Introduction

> Plotinus has only one thing to say ... and yet, he never will say it.
> Hadot, 1993

The present study is an enquiry into 'philosophic silence' in Plotinus.[1] The line of enquiry pursued arose from wonder at a seeming paradox: Plotinus posits a radical truth available to the philosophic seeker, a truth that is an ontological transformation as much as it is an epistemological attainment, but refuses to *speak* this truth, and denies that it may be spoken. Why, then, write about it? The ineffable nature of the One or Good for Plotinus, coupled with what may be termed its transcendence and immanence at all levels of being and knowing, naturally gives rise to this tension between utterance and silence.

Plotinus also positions himself as an exegete of an esoteric philosophic tradition, with a concern for keeping certain philosophic matters out of the hands of the vulgar crowd. He claimed a great reluctance to write and publish his philosophy. Yet publish he did, as well as teaching a philosophic seminar open to all, and to questions from every quarter. How should we account for these apparent contradictions?

The most common account of Plotinus' use of the intensive negative language known as apophasis, of the rhetorics of silence and secrecy and of the paradoxes of transcendence and immanence, is that all these techniques are legitimate philosophical responses to the ineffable first principle of later Platonism. Viewed from the perspective of the philosophic history of ideas, Plotinian paradox and indeed what is widely termed Plotinian 'mysticism'

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[1] References to the text of the *Enneads* are to the *editio maior* of Henry and Schwyzer (1951–1973), by *Ennead*, treatise [chronological number] chapter and line(s). Any otherwise unattributed references are to the *Enneads*; for other primary sources the abbreviation conventions of Liddell and Scott's revised *Greek–English Lexicon* (Oxford 1996) and Glare's *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford 2000) are followed. Abbreviations of periodical titles are those of the *Année Philologique*. Translations are the author's own unless noted.

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arise from Middle and Late Platonist[2] hermeneutics of Platonic premises, and are simply logical.[3] Since the publication in 1928 of Dodds' seminal 'The *Parmenides* of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonist One', the dominant tendency in Classical scholarship has been to regard the rise of the transcendent first principle in Platonism, and particularly in Plotinus, as an outcome of exegesis primarily of the Platonic dialogues and secondarily of other Greek philosophical materials, particularly of Aristotle and the commentary tradition.[4] The intellectual history which has emerged, painted in broad strokes, describes a more or less linear progression toward an idea of a first principle which, whether it is an intellect, a monad, or something else, surpasses being and essence.[5] The 'Good beyond being' of *Republic* 509b8-9, the 'beautiful itself' of *Symposium* 210e2-211b3, the 'One beyond being' of *Parmenides* 142a3-4 and many other passages read in the light of these, provided exegetical materials for interpreters of Plato seeking the primordial first principle, and contributed to their setting it, in an absolute sense, *beyond*.[6] It 'makes sense' that the Good, conceived through exegesis of Plato's dialogues as 'beyond being'[7] and subject to paradoxical conditions in its relationship to the manifest world, is beyond normal

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[2] This book prefers 'Late Platonism' to the almost universal 'Neoplatonism'. While a strong case can be made for retaining the use of a term which refers to a well-defined set of thinkers who share certain distinctive characteristics of thought, it is felt that the 'Neo-' of 'Neoplatonism' smuggles certain polemics of modern scholarship into discussion (to do with modern readings of Plato opposed to ancient ones), which it is as well to avoid. Plotinus and his successors were in many ways closer to Plato than any modern interpreters can hope to be. The questions of what we as scholars mean by Platonism more fundamentally, and how the Platonist Plotinus defined himself, are discussed (p. 253 ff.). For critical discussion of the modern term 'Neoplatonism', see Gatti 1996 (22–24); cf. Zambon 2002 (23–28); Athanassiadi 2006 (23–26). As Catana 2013 rightly argues, the Middle- and Neoplatonist divide is also a modern and artificial one; this book uses the term 'Middle Platonist'. for the sake of convenience, but it should be understood as referring only to a recognised historical period rather than implying any claims about doctrine. Scholarship has long since eroded the solid doctrinal lines once erected between the two eras of Platonist thought.

[3] See p. 147 ff. The present work takes 'Platonist' to refer to the Græco–Roman philosophical movement beginning in roughly the first century CE (see p. 255), and 'Platonic' to refer only to Plato's own work and to the Platonic Epistles, regardless of their actual authorship.

