2.1. BRIDGING THE GAP

Proclus

As we have seen, Derrida’s essay “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” is divided into two main parts. In the first part of the text, the author undertakes a general discussion of “negative theology”—a topic which he had addressed obliquely for many years but never examined in a thorough and continuous way. This general discussion sets out to explain the fundamental differences between negative theology and deconstruction, and especially the determination of Being primarily by the temporal dimension of presence assumed by the former but rejected by the latter. In the second part of his text, Derrida explains that the issue of negative theology needs to be approached through the study of individual cases rather than the formulation of general theories. He therefore embarks on the study of what he terms three “paradigms” of negative theology: A. Plato’s notions of the Good and Khôra, B. The Christian theology of Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart, and C. Heidegger’s notions of Being and Nothing.¹

In order to formulate Paradigm A of negative theology, the author arranges several passages in Plato which he has frequently discussed in the past under the headings of “two movements or tropics of negativity” (deux mouvements ... tropiques de la négativité) or “two radically heterogeneous structures” (deux structures ... radicalement hétérogènes). The first movement includes Plato’s discussion of the principle epekeina tês ousias (“beyond being”) of the Republic and the second his remarks in the Timaeus concerning the principle of Khôra (“place”),² and Derrida is drawing attention to the fact that the Form of the Good and the Receptacle are characterized by negativity or otherness both in themselves and in relation to one

¹ Part of this argument has been summarized by Leo Sweeney, “Deconstruction and Neoplatonism. Jacques Derrida and Dionysius the Areopagite,” in Neoplatonism and Contemporary Thought, ed. R. Baine Harris, vol. II (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 93–123. Reading the text in terms of R. Gasché’s analysis of deconstruction, Sweeney places the Derridean and Neoplatonic approaches to the Ineffable in general confrontation with one another but does not develop an engagement between them on points of detail.

² Derrida marks the beginnings of these two sections of his discussion formally with the Arabic numerals 1 and 2.
another. A prominent feature of Paradigm A will be the simultaneous inversion and non-inversion of an asymmetrical contradiction in a deconstructive process, the asymmetrical contradiction in this case being the axiological priority of the Form of the Good’s negativity above Being over Khôra’s negativity below Being.

But Derrida’s discussion of the Republic passage itself, unlike that of the Timaeus passages to be treated later, does not immediately involve deconstruction. It begins with what one might termed the “predicative” aspects of Plato’s account of the Form of the Good in which both the negativity and the continuity associated with its transcending relation to subsequent terms are shown to be consistent with the so-called “metaphysics of presence.”

According to Derrida, this negative form “is not neutral … it does not oscillate between the ‘neither-this’ and the ‘nor-that’ … it first of all obeys the logic of the ‘above’” (n’est pas neutre … elle n’oscille pas entre le ni ceci-ni cela … elle obéit d’abord à une logique du sur). Moreover, despite the discontinuity that use of the term epekeîna initially seems to imply, the continuity between that which is beyond Being and the Being of beings is actually reinforced. Such continuity is implied first, by the homologous relation between the two terms—in apparently, the fact that there is for Plato a similarity between the Good’s relation to the intelligible Forms and the sun’s relation to visible objects. It is implied secondly, by the causal dependence of the one on the other—apparently, the fact that the visible sun is described by Plato metaphorically as the offspring of the Form of the Good.

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3 Plato, Republic 509B.
4 The beginning of this sub-section is marked by the phrase “on the one hand ...” (d’une part ...).
5 For the connection between “being” (essence) and “presence” (présence) that governs this idea see Jacques Derrida, How To Avoid Speaking: Denials, p. 101 /Comment ne pas parler: dénégations, p. 563. The connection between predication and presence is implicit at this point, but will be rendered explicit in a subsequent paragraph. See note 26.
6 Derrida, HTAS, pp. 101–102/CNPP, p. 564. The crucial notions here are the references to oscillation and logic.
7 “A sufficiently homogeneous, homologous, or analogous relation” (un rapport assez homogène, homologue ou analogue).
8 “In order that what is ... may owe its being ... to this Good” (pour que ce qui est ... doive à ce Bien son être ...).
9 See HTAS, p. 102/CNPP, pp. 564–565. Derrida’s account of the Platonic doctrine regarding the Good, here as elsewhere, contains definite Heideggerian resonances. These are especially a. the suggestion that the Good might be beyond “Being, the Being of beings, or beingness” (l’être ... l’être de l’étant ... l’étantité); b. the notion of transcendence as a “movement