcendence. Complete alienation is asked for in a mystical union that transcends the duality of subject and object, of knower and known, and indeed all familiar cognitive and affective states. This alienation is the 'peak of the cognitive escalation of man' (Rothenstreich, 1989: 5).

A metaphysics of exile: gnosis in late antiquity

In Plotinus, as noted above, the tension between lower and higher reality is extreme because of the absolute transcendence of the latter in relation to the former. Still, the 'taut line' between the two poles of reality did not snap. On the contrary, the absolute transcendence of the One preserves the unity of the whole of reality. In particular, notwithstanding Plotinus' sometimes ambiguous metaphorical language, matter is not opposed to the divine 'light' 'emanating' from the One but, on the contrary, serves as its receptacle for its self-articulation. Thus, at the periphery of reality Plotinus finds a deprived reality rather than a second, competing reality that could aim to usurp the centre in order to advance its own purposes. Fundamentally, the mundane and the transcendent, lower and higher reality, form the poles of a comprehensive reality that includes both.

The 'taut line' between the poles of reality snaps as soon as the mundane and the transcendent, the beginning and the beyond, the creator and the redeemer become separate, opposing realities. This was the route taken by the representatives of 'Gnosticism'.⁴ For the leaders of the early Christian Church, the 'gnostics' represented a very serious intellectual challenge, and thus it is in confrontation with 'Gnosticism' that the symbols and practices of early Christianity were shaped. The 'gnostics' were the true champions of alienation, the metaphysicians of exile. Mostly composed between the 2nd and 4th centuries ACE, their texts are beautiful and moving expressions of a collective loneliness in an alien world. The divine and the world are no longer poles within one comprehensive reality but two separate and opposed principles struggling with and against each other. The cosmos and with it human existence in the cosmos are beyond redemption. As they reject the cosmos, gnostic men and women place themselves in opposition to, and therefore outside of, it. Their true home is elsewhere, and this 'elsewhere' is a divine world that is radically opposed to the cosmos. 'Exile' is here not the unfortunate result of unfortunate human decisions (sin) but 'exile' is built into the ontology of worldly existence (Couliano, 1990; Grant, 1966; Haardt, 1971; Jonas, 1963; Logan, 1996; Merkur, 1993; Pagels, 1989; Rudolph, 1983).

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Accordingly, many of the 'gnostic' texts assume that the God of Israel, who reigns as king and lord over creation, makes the law and judges those who violate it, was in fact a lesser deity, a demiurge. Those with knowledge, *gnosis*, had learned to reject the false claims to power made by this jealous deity and to reserve their worship for a purely spiritual principle that transcended the material creation. Depending on the symbolism in question, this demiurge could be indifferent, ignorant and even directly evil. This lesser deity was either coexistent with the true, first divinity or was produced by or within this first divinity in an unwanted accident, a fall, or a catastrophe. The first divinity is envisioned as a space, as a divine sphere of uniformity and light, called the *pleroma*, the 'fullness of God', and the 'fall' presupposes, or amounts to, a divine self-differentiation whereby the *pleroma* becomes inhabited by *aeons* without losing its harmonious uniformity.

In some variants, the demiurge of the world is ejected by a deity in doubt, the other-worldly 'mother', in an episode of unwilling maternity. More common variants are scenarios in which Satan is a fallen angel or a son of God who out of pride, envy or concupiscence rebels against his Father. The narratives are often more ambiguous and multi-layered than can be indicated here. In fact, the responsibility for the (self-)differentiation of the divine and the accident disrupting the divine harmony cannot easily be attributed to any of the *aeons* that result from the event, and it is not obvious how the differentiation could be understood as the effect of a 'cause' (O'Regan, 2001: 102–10). Although the narrative form suggests a process-like continuity, there is also a sense in which the events that unfold from the differentiation are irreducible to a causal 'act'. The creation of the material world 'happens' as a consequence of a fall, accident or rebellion, and everything unfolding from this unfortunate event needs to be reversed so that the original state is restored. The drama of creation is, essentially, superfluous – it was not meant to happen – and cosmic history as such assumes the character of an unwanted 'delay'.