[4] Especially important for this book are Charrue 1978; Dillon 1992 (192–193); Eon 1970; Mortley 1972, 1975, 1982, 1986; Whittaker 1969b, 1971, 1973 and Festugière 1981, esp. vol. IV, all of which refine our understanding of the intellectual genealogy of the ineffable transcendent within the history of Platonism and Neopythagoreanism.

[5] Important general approaches to this development include Dodds 1928; Dörrie 1960; Aubenque 1971; Festugière 1981 IV (6–140, esp. 6–17); Mortley 1986 I (125–148). Burns 2004 (44–49) presents a succinct summary of much of the material covered in the present section.

[6] See generally Festugière 1981, 79–91. For a discussion of Pl. *R.* with regard to the transcendent in Middle Platonism, see Whittaker 1969a; on *Smp.* see Festugière 1981 IV (79–81).

[7] For the Good ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας in Plato (possible translations include 'beyond essence', 'beyond being' and 'beyond substance') see especially *R.* 509B 8–9; *Prm.* 142A 3–4. and Chapters 5 and 6 in this volume. This book favours 'being' as a translation for οὐσία, but this should be understood as a term of art, defined more thoroughly at p. 181.

human thought and discourse.[8] While this is a perplexing and problematic aspect of Plotinian philosophy, it is one which has been addressed with considerable success in twentieth-century scholarship.[9]

The further problem which arises from this first, namely the paradox of Plotinus' extensive *writing* about this unwritable 'subject', is the central impetus for the present inquiry. We may conclude, based on the premises and arguments found in the *Enneads*, that it makes sense for Plotinus to define his first principle as ineffable, and we may even assent to his extensive writings on the subject, on the grounds that he is attempting to explain the ineffable nature of the One as far as possible. But Plotinus does not simply define the One with a kind of written silence which aims to show the absence from the text of the subject of discourse; he also describes it using rhetorics of *secrecy*. The Plotinian One is described as both self-hiding by its very nature, and in need of concealment from those 'uninitiated' in the mysteries of philosophy. Why should Plotinus desire to defend the highest philosophical achievement, the direct encounter with the One, with secrecy, if it is by its very nature incommunicable?

Previous scholarship has occasionally touched on this paradox, but no answers have been forthcoming.[10] The present thesis seeks an answer by looking not only at the strictly philosophical content of Plotinus' work, but also at the broader cultural context of the norms, style and culture of Platonism. It posits a set of tropes, collectively called 'philosophic silence', which governed the way in which the highest realms of Platonist enquiry were to be discussed, and in what ways they were to be 'concealed'.

The question this study attempts to answer is this: what is Plotinus doing when he tells us that he cannot, or will not, tell us something? The answer it gives has not only philosophical, but social, religious and literary ramifications, and, in the light of these, expands our understanding of the question of Plotinian ineffability itself, asking a question instead about literary and philosophic practice. This is not to abandon the logical side of the question of the ineffable in Late Platonism; rather, it is an attempt to enhance our understanding of the late antique project of writing the ineffable by understanding it *qua* writing: as the textual expression not only of the play of ideas and the search for truth through reason, but of the norms of deportment, ideas of philosophy as a way of life and a tradition

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[8] On the logical considerations of Plotinian transcendence, see Aubenque 1971; Irwin 1989, 199; Mortley 1986 (108, 153); Sells 1994 (3–4); O'Meara 1998 (146–147); and further, p. 147 ff.

[9] See Blumenthal 1987 (550–553) for a review of scholarship until 1971 concentrating on the problem of the One in Plotinus.

[10] Pépin 1984 (32) asks this question, leaving it unanswered.

and notions of the lived encounter with higher truths so central to Late
Platonist thinking.

'Cratylan' Silence

A quick survey of the Classical dilemmas of silence and discourse will help
to orient the enquiry at the outset. When faced with an ineffable truth, the
philosopher has a limited number of options. The first is simply to keep
silent. This is the solution of Cratylus, who 'finally decided that speech was
not needful, but just moved his finger',[11] immortalised in Plato's dialogue
where the claims of language as a tool for the transmission of truth are
subjected to scrutiny. Plato evidently rejected the Cratylan solution, and we
know of no Platonist thinkers who followed the lead of Cratylus on this
matter, abandoning verbal discourse. The Cratylan distrust of language,
however, did not die with its eponymous proponent, and it was especially
prominent in the sceptical Academy which the Platonists were concerned
with refuting. The Platonists, by contrast, while agreeing that language
is an inferior tool for the transmission of truth (and even appropriating
sceptical arguments with a view to demonstrating this),[12] defuse the basic
problem of language by positing direct modes of knowledge which bypass
words and verbally conditioned thinking altogether, modes of knowing
which are themselves in a sense 'silent'.

