There is no doubt that with the publication of the anonymous and untitled fifth tractate of NHC I we have been given a highly significant new source for understanding Gnostic, and particularly Valentinian, thought.\(^1\) It is not only the sole original presentation of a Valentinian system that we possess. The singularly rationalistic approach of the author makes the metaphysical structure of his system transparent in such a way that the tractate may serve as an introduction to Gnostic thought in general as well as illuminate Valentinian theology and mythology in particular. It is, however, an unusually difficult text that confronts us. The publishing team was only too aware that their editio princeps would not be the final edition of the text. The codicological analysis, the translations and the exegetical commentary left unsolved a number of the problems posed by the MS. In spite of this one must be grateful to the editors that they did not wish to delay the publication of this important text, already eagerly awaited for twenty years, until they felt that they had eliminated the difficulties, but instead made it available for continued study by other scholars. Already several advances have been made over the editio princeps: A number of previously unidentified fragments have been placed and published for the first time in the Facsimile Edition;\(^2\) the codicological description has been corrected;\(^3\) several new readings have been put forward;\(^4\) and the system of the TriTrac has been briefly summarized and commented upon by several scholars.\(^5\) It is the purpose of this article to make a further contribution towards the elucidation of the text and the system which it presents.

The first part of the TriTrac falls neatly into two sections. On pp. 51:1–75:17 the origin and nature of the Pleroma is treated; the second section (75:17–104:3) deals with the Fall and the ensuing cosmogony. The title given to the first part by the editors, “De Supernis”, is inaccurate in so far as only the first section deals with “the superior things” (netjasi) in the sense of the author, namely as a designation of the Pleroma.
THE ORIGINAL TRIAD (51:1–59:38)

The fact that there are three hypostases at the top of the system is of course not coincidental. "The Father," "the Son" and "the Church" are not only, or primarily, persons, but each has a metaphysical significance and functions within a system. What, then, is their philosophical meaning? The Father is immediately termed One (51:8ff). This implies uniqueness (51:21f) and unchangeability (51:23, 52:10ff), but also that he, being himself unbegotten, is the first and sole cause ("father") of the universe (51:19–52:6, 52:19f). His uniqueness implies transcendence: he is unnamable and thus unknowable (54:2–34). But the Father also has a positive aspect: he is Good, thus perfect and full (53:5–20).

If the portrait of the Father is fairly clear, understanding the position of the Son is more difficult. The editors have correctly seen that this figure is a mediator of revelation and the logically necessary object of the Father's superabundant love. But which more strictly philosophical notion does "the Son" represent? On this point the editors are in disagreement with themselves: According to the commentary the TriTrac differs from the system of Ptolemaeus in that it identifies nous with the Father and not with the Monogenēs. In the "theological introduction," however, we are informed that the TriTrac agrees with Ptolemaeus on this point. In other words, the commentary interprets nous as belonging to the One, whereas the introduction makes them two distinct hypostases.

As we consider these varying interpretations, it must first of all be pointed out that although the Greek word vouç does occur in a theological context in the TriTrac, it is not used with the particularity of a technical term. We do find, however, an idea which corresponds fairly well to the Aristotelian vouç: Being unnamable and unknowable by anyone and anything else, the Father knows himself. Since the translators have construed the passage in question rather unhappily, I allow myself to quote it in full:

For he who is inconceivable by any thought, invisible by any thing, unutterable by any word, untouchable by any hand, only he himself knows himself in the manner in which he is and his form and his greatness and his magnitude. And when he is able to conceive of himself, to see himself, to take a name for himself, to grasp himself, it is he who is his own mind (nous), his own eye, his own mouth, his own form; and (it is) he who conceives himself, who sees himself, who utters himself, who grasps himself, that is, the inconceivable, the unutterable, the incomprehensible, the unchangeable one. And that which he conceives and that which he sees and that which he utters is delicacy and delight and truth and joy and repose. The thought which he has surpasses all wisdom and excels all mind and excels all glory and excels all beauty and all sweetness and all greatness and all profundity and all exaltedness (54:35–55:27).