Human beings are created as part of the cosmos; they are created by the same demiurge who created the world. However, as part of the divine scheme to restore the original pure, pre-cosmic state, they were given a divine spark, a flash of the divine light or substance, the *pneuma*, which renders them superior to their creator. The details of this story of human divinization are complex and vary from system to system. Some of these stories include an 'inverse reading' of Genesis according to which Adam obtains a secret knowledge, *gnosis*, by eating the forbidden fruit. What is disobedience in the traditional reading of Genesis becomes here an act of liberation and emancipation, of awareness, of awaking from the sleep of ignorance, and the serpent becomes a representative of the divine sphere, who reveals to humans the evil purposes of their creators who want to keep Adam in his state of ignorance. By eating the fruit, humans obtain knowledge and realize that they have to turn away from their creators.⁵ Full of anger, the powers who control the

cosmos, the *archons*, expel Adam and Eve from paradise and send them to earth where they become prisoners of matter.

To the extent that they have *gnosis* – knowledge of ‘who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we were placed, whither we hasten, from what we are redeemed, what birth is and what rebirth’ (Theodotus as quoted in Clemens Alexandrinus, 1934: 78) – humans experience their earthly existence as a state of alienation and exile. After all, their divine spark makes them consubstantial with the divine, and they experience the cosmos as an imprisonment, as violence, as the result of ‘being thrown’ into the body. The symbols used here emphasize the passivity and the involuntary nature of their fate. Material existence in the cosmos is not a passive principle that can be moulded and shaped according to divine plans; the cosmos has its own powers, who will actively try to make life forget its true roots. Telling the story of the fall and humanity’s exile from the divine is thus not just a description of past events but it is an interference with the process as it is being described. Passing on the knowledge of humanity’s true history is already the beginning of the reversal of that history. Gnosis is both recital and effectuation of salvation. Knowing its true fate and its true origins places humankind above its cosmic prison and its limitations, giving a radical sense of freedom – freedom that is not only political or social, but freedom that is ‘a-cosmic’ in that it entails a freedom from the material constraints of physical, embodied existence.

These symbolisms of alienation and exile attempt to eclipse the symbols of Greek philosophy. This is most evident in their reinterpretation of the soul (*psyche*). In Greek philosophy, the soul is man’s sensorium of transcendence; it is the faculty that elevates him above the realm of matter and places him between the mundane and transcendent layers of reality, allowing a clearer, purer and more attuned existence in the cosmos. In contrast, ‘gnosticism’ presents the soul as the principal organ through which the cosmic powers confine humans to their earthly existence. Through the soul they reach into the interior of an individual in order to chain him or her to the world. The soul provides them with a battlefield on which they fight out their rivalries and struggles. Demonic powers penetrate into the individual’s innermost feelings and manipulate them for their own sinister purposes, terrorizing the individual through his or her soul. Fear, confusion, and the longing for an escape from a world of terror dominate earthly existence. Accordingly, the soul too must be left behind when the divine humans return to their origins. Overcoming the cosmos and its limitations thus means to repudiate even the very last residual of an ‘I’, of the unity of the soul.

PART 3: ANOTHER 'AGE OF EXILE':
GLOBALIZATION AND THE RELIGIOUS FERMENT
OF (POST)MODERNITY

Within the context of the 'age of exile' of late antiquity, I identified Plotinus' negative theology and the gnostic systems as two important narratives that weave the exilic condition into their accounts of human existence. I singled out Plotinus and Gnosticism because their juxtaposition revealed the importance of a fundamental distinction. Plotinus' narrative of emanation, as noted, preserves the unity and oneness of reality by highlighting the absolute transcendence – the absolute heterogeneity – of its unifying principle, of the One. As an important corollary, the architecture of Plotinus' thought implies that the possibility of achieving union with the One corresponds to the possibility of complete and unreserved self-transcendence. And the further remote the principle of unity is, the greater the demands on those who are struggling to behold the oneness of reality. Accordingly, Plotinus' philosophy is a transformative practice. If reality appears as a disordered flux in which the soul finds no anchor for meaningful existence, it is the soul that has to change, not reality. The One is always there, sustaining reality, but the concrete historical, social and political conditions may make it especially difficult for the soul to understand that it must 'turn around' (*epistrophe, ekstasis*) and reorient its existence towards the ground of being.

