2.4. FROM THE ONE TO THE BLANK

_Damascius_

Of the three “architectural models” of Negative Theology constituting the event-place structure of “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials.” part II: paradigm A. Plato, paradigm B. Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, and paradigm C. Heidegger, Derrida characterized the first as Greek, the second as both Greek and Christian, and the third as neither Greek nor Christian. The time has now arrived for us to concentrate on the last of these architectural models although, given that we are attempting to investigate less the topic of Neoplatonism and Derrida than that of Neoplatonism after Derrida, our attempt at a comparative reading of the ancient and modern textualities might be conceived as following a diagonal rather than a parallel trajectory. Now if the twentieth-century writer Heidegger is neither Greek nor Christian—a characterization that would require qualification in another more appropriate context—, the same can be said of the late classical thinker Damascius. From the historical viewpoint, Damascius rather obviously stands outside the Greek and Christian traditions, having come from Damascus in the modern Syria and presided over a philosophical school closed by the Christian authorities. From the philosophical viewpoint, he stands outside these two traditions in a more radical way, having presented an absolutely unique challenge to the “onto-theological” assumptions on which both depend.¹ For both these reasons, we will substitute Damascius for Heidegger and, on occasion, read Damascius as Heidegger in articulating our philosophical response to the third Derridean paradigm of Negative Theology.²

---


² A promising beginning in the task of bringing these two thinkers into dialogue has been made by Laurent Lavaud, “L’ineffable et l’impossible. Damascius au regard de la déconstruction,” in Philosophie 96 (2007), pp. 46–66. After sketching Derrida’s critique of “negative theology” in his essay “Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations,” Lavaud investigates the two questions: i. Whether Damascius escapes the metaphysical schema criticized by deconstruction (pp. 51–62); and 2. To what extent Damascius’ aporetic method approaches the method of deconstruction (pp. 62–66). The present writer agrees with Lavaud’s conclusions that
The diagonal movement to be implemented by our intertextual strategy of reading Derrida's paradigm C might be understood as consisting of three phases. This movement of writing or reflection will begin by summarizing Derrida's account of the Heideggerian post-phenomenological analyses of Being, Time, and Dasein, immediately adding a brief note on Damascius' comparable doctrine of the self-constituted soul and its intellectual travail. The basis for juxtaposing textual materials hitherto imagined to be heterogeneous—and for introducing a philosopheme of which Derrida himself was obviously unaware—is established in the next phase of the strategy. In the course of his essay, Derrida remarks that he will limit himself to the question of how to avoid speaking of Being, when addressing Heidegger's thought, and notes the common essentiality of Avoiding and of Being. This comment will form the starting-point of an extended analysis of Damascius' doctrine of the Ineffable—which is really an anti-doctrine—and of the peculiar senses of both Avoidance and of Being intimated there. Our movement of writing or reflection will conclude by considering the extent to which Derrida's self-restriction to the question of how to avoid speaking of Being and his view of the common essentiality of Avoiding and Being is not only illuminated by Damascius' thought but illuminates that of Heidegger.

Derrida's discussion of paradigm C is explicitly divided into two main parts and a postscript, the first main part containing a general discussion of Heidegger's treatment of the nihilation of nothingness, the mood of anxi-

---

a. there is a similarity between the manner in which the Ineffable is beyond the oppositional structure of originating and derived in Damascius and that in which the Impossible is beyond that of possible and impossible in Derrida (pp. 58–60); but that b. Damascius adheres to traditional metaphysical assumptions, and therefore differs from Derrida, in maintaining an irreversible hierarchy of terms graded according to value (pp. 62–64). However, for the present writer's disagreement with Lavaud's analysis at crucial points see below notes 198 and 205.

3 In utilizing Derrida's discussion of Heidegger as a starting-point in the earlier part of this chapter, we will not comment on the accuracy of Derrida's reading of his chosen source. However, it is probably worth noting here that Derrida's interpretation does not take account of certain crucial writings (e.g. Contributions to Philosophy, Mindfulness) that became widely available only from the 1980s onwards. In fact, the lack of such textual resources explains certain passages in which Derrida—with commendable frankness—admits that he does not understand Heidegger's thought.

4 p. 125 ff.

5 In actual fact, it is Damascius' doctrine of the Ineffable rather than his doctrine of Being that will be studied, since this provides a closer analogy with Heidegger's subject-matter. However, some remarks on Damascius' notion of Being will be ventured in the final section of this chapter.

6 p. 154 ff.