While the literal silence of Cratylus was rejected by the Platonists, the
evocation of the refusal to speak became a powerful cultural gesture in the
first centuries CE, appearing in the context of the mysteries philosophically
reconceived or of the tropes of Pythagorean initiation and practice, and
more generally as a mark of the Platonist sage, whose control of higher
knowledge and maintenance of it as the province of an elite philosopher-
class was a defining characteristic. Examples survive of 'silent philosopher'
stories from late antiquity which shed an interesting light on this image of
the 'serious philosopher' or *spoudaios*, a kind of gnomological biographic
writing wherein the philosophic protagonist, be it Apollonius of Tyana
or 'Secundus, the Silent Philosopher', enters into an actual state of ver-
bal silence.[13] But it is a decidedly non-Cratylan silence which emerges
from this literature, silence based in the signification (*semeiosis*) of a higher
truth rather than the mere *aporia* inherent in the nature of language; a

[11] Arist. *Metaph.* 1010a12-13.
[12] See Wallis 1987; O'Meara 2000.
[13] See p. 78 in this volume.

positive, rather than a negative silence. Philostratus attributes a kind of
discursive silence to the ancient Pythagoreans in his *Life of Apollonius*:
they understood that καὶ τὸ σιωπᾶν λόγος, 'to keep silence is also to
speak'.[14]

Aristotle, in the section of the *Metaphysics* cited above, goes on to men-
tion Cratylus' critique of Heraclitus on the possibility of stepping in the
same river twice (fr. 41 Bywater); Cratylus counters that to do so even
once is an impossibility (ll. 13–15). While this critique may be conceived
of as having been delivered in Cratylus' early, still vocal days, as presented
by Aristotle it constitutes an early example of what becomes, in the later
history of philosophy, a surprisingly common paradox: that of the silent
philosopher who delivers *sententiae*.

Negative Discourse

A second philosophical option is to restrict discourse to the purely neg-
ative; able only to say what the transcendent truth is *not*, late antique
philosophic and religious writers developed sophisticated negative vocab-
ularies and techniques for outlining (insofar as they deemed it possible)
the absence of what they wished to designate. This is the basic dynamic of
'apophatic' language.[15] Full apophasis goes a step further than simple nega-
tivity by incorporating paradox and self-negation into discourse in order to
heighten the ability of writing to convey the radical indeterminacy of the
non-subject of discourse, be it the Plotinian One, the nature of emptiness
in Zen tracts, or the radical alterity of the *deus absconditus* in many of the
theistic currents arising in the first centuries CE.

Plotinus tells us in Treatise 39, for instance, that the One is the ori-
gin of all noble and majestic things, and in another way not their origin
(VI.8.8.8-9); that it is wholly unrelated to anything (13–14) and yet related
to everything as the principle of all (9.6 *et passim*); that it cannot even
be described with the verb 'to be', but that this and all other predica-
tions must be stripped away from it (8.15). It is at this second level of
'silence' that we begin to see the outlines of the contradiction created by
the Platonist rejection of Cratylus alongside a strong concept of the inef-
fable: the One for Plotinus is completely unsayable[16] (and indeed even the

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[14] Philostratus *V.A.* I.1[53].

[15] See especially Chapter 7.

[16] Language can only say what the One is not (V.3[49]14.6-7), and it itself remains unsayable
(VI.9[9]4.11-12, quoting the Seventh Platonic Epistle 341c5) and unpredicable (III.7[45]2.6-7). See
Chapter 6 in this volume.

'lower' hypostases of the Plotinian universe are 'very difficult to say' [17]), but the task of discourse requires that the philosopher continually make the attempt.[18] While this attempt is never successful in the task of expressing the ineffable, it is by no means seen as vain discourse; it is part of an active philosophic process which 'drives' the Plotinian seeker toward the ineffable One.[19]

Plotinus makes complex use of many different types of apophatic and negative language, and part of what follows will consist in a detailed analysis of how, exactly, he employs different types of negation as part of his philosophic pedagogy. Sometimes Plotinus simply recognises that analogical or equivocal use of normal language is inadequate but not false in discussing the One, and that, since it cannot be named, 'One' is a satisfactory and normal way of speaking of it (e.g. VI.9[9]5.31-2 and ff.). More characteristically, however, he tends to emphasise precisely the tensions inherent in such an unsatisfactory arrangement; the 'One' and 'Good' are both false appellations.[20]