In Gnosticism, the soul finds itself in a very different situation as the 'taut line' between the poles of reality has snapped. The key moment in the soul's narrative history is not a 'turning around' but the acquisition of knowledge (*gnosis*) – a moment of insight, in which the soul finds in itself the divine spark that confirms its utter exceptionality in an alien and hostile environment. The inevitable conclusion drawn from this insight is that participation in the surrounding reality is contrary to the very essence of human nature. The absolute heterogeneity that separates the innermost part of the soul from the cosmos cannot be overcome or bridged, and thus the soul's true inner principle must turn away from reality. Juxtaposed in this schematic manner and taken out of their immediate historical contexts, these two models – Plotinus and Gnosticism – define a narrative space within which other narratives of exile can be situated and described in terms of their proximity to either one of these models.

As I mentioned in the Introduction to this article, the theme of exile is omnipresent in today's human and social sciences. Commentaries on the present 'restless epoch' are in many ways reminiscent of Epictetus' analysis of Roman society but more so than its Roman analogue, the contemporary configuration turns exile, displacement and homelessness into a *universal* condition. As Zygmunt Bauman (1988/9: 39) noted already some time ago, 'everyone is a stranger', a fact that becomes bearable in the short term

because, 'if everyone is a stranger, no one is'. The abolition of strangeness, exile and alienation, at least in theory, is 'attained by raising it to the level of a universal human condition'. For Bauman, 'these are the worrying, yet exhilarating trends usually subsumed under *postmodernity*'.

The 'restlessness' of today's world is commonly correlated with the dynamics of globalization and, more recently, with the dynamics of empire (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2001; Wood, 2003; Pieterse, 2004; Kiely, 2005; Zielonka, 2006). A sympathetic evaluation might consider today's concept and vocabulary of 'globalization' as a modern or postmodern equivalent of the Stoic universalism of the Roman Empire. In fact, as noted earlier, what distinguishes an 'ecumenic empire' from other large-scale power organizations is exactly the 'pathos of representative humanity', and this pathos is implied in contemporary discourses on globalization. Therefore, it is important to remember, with Polybius, that at the level of concrete experience the 'globalization' of the ecumenic empire is nothing but brute power, which for the victims of imperial expansion translates into suffering.

Today it is evident that the western process has produced and engulfed the global ecumene. But in contrast to widespread misconceptions and in spite of the more than 2,000 years of history that have passed since Polybius first theorized the ecumene, today's global ecumene – 'globalization' – is not a world, but is in search of a world (Voegelin, 1962). Over centuries, the various concrete societies were drawn into one and only one global power field – in which, today, US power dominates – but the field does not constitute a 'subject' in history but remains an 'object' of political and military organization. The global ecumene, although a fact in pragmatic history, has as yet to become existentially and spiritually authoritative so that its order is experienced as more than an accident or a convenience. At the centre of today's 'age of exile' one finds again, therefore, the tension between ecumenic ambitions and the spiritual void of an order primarily based on power. And just as in late antiquity, it is precisely this tension that gives rise to 'religious ferment'.

Evidence of 'religious ferment' could come from various aspects of contemporary culture but for the purposes of this article I wish to draw attention to a debate which may appear 'academic' at first but upon closer inspection reveals itself as a symptom of a deeper crisis comparable to the crisis faced by Plotinus. According to an increasing number of commentators, negative theology can be found in thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, and others usually – and often misleadingly – labelled 'postmodern'. Some go as far as to speak of a 'theological turn in continental philosophy' (Bradley, 2002: 57).

Already in the mid-1980s Maurice Blanchot recommended readers of Foucault to reread *The Archaeology of Knowledge* predicting 'that [they] will be surprised to discover in it many a formula from negative theology' (Blanchot, 1987: 74). James Bernauer too saw parallels between archaeology's negations of the concept of 'Man' and negative theology's negations of

concepts of God (Bernauer, 1990: 178). In a private meeting with Bernauer in 1980 Foucault accepted that his work was comparable to negative theology 'insofar as it applied to the human rather than the divine sciences' (Bradley, 2002: 73). That Foucault should be considered an apophatic thinker is not surprising given the overall direction of his work on 'power'. As David Bentley Hart (2003: 68–9) has perceptively noted, 'a theologian might well be tempted to read Foucault as an unwitting phenomenologist of original sin':

After all, he often seems to say no more than what theology already assumes: that the world lies in the grip of thrones, dominions, principalities, authorities, and powers; although to this observation Christian tradition adds the claim that these powers appear as original or as ultimate only within the order that they describe, guard, and govern – which Christ has overcome.

