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Neoplatonism after Derrida is a study of various passages and themes in two philosophical traditions that one might initially think have little to do with each other: deconstruction and Ancient and Medieval Platonism. Gersh’s study, however, taking as a beginning point Derrida’s explicit or implicit engagement with Neoplatonism, shows in great detail important points of contact between these two ways of thinking philosophically. The study is aimed fairly squarely at specialists with an interest in at least one of these fields.

The main focus of the study is the working of language in philosophical expression. In its four chapters, Gersh lays out Derrida’s account of writing and his interest in negative theology, and the Neoplatonic deployment of language, which parallels the deconstructive practice. In the process Gersh deconstructs both Derrida and Neoplatonism. His account of Derrida’s actual practice within texts finds that it makes use of A.J. Greimas’ tool of the semiotic square, which implies a sort of quasi-formalism that Derrida would undoubtedly have disavowed. His account of the Neoplatonic structure of remaining, procession, and reversion finds a conscious juxtaposition of opposed linguistic terms (eternal/temporal, unity/multiplicity) that points to a fluidity of written expression that many scholars of Ancient philosophy might find surprising.

In chapter 1, ‘Derrida reads (Neo-) Platonism’, Gersh sets the terms of the study, and gives an example of his deconstructive reading by juxtaposing three sets of ‘philosophemes’, with one term in each drawn from Neoplatonism and one from Derridean deconstruction. The upshot in this chapter is to show that in Neoplatonism itself there is a gradual movement from an exclusively monosemous propositional discourse about the principles of things to a sort of writing that is inherently polysemous. In simple terms, Neoplatonic texts speak about the One, which is above all thought, and Intellect, which is above propositional discourse, but do so through the medium of written, propositional philosophical texts. He argues that they do so by laying out a system of determinately related terms while undermining that system at the same time, a practice that turns out to be in some ways similar to deconstruction.

In chapter 2, ‘What is called “Negative Theology?”’, Gersh presents a detailed analysis of the Derridean essay, ‘Sauf le Nom, (Post-Scriptum)’. He argues that Derrida’s account of the generation of ideality, in an inversion of Husserl, is one where ideality arises through the repetition and citation of linguistic terms. The ground of this is the semiotic theory of Saussure. Gersh also argues that Derrida orders his manipulation of linguistic signs according to certain patterns derived from Greimas’ semiotic square. He calls this the (a)semiotic square, because Derrida extends his theory to the morphemes and phonemes of language, rather
than just the words. He demonstrates that such patterns structure ‘Sauf le Nom’, and argues that they parallel the Neoplatonic structures of remaining, procession and reversion.

Chapter 3, ‘Margins of Augustine’, is an analysis of the ‘reversion’ in Augustine’s *De Quantitate Animae*. In it, he demonstrates that Augustine’s use of reversion is situated within a metaphysical structure of superior and inferior terms such as corporeal/incorporeal, divisible/indivisible, which clearly corresponds to the asymmetrical contradictories of deconstruction. Further, Gersh brings out the performativity inherent in language, by pointing to the fact that Augustine’s text has as its aim to make the reader follow the author’s own ascent through the hierarchically ordered terms described as actions of the soul, culminating in a sort of ‘remaining’ that is contemplation.

The final chapter, ‘…Remains to be Thought’, is the most complex. Here Gersh examines how Neoplatonic texts can speak of what lies above the discursive, about Intellect and the One, through an examination of various strategies in Heideggerian and Derridean texts. The upshot is that in Heidegger, and especially in Derrida, any particular utterance is thought of as a truncation of the resources of language. Preceding any particular utterance, in Derrida, there is a ‘performative experience’ of the relation between linguistic terms that both arises out of particular utterances and cannot be reduced to any particular utterance or set of utterances. Parallel to this is the Neoplatonic account of Intellect’s thoughts of the One, Soul’s thoughts of Intellect, and writing’s expression of Soul’s discursive thought. At each of these levels, the ‘expression’ is based on an experience that precedes the expression, and cannot be captured by it. This point of contact is behind Derrida’s employment of a discursive form of negative theology.

This study is extremely complex, and its fertility is difficult to express in a short review. Gersh’s technique is deconstructive, in the sense that he juxtaposes many different texts and themes. But within each segment of his text he employs monosemous propositional argument. In essence, the study is a sort of workbook, through which the reader can come to a better understanding of both Neoplatonism and deconstruction. It goes a long way towards demystifying Derrida, and it points to a very real and important linguistic element within the Platonism that was the backbone of Western philosophy for almost two millennia. It is not a book to be picked up lightly, but serious and sustained thinking about the multitude of points of contact that it presents will reward the patient reader. Further, Gersh’s own expertise in Neoplatonic scholarship comes through. This is not a study that simply inhabits the contemporary point of view and reads the history from its assumptions, but rather one that attempts to show the shortcomings of such a technique. Gersh conducts a genuine conversation between a Continental philosopher who continually engages with the Western tradition, and the part of the Western tradition that anticipates most strongly many contemporary Continental developments.
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