It will be argued that one of the key differences between Plotinus and his Middle Platonist and Neopythagorean predecessors is that Plotinus seems, based on the extant evidence, to have taken most seriously the task of unsaying the ineffable; he is committed to the internal logic of transcendence and his writing grapples with it in a uniquely sustained way. At the same time, apophasis – simple negation or the negation of negation – does not account fully for what Plotinus is doing in his discourse of the One, as he himself recognises, Plotinus maintains in several places in the *Enneads* that apophatic negations themselves remain at the level of *logismos* or *dianoia*, the level of human thought from which all true knowledge of the One is excluded by its nature.[21] Apophasis can point out the need for the aspiring philosopher to transcend discursive thought and outline the edges of the discursive thought-world, but it cannot itself cross over into that which lies beyond.[22]

[17] VI.9[9]3.1-3.

[18] *Ibid.* 4.11-16.

[19] The One is unsayable and unwriteable but when we speak and write we 'impel toward it' (VI.9[9]4.11-16: λέγομεν καὶ γράφομεν πέμποντες εἰς αὐτό).

[20] II.9[33]1.1-8; V.5[32]6.26-30; VI.7[38]38.4-9; VI.9[9]5.29-34. Cf. Bussanich 1996 (41).

[21] See VI.9[9]9.51; VI.7[38]34.3; VI.9[9]7.15 and 20; cf. Hadot 1986b, 247. The details of Plotinian anthropology and the theory of knowledge according to which these concepts play themselves out are discussed on p. 197 ff.

[22] See VI.9[9]9.51; VI.7[38]34.3; VI.9[9]7.15 and 20.

Plotinian Poetics of Transcendence

This book argues that Plotinus is doing something more complex with his philosophic writing than either simple silence or simple negativity will allow. It argues that there is a third philosophic option which incorporates but goes beyond both the silence of Cratylus and the negative discourse of the theologians. Strong claims will be made for Plotinian poetics as an intrinsic and powerful element in Plotinian philosophy, and the discussion will attempt to elucidate the way in which Plotinus' use of written silence is in fact intended as a practical, performative philosophic method in his pedagogic writing.

What is meant by 'poetics' here is an approach to literary creation which emphasises the performative power of text; in this case, the ability of written philosophy to change its reader. One of the assumptions of the present study is that philosophical content cannot be stripped of its literary context, and one of its aims is to show how the literary character of Plotinus' philosophy is an integral part of the account which Plotinus gives and is essential to understanding that account fully. 'Poetics' is thus to be understood as referring not to the narrow genre of writing poetry, but to any theory and practice of writing *qua* writing which takes into account the status of writing itself: its epistemological possibilities including truth-claims, its ability or otherwise to evoke things-in-themselves, and of course, taken in a Late Platonist context, its *ontological* claims. On the philosophic level, then, a primary aim of this work is an analysis of Plotinian writing in context.

More specifically, a certain speech-act is being investigated, namely the positing of a truth and the simultaneous denial that it may, or can, be spoken of. This simple dialectical device, the revealing of a hiding or the hiding of a revealing, lies at the heart of a complex philosophic *topos*, elements of which developed in the first centuries CE both among Platonist and Neopythagorean philosophers and among more demotic Platonising religious movements, referred to in what follows as Platonist 'philosophic silence'.

The growth of this *topos* will be traced in the development of three interrelated trends: on the conceptual level, in the rise of the transcendent absolute and of a conception of certain aspects of reality which are truly ineffable; on the social level, in the changing face of Platonist elitism transformed by the new challenges of late antique ideological struggles for control of the truth; and on the literary or rhetorical level, in the Platonists'

new methods of reading Plato and of constructing a broader wisdom tradi-
tion within the cultures of the past wherein the absolute truth is contained
and transmitted by a specially sanctioned, or even divinely ordained, chain
of transmission, to be accessed only by the philosophic elite. Having estab-
lished a historical model for these developments within philosophy, this
book will investigate Plotinus' place within these traditions of written
silence. It will outline his poetics of unsaying in a way that is both histor-
ically contextualised and which allows us access, as readers of the *Enneads*,
to a greater understanding of what Plotinus was doing when he employed
techniques of secrecy and silence in his pursuit of literary access to true
knowledge about reality.