If an escape from the ubiquitous, multiform and variable nexus of power is possible at all – a question that Foucault struggled with especially after the publication of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* – one might expect, therefore, that some form of apophatic movement would be involved.

But the thinker who has confronted the 'accusation' of advocating a form of negative theology most seriously is Jacques Derrida. In fact, it could be argued that Derrida's project evolved and gained shape in conversation with 'the supposed movements of negative theology', which by his own admission continued to 'fascinate' him throughout his work (Derrida, 1992a: 82). In 1968, in the discussion following the presentation of his seminal paper 'Différance', a member of the audience observed that '[I]t [*différance*] is the source of everything and one cannot know it: it is God of negative theology'.

Derrida's negative response at the time – 'It is and it is not. It is above all not.' – was remarkable for its ambiguity and thus reflected a deferral rather than an answer, a 'promise' that he would eventually have to stop deferring and 'at last speak of "negative theology" itself' (Derrida, 1992a: 82). And yet, when he finally made a serious attempt to fulfil the 'promise', the remarkable clarity of the 'denial' [*dénégation*] – 'No, what I write is not "negative theology".' (Derrida, 1992a: 77) – had to be explicated in more than 60 pages. Moreover, the 'Post-Scriptum' that followed the 'denial' only reopened the door for further speculation:

I trust no text that is not in some way contaminated with negative theology, and even among those texts that apparently do not have, want, or believe they have any relations with theology in general. (Derrida, 1992b: 309–10)

It is not difficult to see why Derrida was unable to resolve his complex relationship with negative theology. From the start, his reservations were

based on his impression that the ultimate purpose of negative theology was not 'negative' at all but affirmative:

... So much so that the detours, locution, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. . . . And yet those aspects of *différance* which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being. (Derrida, 1982a: 6)

Negative theology, Derrida notes, affirms the divine – that, in fact, is the very purpose of its negating movements – and thus even in its most radical variants is not quite negative enough. In the words of one of his disciples, where negative theology looks for a 'superminent, transcendent ulteriority', *différance* is 'but a quasi-transcendental anteriority' (Caputo, 1997: 2–3). Whether Derrida's assessment of negative theology is fair cannot be discussed here (cf. Rubenstein, 2003); the assessment is interesting primarily because it helps clarify Derrida's self-understanding. Derrida's project aims to eclipse negative theology in that it wants to be more negative than even 'the most negative of negative theologies', but this very gesture is implicit in negative theology, which always aims to move beyond itself.

Apart from the question of the feasibility of Derrida's project – Can one 'outdo' negative theology? – there is the question of the motivation. Why would one want to 'outdo' negative theology? Derrida explains:

It is the domination of beings that *différance* everywhere comes to solicit, in the sense that *sollicitare*, in old Latin, means to shake as a whole, *to make tremble in entirety*. (1982a: 21)

If that is the purpose and effect of *différance*, why would one want to achieve this effect? As is often the case in philosophy when it comes to questions of motivation, it is easier to listen to the disciples rather than the teacher because the teacher simply does what he or she does while the disciples have to justify to themselves why they are adopting someone else's outlook. It is instructive, therefore, to listen to John Caputo:

Deconstruction is rather the thought, if it is a thought, of an *absolute* heterogeneity that unsettles *all* the assurances of the same within which we comfortably ensconce ourselves. That is the *desire* by which it is moved, which moves and impassions it, which sets it into motion, toward which it extends itself. (1997: 5; emphasis added)

