The Power of the Unsaid:
Philosophic Silence in Plotinus

Submitted by Nicholas Banner to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Classics
In April 2013

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

The Power of the Unsaid: Philosophic Silence in Plotinus

Abstract. This thesis examines the theme of secrecy and silence in the philosophy of Plotinus. This philosopher is known for the innovative use he made of Platonic and Aristotelean materials in constructing a thought-world which posits a totally transcendent first principle, the one or the good, from which all other entities are derived. The Plotinian one is ineffable by its very nature, and Plotinus expounds at length the claim that it cannot be comprehended, either by speech or thought. The paradox of a philosopher writing extensive discourses about a reality which is said to be ineffable is the main topic of this thesis, which seeks to answer the question: what is Plotinus doing when he tells us that he cannot, or will not, reveal the nature of the one?

Partial answers to this question have been given in previous scholarship through study of the philosophic background which led Plotinus to posit such an ineffable reality, and through analysis of the arguments in which he upholds the doctrine of the one's ineffability. Building on this body of work, this thesis gives a more comprehensive answer to this question by analysing the tropes of silence and secrecy which were developed in Middle Platonism, derived especially from Plato's writings, and by locating Plotinus in a broader philosophic tradition which interpreted canonical thinkers as esoteric writers. In this way, the thesis provides a historical context for Plotinus' treatment of the ineffable one. Plotinus' discourse of ineffability is presented not just as a response to purely philosophical issues, but also an enactment of a tradition of philosophic silence, which determined in part how a Platonist philosopher articulated in written form ideas about concealment and the limits of discourse. Through a combination of close reading of a number of Plotinian texts and full discussion of the wider context, this thesis aims to integrate analytical and cultural approaches to Plotinus' philosophy. It aims also to bring out the significance of the theme of philosophical silence for late antique philosophy both as a discipline and as a socially-embedded part of Græco-Roman civilisation.

Index

List of Abbreviations (see Bibliography for full references) 5
Transliterated Greek Words 5

Introduction 6
Modes of Reading and Writing Philosophical Silence 13
Outline of the Present Work 19

Part I: The Cultural Roots of Philosophic Silence 23

Chapter One: *De philosophorum Græcorum silentio mystico*: Preliminaries. 24
Written Silence, The Esoteric, and Esoteric Hermeneutics 24
The Intrinsic Difficulty of the Question 32

Chapter Two: The Silent Philosopher 49
Presocratic Roots of Philosophic Silence 55
Philosophic Silence in Classical Athenian Philosophy 70
Philosophic Silence in Plato 73
The Silent Philosopher in Late Antiquity 82

Chapter Three: Perennial Wisdom and Platonist Tradition 95
Philosophic Lineage and Perennial Wisdom in Platonism 97
The Transposition of Religion in Middle Platonism 112
Esoteric Hermeneutics in Middle Platonism 123

Chapter Four: Plotinus and 'The Ancients'; Tradition, Truth, and Transcendence 135
The Plotinian Idea of Tradition 136
Plotinian Hermeneutics of the Perennial Tradition 148

Part II: The Transcendent Absolute, the Ineffable, and Plotinian Poetics of

Transcendence 157

Chapter Five: The Development of the Transcendent Absolute in the Middle Platonist Milieu 158

The Rise of the Ineffable Transcendent 159

The Transcendent in Middle Platonist Thought 164

Chapter Six: The Transcendent Absolute and the Ineffability of Reality in Plotinus 189

The Architecture of the Ineffable in Plotinus 190

Modes of Knowing in Plotinus 209

Chapter Seven: The Poetics of Transcendence in Plotinus 225

Negative Methods in Plotinus 227

'Speaking Improperly': Kataphatic Descriptions of the One 237

Indeterminacy and the Open Secret 243

Conclusion 256

Philosophic Silence and Philosophic Openness in Plotinus 262

Appendices 266

Appendix A: Notes on the Classical Roots of Transcendence 266

Appendix B: The Plotinian Idea of Tradition and 'Platonism' 269

Appendix C: Esoteric Hermeneutics, Plato, and Aristotle in Plotinus 273

Appendix D: Some Notes on Plotinian Metaphysics 277

Appendix E: Philosophic Silence and Plotinian Religion 282

Appendix F: Modern Theories of Philosophic Silence 288

298

Select Primary Bibliography 298

Secondary Bibliography 301

List of Abbreviations (see Bibliography for full references)

CH = *Corpus Hermeticum*

DK = Diels-Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*

H + S 1 = Henry and Schwyzer, edd., *Plotini opera*, *editio maior* (Paris/Brussels 1951-1973)

H + S 2 = Henry and Schwyzer, edd., *Plotini opera*, *editio minor* (Oxford 1964-1983)

LSJ = Liddel, Scott, and Jones *Greek English Lexicon*

NF = Nock and Festugière 1947

NHC = Nag Hammadi Corpus

OLD = *Oxford Latin Dictionary*

PG = *Patrologia Graeca*, Migne 1857-66

SVF = *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, Arnim 1905-24

W = Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles: Texte und Kommentar*

Transliterated Greek Words

Certain Greek words without a convenient English equivalent are transliterated throughout the text; their meanings are discussed in the course of the thesis, and they should be regarded as 'terms of art'.

- αἴνιγμα = enigma
- αἵρεσις = *hairesis*
- ἀναγωγή = *anagôgê*
- ἀπόφασις = apophasis
- ἀφαίρεσις = aphairesis
- γνῶσις = *gnôsis*
- δαίμων = *daimôn*
- διανοῖα = *dianoia*
- ἐπιστήμη = *epistêmê*
- ἔρως = *erôs*
- κάθαρσις = *katharsis*
- λογισμός = *logismos*
- λόγος = *logos*
- νόησις = *noêsis*
- νοητόν, νοητά = *noêton*, *noêta*
- νοῦς = *nous*
- ὑπόστασις = hypostasis, pl. hypostases