Modes of Reading and Writing Philosophical Silence

To begin by illustrating some of the dynamics of these literary techniques,
we may pose a preliminary question to an example of Enneadic text, a
quotation from the early Plotinian Treatise 9, *On the Good or the One*.[23]
This treatise is a sustained discussion of the highest level of hyper-ontology
in Plotinus' world-view, the One or Good, and of the soul's means of access
to this hypostasis, and shows the degree to which Plotinus' discourse is
already immersed in the methods of philosophic silence from quite early
on in his career as a writer. A single sentence will serve as a condensed
example of some of the themes and methodologies which Plotinus uses in
unsaying the truth and revealing its hiding. This passage comes near the
end of the treatise; having discussed from several perspectives the ways in
which the One is unnameable, indescribable by normal predicates[24] and
unapproachable by normal cognitive means,[25] Plotinus tells his reader:

> This is the intention of the command given in the mysteries here below not
> to disclose to the uninitiated; since the Good is not disclosable, it prohibits
> the declaration of the divine to another who has not also himself had the
> good fortune to see.[26]

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[23] The *Enneads* have titles which come down from antiquity, chosen by Porphyry, Plotinus' student
and editor (Porph. *Plot.* 4). On Porphyry's edition of Plotinus' works, see H + S 1, Vol. 1 ix-x.

[24] VI.9[9]5.31 ff; 6.55-7.

[25] This treatise is a rich source for Plotinus' circumscription of normal knowledge through creative
metaphor; the One can be seen by *nous* (VI.9[9]3.22-27), and as it were touched (οἷον ἐφάψασθαι
καὶ θιγεῖν [4.27; cf. 7.3-5]), yet cannot be given even the predicates 'ἐκείνου' or 'ὄντος', discourse
instead 'running around' it in attempts to explain what it has undergone in its proximity (49–55).
Neither can it be experienced by way either of normal knowledge (*epistêmê*) nor even of *noêsis*, but
only by a presence superior to knowledge (κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα [4.1-4]).

[26] VI.9[9]11.1 ff: Τοῦτο δὴ ἐθέλον δηλοῦν τὸ τῶν μυστηρίων τῶνδε ἐπίταγμα, τὸ μὴ
ἐκφέρειν εἰς μὴ μεμυημένους, ὡς οὐκ ἔκφορον ἐκεῖνο ὄν, ἀπεῖπε δηλοῦν πρὸς ἄλλον
τὸ θεῖον, ὅτῳ μὴ καὶ αὐτῷ ἰδεῖν εὐτύχηται. Armstrong's translation (2003).

Reading the Truth Hidden in Tradition

As has been noted, Plotinus' philosophical discussions of the One and of the soul's relation to the One are usually approached through philosophical analysis, and it is worthwhile by way of contrast to begin by looking at the way Plotinus is using culture in this text. Plotinus reads the ancient injunction to silence associated with 'the mysteries here below', an injunction to secrecy in the interests of cultic exclusivity, as concealing a philosophical doctrine of ineffability. We may note, firstly, that Plotinus is applying a method of philosophic reading to a cultural institution which is itself extra-textual; such appropriation of religion in the service of philosophy is an important dynamic in Platonist thought explored.[27] We note further that this 'reading' of the mysteries is itself hidden from the 'uninitiated' – that is, from anyone untrained in the particular hermeneutic of Platonist exegesis which discovers (or constructs) the hidden meaning. A second hermeneutic level of secrecy is thus layered below the first, manifest one, attributing to the true philosophy which is able to discover such hidden meanings the status of initiation and the privileged knowledge of the *mystês*.[28]

   This reading of tradition is part of a larger programme which Plotinus embraces, and in some respects pushes forward, of re-reading not only Plato, 'Pythagoras' and Aristotle through late antique eyes, but also Hellenic religion, Homer and other texts and traditions of the Hellenic past, constructing from these materials a perennial tradition with claims to absolute authority and privileged access to the truth. Plotinus' well-known claim to be merely an expounder of ancient wisdom rather than an original thinker amounts to the location of a type of absolute philosophical authority in a non-existent, or *silent*, textual tradition, but one which is paradoxically subjected to the hermeneutic rigours of Late Platonist exegesis.[29] This process in Plotinus embraces re-reading of the ancient mysteries as ageless philosophical wisdom, as seen above, as well as allegorical interpretation of traditional myths, and of Homer and other poets, as repositories of inspired but hidden truths of theology, and, most interestingly, the reading of Plato and other philosophers as though they too were writing with a hidden subtext in precisely the same way. The following discussion will bring out a technical hermeneutic vocabulary for

