NEOPLATONIZING GNOSTICISM AND Gnosticizing NEOPLATONISM IN THE “AMERICAN BAROQUE”

Jay Bregman

Hilary Armstrong gave the Gnostics a fair hearing in his “Dualism: Platonic, Gnostic, and Christian.”1 He basically viewed Gnosticism as having some points of contact with Platonism, but since they were not doing the same thing as philosophers, he reasoned, it would be wrong to treat them as “bad philosophers.” Although Gnostic anti-cosmism is balanced by his nuanced view of certain Gnostic pro-cosmic ideas, Gnostics are “mythicizers,” hence doing something very different from philosophers since, in the last analysis, they think that the cosmos is at best transitory—a place to flee from.

However, in the last decade or so, there has been a reconsideration of Armstrong’s view. Led especially by John Turner and others, scholars have affirmed that Gnostics, Middle Platonists, and Neoplatonists indeed have more in common philosophically than had been previously supposed; Gnostics were perhaps even writing commentaries on Plato’s dialogues in order to gain a respectable hearing in Plotinus’ seminars.2

Nineteenth-century America was the scene of an earlier engagement with Gnosticism, through which heterodox thinkers paved the way for its current serious reception. I will trace the roots and anticipations of contemporary discussions, in the Neoplatonic, late Transcendentalist journal, The Platonist, and other North American sources.

Metaphysical thinkers of the later American Renaissance painted their religious symbols on a Neoplatonic canvas. A secularizing world had given rise to notions of a universal syncretistic cosmic Theism, which welcomed the “esoteric” strains of all traditions. Alexander Wilder, M.D., a regular contributor to The Platonist, also cast a wide syncretistic net: the Neoplatonists taught Platonic philosophy in the form of a religion embracing some of the characteristic features of Jainism, the Sankhya and Pythagorean schools (hé gnōsis tôn ontōn). His accounts include Solar worship, Mithras, “divine men” (theioi andres) like Apollonius and Pythagoras, and theurgy, including

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1 Armstrong 1990, 41; for his general overview, see pp. 42–51.
2 A good place to start a study of this ongoing discussion is Turner and Majercik 2000.
Proclus’ teaching that *symbola* or “tokens” made ascent possible through each level of reality up to the One. He was interested in Alchemy and the philosopher’s stone as a kind of universal medicine, the perfection of matter.  

With such “over the top” syncretism and the increasing confusion of an incipient late nineteenth-century “spiritual crisis,” perhaps the “American Baroque” is a suitable name for the era’s heterodox branches of occult and religious thought. The “Classical” American Renaissance (seminal period, roughly 1830–1860) peaked in the first half of the 1850s; after 1860 or so, there was an increasing sense of social, economic and spiritual crisis. Parallel to the almost grotesque ostentation and extravagance of the Gilded Age, was the overheated spirituality, in part a reaction to the rise of scientific materialism, in which Neoplatonists, Theosophists, and other esoteric and syncretistic religious groups made common cause. Just as in Europe of the sixteenth and well into the seventeenth century, there were somewhat similar crises, together with wars and revolutions in connection with religion, the rise of Hermetic thought and Neoplatonism, changing class and economic conditions, a new philosophy and the rise of early modern science. Roughly two hundred years apart (late seventeenth and late nineteenth centuries) both eventually gave way to an initially more rationalistic and reform-minded eras.

Given the nineteenth-century rise of interest in comparative religion, it is not hard to find more than a few American “Synesii on steroids,” as it were. Neoplatonism, mystical gurus such as Socrates and Ammonius Saccas, Esoteric Christianity, Alchemy, Hermetic writings, Gnostic works, Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, Ancient Mesopotamian, Phoenician, Egyptian, Kabbalah, Essenes, and Pythagoreans: all became different but compatible expressions of the One Great Truth. Alexander Wilder was the most comprehensive among these “baroque” figures, whose writings remain intelligible. He gave new meaning to Symmachus’ celebrated appeal to Christian emperors for religious tolerance, *Uno itinere non potest pervenire ad tam grande secretum* (“The ultimate mystery cannot be reached by one path alone”). Such later Transcendentalist disciples of Thomas Taylor opted for a new non-denominational syncretistic “cosmic Theism.” Wilder also sounded a “revivalist” note: “The reflecting men of all the older ages, down to Plato, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and the followers of the Gnosis, all paid like respect to the great arcanum of life and of Man.” He viewed Proclus as a perennialist

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4 Wilder 2009, 188.