Caputo's mission statement is close enough to Derrida's. The 'absolute heterogeneity' is *différance*; the 'unsettling' corresponds to the 'trembling', and the 'entirety' is repeated in the 'all'. But Caputo adds the important insight that underlying 'deconstruction', one finds a 'desire'. The term 'desire' is always revealing. What is the nature of this 'desire'? As the superlatives in the above quotations indicate and as Derrida's criticism of negative theology implies, the desire underlying deconstruction is a *mimetic desire*, a desire to 'outdo others' in what they do – e.g. negative theologians in their negations. It is tempting to compare this gesture to the practices of the radical ascetics of late antiquity, whose dramatic acts of self-denial, self-punishment and self-torture were clearly also driven by competitive display. Sarapion, for example, famously boasted, 'I am deader than you!' But when self-denial becomes *mimetic* and competitive, the ultimate goal is inevitably self-assertion. I suspect, therefore, that Derrida's encounter with negative theology is not a conversation but a competition, and yet it is precisely in this competitive display that he leaves the orbit of negative theology, which is concerned not with self-assertion but its opposite, self-transcendence.

Apart from matters of motivation and desire, the substance of Derrida's claim that negative theology is affirmative concerns the nature and possibility of the mystic experience of union with the Divine. Derrida and negative theology agree on the absolute transcendence, the absolute heterogeneity and the untranslatable incommensurability of the One, of God, of the Other, but Derrida is unable to accept that the mystic vision and union could escape 'the violence of metaphysics through a non-linguistic experience of the Other that would allow knowledge while still respecting dissimilarity' (Almond, 1999a: 335). One cannot truly talk to or about the Other without ultimately incorporating it into the Same.

Derrida's reading of Meister Eckhart provides another opportunity to explore the nature of this disagreement. Eckhart's negative theology is expressed in his radical distinction between God and the Godhead (*Gottheit*). For Eckhart, the Godhead refers to the mystical space 'behind' God, the 'abyss', the 'desert', the 'divine dark' and the 'nothingness', which enables God to be. The Godhead is the source, the 'groundless ground' of God. The 'nameless' Godhead, rather than God, is Eckhart's symbol for radical incommensurability. While God has attributes – is just, kind, good – the Godhead remains 'free and untrammelled', 'devoid of all forms'. There is a sense in which the Godhead is 'anterior' to God, 'just as silence is anterior to language' (Almond, 1999b: 155). Almond sees Eckhart's Godhead 'as a way of putting God "under erasure" (*sous rature*), a way of acknowledging one's finite perspective whenever one talks about the unspeakable' (1996: 159). But, again, Eckhart's distinction ultimately only serves the purpose of clarifying that the true experience of the Divine is beyond concepts, even concepts of God. The breakthrough to the Godhead demands that all

conceptual strategies are abandoned; a complete self-emptying of the soul is required, so that the soul becomes open to, and a receptacle for, the presence of the Divine. For Derrida, this is the point where Eckhart's project must fail because it falls back on a metaphysics of presence. There is, then, a fundamental difference between the reasons why Eckhart and Derrida put their concepts of God and 'sign' under erasure: Eckhart chooses to do so because 'of an inarticulable presence', Derrida because 'of an ineluctable absence' (Almond, 1999b: 163).

I agree, therefore, with Derrida's initial 'denial': his work clearly cannot be subsumed under the label of negative theology. Indeed, the entire problem of *différance* is without equivalent in apophatic thought. There is, for example, no *différance* in Plotinus because the One does not 'confront' being as alterity, as an originary dissemblance, but begets being in a relationship of undiminished giving. Instead, Derrida's preoccupation with *différance* is equivalent to the radical 'calling-into-question' of cosmic being that characterizes the 'gnostic' systems of late antiquity. To be more specific, the position that *différance* occupies in Derrida's thought corresponds to the position that the self-differentiating, pre-cosmic movement within the *pleroma* occupies in the 'gnostic' narrative. In order to be able to appreciate this equivalence, I will briefly review the meaning of the term *différance*:

... we will designate as *différance* the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted 'historically' as a weave of differences. 'Is constituted', 'is produced', 'is created', 'movement', 'historically', etc., necessarily being understood beyond the metaphysical language in which they are retained, along with all their implications. We ought to demonstrate why concepts like production, constitution, and history remain in complicity with what is at issue here. (Derrida, 1982a: 12)