[27] Chapter 3, esp. p. 103 ff.
[28] The equation of philosophy with the mysteries, and of philosophical *paideia* with initiation, is widespread among Platonists; some reassessment of its significance to philosophy is outlined on p. 106 ff.
[29] What I call Plotinus' 'perennialism' is discussed p. 126 ff.

reading the unwritten tradition both within and outside the canonical texts of Platonist philosophy. It will also problematise to some degree the easy identification of Plotinus as a 'Neoplatonist', or even a self-styled 'Platonist', arguing that Plotinus defined himself simply as a 'right philosopher', an interpreter of a chain of perennial wisdom of which Plato constituted a single link.[30]

Hiding the Secret, Revealing the Hiding

It is characteristic of the discourse of secrecy and revealing employed in this kind of exegesis of the ancient mysteries that, considered logically, it contains an inherent self-contradiction: Plotinus here betrays the 'intention of the command given in the mysteries' even as he reveals its true meaning. In declaring the true nature of the injunction to silence of the mysteries, Plotinus ought surely to be profaning them.

Moreover, Plotinus is revealing the mysteries in a *written* text, a Platonic *bête noire* when the *arcana* of philosophy are under discussion; the traditional Platonic privileging of orality over the written word in philosophical teaching constitutes a paradoxical dynamic underlying all Plotinian writing which seeks to uncover the absolute truths of philosophy.[31]

The theme of 'the secret revealed' takes many forms in Platonist writing, and will appear again and again in the discussion that follows. At the same time, the 'revelation' is often simultaneously a hiding: Plotinus can reveal the true meaning of the injunction, but he is ultimately prevented from disobeying the injunction by the essential incommunicability of the nature of the Good.

The Self-Hiding Secret

In this sense, the secret of the mystery is a self-hiding secret, and Plotinus can only point to the fact of this hiding, not to the hidden itself.[32] He is discussing 'the mysteries self-defended, the mysteries that *can* not be revealed. Fools can only profane them. The dull can neither penetrate the secretum or divulge it to others.'[33] The parallel here between the inaccessibility of the Good, its self-hiding nature which is only accessible to the serious philosopher if at all and the inaccessible nature of the true meaning of the

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[30] See p. 253 ff.
[31] As discussed p. 69 ff.
[32] Cf. Pépin 1984, 32.
[33] Pound 1968, 145.

mystery injunction, also to be unearthed only by the adept, is striking. I discuss ways in which the 'self-hiding' secret of the transcendent added a new dimension to philosophic silence not to be found before the second century CE, and which we see seriously explored for the first time in Plotinus' works. The juxtaposition of the rhetoric of hiding and the revelation of the secret is also of note; we will find again and again in our history of Platonist philosophic silence the revelation of a secret not indeed hidden but actually flagged by the rhetorics of secrecy and silence.

Secrecy as Silence, Silence as Secrecy

Further consideration of the passage reveals an exegetical sleight of hand: the traditional law of non-disclosure of the mysteries is smoothly transferred to an indication of the philosophical truth of a Plotinian claim, *viz.* the ineffability of the Good. In other words, the *prohibition* of disclosure becomes the *impossibility* of disclosure, secrecy becoming silence; again, Plotinus is telling a secret while simultaneously withdrawing it.

We find in this passage an interplay of two modes of what might be called written silence: writing the prohibition of disclosure and writing the impossibility of disclosure. This interplay, which Plotinus and later Platonists employ extensively, is fostered by ambiguities in the Greek vocabulary of silence itself: the mysteries were traditionally ἀπόρρητα or ἄρρητα, 'unsayable', i.e., 'not to be spoken of', words which in the course of time and with the rise of the idea of the ineffable in post-Hellenistic philosophy and religion, came more and more to signify 'unsayable' in an absolute sense – that is, 'impossible to reveal'.[34] As I argue, however, these terms never lost their original signification, and always suggested secrecy as well as ineffability. A key aspect of philosophic silence is thus the interplay, or interference, between the concepts of secrecy and silence.

The Indeterminacy of Ineffability and Philosophic Register

As will be discussed, there are many loci in Plotinus and his Middle Platonist predecessors where neither meaning can be exclusively accurate; the term 'unsayable' hovers between the two meanings, and signifies neither in

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[34] Cf. Casel 1919, 6; Pépin 1984, 32–35; Brisson 1987, 96–97. Mortley 1986, 8–10 notes an inherent potential for ambiguity in the use of the Greek alpha privative, whereby an adjective so modified may have either an emphatic or a totalising meaning, an ambiguity which would be exploited by the apophatic discourse of later Platonists (citing Arist. *Metaph.* 1023a1: ἄτμητον may mean 'difficult to cut' or 'impossible to cut'). We may add to this the deontic meanings associated with the terms ἀπόρρητον and ἄρρητον.

a full or absolute sense. Apophatic language is characterised by a tension between predication and its impossibility brought about, in its simplest form, through an immediate and systematic gainsaying of any predicative statement. The rhetorical alternation and interference between the two modes of 'cannot speak' and 'must not speak' result in further, deeper layers of indeterminacy in Plotinian language.[35] Plotinus incorporates an indeterminacy of 'register' into his treatment of the ineffable, blending the concerns of philosophy with those of religion while refusing ever to set foot firmly on either side of the fence.[36] Similarly, he sometimes switches register from the dispassionate discussion of concepts to the first-person language of the personal encounter with higher metaphysical entities, often with a disconcerting abruptness which leaves the boundaries between the two modes of discourse blurred, and the nature of the ineffable reality under discussion further removed from any concrete concept which the reader might form.[37]

Attempts at translation serve to illustrate how difficult it is to maintain this suspension of register in interpretation. Simply by capitalising 'the Good', we risk evoking a theistic mindset foreign to, or at least irreducibly uncertain in, the original text[38] (while the alternative, leaving terms such as 'one' or 'good' uncapitalised, puts unjustified strain on readers). Plotinus tells us that 'the good is not disclosable', but 'the Good' is already disclosing something of the translator's interpretative approach, and adding an element of determinacy which the author strives to avoid. It should be understood that the capitalisation of 'One' and 'Good' in the present work are for ease of reading, and the reader should strive to attribute no personal or theistic characteristics to Plotinus' first principle.

The Paradox of Writing the Ineffable

A final seeming contradiction may be extracted from our passage, one which returns our reading to the initial question which sparked this

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[35] The term ἀπόφασις, in 'a coincidence worthy of note' (Mortley 1986, 429) is itself ambiguous, having in fact two radically opposed meanings; it may be derived from ἀποφήμι to mean, on the simplest level, 'negation, denial', and from ἀποφαίνομαι to mean 'statement, affirmation'.

[36] The categories of 'religion' and 'philosophy' are modern, and it would be more correct to say that, for Plotinus, concerns which to modern philosophers are bracketed as 'religious' or 'theological' are central to philosophy proper; it is however clear that these concerns were not considered strictly philosophical by all philosophers in Plotinus' day, and that his project was concerned with an appropriation of the sacred by the philosophical; cf. van Nuffelen 2011, 7–10, and see p. 103 ff.

[37] See Chapter 7.

[38] See e.g. the translation of Armstrong (2003) *passim*. Cf. Sells 1994, 11 and the comments of Hadot cited p. 33 below.

inquiry: the status of the *Enneads* themselves as written works. The impossibility of disclosure of the Good through language to anyone who has not already seen it himself[39] is a challenge to the very enterprise of philosophic writing. It would seem that writing about the One or Good cannot, according to Plotinus, serve as an exposition of its nature,[40] nor can it be of use to such as 'have seen', whose knowledge will be, by definition, perfect and self-confirming.[41] It is left to the reader to determine why Plotinus undertakes such a project at all. This problem has largely been ignored in interpretation; after all, Plotinus clearly felt it worthwhile to write his treatises, and who are we to take him to task for this? Nevertheless, the question remains a cogent and significant one, and one which we sometimes see Plotinus pondering in the *Enneads* themselves.

Outline of the Present Work

The foregoing discussion has highlighted some of the ways in which philosophical culture, rather than philosophy *simpliciter*, influenced the ways in which Plotinus wrote about the ineffable. Plotinus was not writing in a cultural vacuum: there was a tradition of *silentium philosophorum*[42] in which he both participated and took a defining role, and which determined part of what it was to philosophise rightly in his day and time. Part 1 of this book will establish the theoretical parameters of philosophic silence and draw up a historical model of its development up to Plotinus' time. The book as a whole will contextualise the *Enneads* in terms of this tradition. Chapter 1 begins by outlining the interpretative difficulties which the recondite nature of the subject presents.

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[39] The One or Good may not be said or thought, but it may (sometimes) be *seen* and *touched*, a shift in vocabulary which plays an important part in the poetic articulation of silence in the Plotinian corpus, and in fact emerges as one of the ways in which Plotinus creates a change in the philosophic register mentioned above. See Chapter 7.