Différance positions itself in relation to the general 'system of referral' as radical alterity – Caputo's 'absolute heterogeneity' – and at least metaphorically as 'anteriority', making it impossible to 'refer' to it within the same system – the 'system of the same' – and thereby turning the very same system into an 'irreducible aftereffect'. Accordingly, *différance* is not a concept – in fact, it is not even a word! – 'but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general' (Derrida, 1982a: 11). These considerations lead directly to the problem of the origin of cosmic being as found in the 'gnostic' narrative. Derrida states:

In a certain aspect of itself, *différance* is certainly but the historical and epochal *unfolding* of Being or of the ontological difference. The *a* of *différance* marks the *movement* of this unfolding. (1982a: 22; original emphases)

The 'lapse in spelling', 'a kind of gross spelling mistake' (Derrida, 1982a: 3) – the *a* that turns *différence* into *différance* – correlates here with the accidental, unwanted beginning of cosmic existence.

This characterization of Derrida as a 'gnostic' thinker can be made more precise by looking at the influences that helped determine the overall direction of Derrida's project. One of the key mediators in the transmission of 'gnostic' narratives from antiquity to the modern period was the German mystic Jakob Boehme (1575–1624), who must be considered as the most important, if not constitutive, heterodox influence on Hegel (Walsh, 1983; Weeks, 1991; O'Regan, 1994, 2002). Boehme's mysticism represents the original form of the modern understanding of 'dialectics' as the fundamental principle of cosmogeny and thus functions as a predecessor of the Hegelian system (Piórczynski, 1985). In his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel – who considered Boehme as the 'first German philosopher' – devotes as much space to Boehme as to Spinoza; Boehme's *Aurora* is quoted more than a dozen times. Schelling was among the first to accuse Hegel of borrowing from Boehme, implying that there was indeed little in Hegel's work that could not also be found in Boehme's.

It is interesting that Derrida's 'companion text' and reference point while writing the 'Post-Scriptum' (later *Sauf le nom*) essay for Coward and Foshay's volume on negative theology, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, was written by Johann Scheffler (1624–77), better known by the name he gave himself, Angelus Silesius, the Silesian Angel. One of the key encounters in Scheffler's formative period, Abraham von Franckenberg (1593–1652), published an edition of Boehme's writings in 1642. In fact, Franckenberg is best known for his devotion to Boehme. When Franckenberg died, he left his entire library – which included works by Boehme, Valentin Weigel, and Johann Valentin Andreae – to Scheffler (Sammons, 1967: 21–4).

Boehme's writings introduce a symbol that captures the meaning and purpose of Derrida's *différance* much more convincingly than the symbols mentioned in my cursory survey of 'Gnosticism'. Where Eckhart speaks of the Godhead, Boehme speaks of the *Ungrund*, the non-ground. While the two terms both express radical incommensurability, their meanings are ultimately very different. In Eckhart, the divine 'nothingness' is also divine plenitude and superabundant generosity, while in Boehme, it is precisely the emptiness, 'the indeterminacy and indigence of the radically transcendent divine' that sets 'the basic terms for divine movement' (O'Regan, 2002: 74). There is no knowledge in the *Ungrund*; its darkness is such that the divine has to reveal itself in a self-differentiating movement that becomes the beginning and origin of everything. Boehme's *Ungrund* is much closer to Derrida's ineluctable absence than Eckhart's Godhead.⁶ Indeed, in Derrida's own words, *différance* refers to the same differentiating movement as Boehme's *Ungrund*:

Différance is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. (1982a: 11)

And it is precisely this movement – the becoming – and its possibility that provide the context for Derrida's observation, in *Post-Scriptum/Sauf le nom*, that Scheffler's meditations on becoming seem 'strangely familiar to the experience of what is called deconstruction' (Derrida, 1992b: 290). I propose, therefore, to read Derrida not as a representative of negative theology but as a 'gnostic' thinker, with *différance* playing the role of his *Ungrund*.⁷ But if one of the most influential and iconoclastic figures of the 20th century advocates a metaphysics of exile and if, indeed, his status as a cultural icon is due to his advocating such a position, then it becomes impossible to dismiss gnosticism as an irrelevant, outdated mode of thinking. Today, gnosticism appears much *less* esoteric than it did even in late antiquity. There are segments of contemporary culture where it finds itself at the centre rather than at the margins of cultural influence, and Derrida's work and its reception is just one example of how its influence affects the human sciences.