[40] Although, as has been discussed, certain *negative* statements about the One can be expounded in a fairly normal, discursive way, the truth-value of even these statements is called into question by Plotinus' apophatic refusal to predicate the One.

[41] Technically speaking, there can never be knowledge of the One. The identification with or participation in *nous*, however, which is the highest form of what we might call 'knowledge' and which comes closest to realisation of the One through contemplation, is by definition perfect, timeless and complete, and its highest 'part' is capable of self-transcendence and an ineffable attainment of the One (as discussed in Chapter 6).

[42] The term is from Casel 1919, the first large-scale study of philosophic silence, which remains the only full attempt at a historical survey of the kinds of written silence dealt with in this book (partial exceptions include Mortley 1986 and Montiglio 2000, both of which provide a more theoretically nuanced approach than Casel, but which are more narrow in their scope).

The following three chapters conduct a basic historical investigation of the rise of elements of philosophic silence. Chapter Two examines the surviving pre-Classical and Classical sources which were later developed by Platonists into a tradition of esoteric philosophy, and examines the figure of the 'silent philosopher' as he appears in late antique accounts. Chapter 3 examines the development in the first centuries CE of the ideas of tradition and of esoteric transmission which informed the writings of such thinkers as Alcinoüs, Numenius, Celsus, Maximus of Tyre and Plutarch. It charts the development of concepts of a *philosophia perennis* among Platonists, a simultaneously culturally embedded and transcendent truth which serves, in later Platonism, as the historical *location* of the hidden, ineffable truth of philosophy, and the concurrent development of a Platonist hermeneutic which read Plato as the propounder of a hidden, dogmatic message. Chapter 4 turns to Plotinus, showing the development of these same 'traditional' materials in the *Enneads*. Not surprisingly, it emerges that Plotinus, like all philosophers, was writing within a tradition and, like all great philosophers, bending the tradition's contours and lexicon toward a set of needs which were his own.

In Part II the discussion turns to the theoretical side of the philosophy of transcendence. Chapter 5 examines the rise of the transcendent absolute in Middle Platonism, concentrating on theories of the limits of discourse and of esoteric and other indirect modes of expression as envisioned by these philosophers. This chapter considers Middle Platonism as a broad cultural movement incorporating the Platonising religious movements of the first centuries CE as well as philosophy proper (and several gradations between these two, somewhat artificial, extremes), and examines the concurrent rise of strong tropes of transcendence, silence and ineffability in these movements. Chapter 6 again turns to Plotinus, analysing his stance on the problems of transcendence, which he treats with a striking depth and rigour that draws on both his philosophical and religious predecessors. This chapter will use the preceding discussions to cast light on the metaphysical situation of Plotinian discourse, particularly the status of *nous* and *noêsis* as regards truth-claims, and the anthropology which situates the human agent within the Plotinian world. Taken together, Chapters 5 and 6 describe the conceptual space within which Plotinus is writing and address the problems of the nature of writing, both for the writer and for the reader as philosophical agents, the ability of discursive thought to attain to and transmit true knowledge and the theoretical potential for philosophic writing to surpass the limits of the discursive.

Chapter 7 is a detailed analysis of Plotinus' strategies of writing with regard to the limits of discourse, conducting a close reading of an exemplary passage and setting it in dialogue with other passages from the *Enneads*. It begins with investigations of Plotinian techniques of aphairesis and apophasis, and shows, through case studies from the *Enneads*, the ways in which these techniques, with their function of 'stripping away' false ideas (indeed, *all* ideas) about reality and of unsaying the partially true statements of ontology (that is, *all* statements), are used as tools of written philosophy. After the first section delineating the self-imposed limits of discourse in Plotinus, the second investigates the ways in which Plotinus transcends (or transgresses against) these limits in his writing. A third section makes some proposals as to how Plotinus is using the unsaid and unsayable in his work as a whole in the service of his philosophy of transcendence, while also considering the social aspects of his philosophic silence.

Finally, the Conclusion draws together the cultural and social themes of Part I with the theoretical discussions of Part II, delineating a model of philosophic silence in Plotinus which incorporates both aspects of philosophy in a single discursive *topos*. Several appendices expand on points of interest which lie outside the main arguments of this book. Footnotes throughout direct the reader to these essays, which are designed to be helpful and enriching, rather than essential, to the main text.