EPILOGUE

The globalizing politics of late antiquity as well as postmodernity turns the experience of exile into a mass phenomenon – in the form of the concrete experience of physical movement from one place to another or in the form of a philosophical or spiritual detachment from a reality that appears out of joint. But exile always enforces 'deconstruction'. The 'gnostic' systems of antiquity and postmodernity are radical expressions of this sense of detachment, reflecting that for their authors, in contrast to Plotinus, the 'taut line' connecting the poles of reality has 'snapped'. For them, the oneness of reality has disintegrated into an 'absolute heterogeneity', to quote Caputo again, 'that unsettles all the assurances of the same within which we comfortably ensconce ourselves'. In both its classic and postmodern variant, however, the 'gnostic' response to a reality out of joint is a form of self-assertion: a shaken experience of being is translated – or 'turned inside out' – into the 'desire' to shake being 'as a whole, to make tremble in entirety' (from Derrida, see above). I propose to call this 'turning inside out' a 'negative conversion' – 'negative' because it reverses the orientation of the 'classic' types of conversion (*periagoge, metanoia, epistrophe*) that always turn the 'out-of-joint' experience of reality into introspection and self-transcendence. As a characteristic feature of 'gnosticism', the 'negative' conversion blocks this inward movement and precisely thereby obtains and asserts its identity, often in a mimetic fashion. The 'exile from metaphysics', which appears to animate so much of what is written under the postmodern label, is thereby transformed into a 'metaphysics of exile'.

NOTES

- 1 The analogy is a 'detour' only in the sense that it represents an externalization of self-reference. Self-reference is inevitable as the present is always studied from within the present. The externalization does not remove the self-reference as the study of the past is still conducted from within the present; rather, the 'detour' is a way of managing self-reference, of making it productive.
- 2 Mackenna's translation of the *Enneads* is widely used. I used Gregory's translation but also refer to the relevant pages in Mackenna.
- 3 Plotinus took the 'shedding of wings' from Plato's *Phaedrus*, 248c.
- 4 The category 'Gnosticism' is not uncontroversial. The religious groups and movements commonly included in this category – Basilides, Valentinus, Mani and their followers – did not refer to themselves in these terms. In fact, while Greek words like *Christianos*, *Christianikos*, *Christianismos* began to appear in ancient texts a few generations after Jesus, no such words existed for 'gnosticism' or a 'gnostic religion'. Thus, the term does not represent one coherent religious movement but a variety of different groups, individuals and ideas that typically did not know of each other. For the problems of defining 'Gnosticism' see Williams (1996). For the purpose of this article I will ignore these issues because I am not interested in definitions but in radical examples of symbolisms in which living-in-this-world becomes a form of exile.
- 5 The same gesture, interestingly, can be found in Hegel, who discussed the serpent not as a symbol of Satan, the father of lies, but as a discloser of the unrecognized truth. See Hegel's *Logic*, §24.
- 6 A classic Derridaen riposte to equating *différance* and *Ungrund* would be to (mimetically) reassert that *différance* precedes and determines any terms, concepts or names used to describe the *Ungrund*, especially terms such as 'infinite', 'undifferentiated' and 'empty'. Still, Boehme should be allowed to use language with the same proviso employed by Derrida – see above – that these terms are 'necessarily being understood beyond the metaphysical language in which they are retained'. With this proviso, which is as justified in Boehme's case as it is in Derrida's, Boehme could easily make the reverse claim, that the *Ungrund* 'precedes' anything that Derrida can say about *différance*. The result of this exchange, however, is not a conversation but again a 'competition', which inevitably ends in a stalemate.
- 7 It is astonishing that Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* misses this link. Neither 'gnosticism' nor Boehme is mentioned in the book – and this in spite of the fact that Derrida is clearly aware of the significance of the Boehme–Hegel connection; see, for example, Derrida (1982b: 284–5, n. 12). 'Gnosticism' is capable of 'enlisting' other narratives such as Neoplatonism, apocalyptic and the Kabbalah and thus it may sometimes be difficult to identify the underlying 'gnostic' structure of a religious or philosophical system; see O'Regan (2001: 207–26).

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