LYING AGAINST TIME: GNOSTIC, POETRY, CRITICISM

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Valentinus, whose fragments show a mythopoeic power beyond that evidenced in any complete Gnostic text we possess, wrote this in a letter, as reported by Clement of Alexandria:

Even as fear fell upon the angels in the presence of Adam when he uttered greater sounds than his status in the creation justified, sounds caused by the one who invisibly had deposited in Adam seed of celestial substance so that Adam expressed himself freely, so also among the generations of men of our world, the works of men become objects of fear to their own makers, as in the instances of statues, images and everything which hands fashion in the name of a “god.” For Adam, being fashioned in the name of “man,” inspired angelic fear of the preexistent man because preexistent man was in Adam. They, the angels, were terrified and quickly concealed or ruined their work.

An exegesis of the literary strength of this magnificent fragment is the starting point for my attempt to expound part of the “meaning” of Gnosis. My way into Gnosis is not psychological, philosophical, or historical, and may or may not be “religious.” Within the necessary limitation of my own misreading of Gnosis, I would want to call it a Gnostic way, because I have found that my mode of interpreting literary texts can be described more accurately as a Valentinian and Lurianic approach than as being Freudian, Nietzschean, or Viconian. A Valentinian and Lurianic stance makes possible, at least for me, an “antithetical” and revisionist way of reading Wordsworth and Shelley, Emerson and Whitman, Yeats and Stevens. Perhaps a kind of literary criticism opened up by Gnostic and Kabbalistic dialectic can be turned back upon Gnostic texts, so as to see what the Valentinians and Lurianics read like when they are read as Emerson or Yeats can be read.

What is the fear that falls upon sculptor and poet, according to Valentinus, when they behold the statues and images that they have fashioned in the name of a “god”? We might think of the dramatic speaker of Blake’s Tyger, who fears what turns out to be an image he himself has framed, except that Blake himself is hardly one with that
frightened speaker. What is it in an artist that can look upon his own handiwork and find it frightening? For “a god” here we can read “the daemonic” or in our Age of Freud “the uncanny” (unheimlich). Valentinus gives us two clues for interpretation, both analogical. Adam frightened the angels because his voice reverberated with the power of a preexistent Man, a Primal or Divine Anthropos or Adam Kadmon, in whose name Adam had been fashioned. The angels were terrified because they realized that a greater power or freedom of expression than they enjoyed thus belonged to Adam, who by sharing in the name of preexistent Anthropos stood over them in hierarchical rank and stood before them in priority of genesis. In their terror, the angels rapidly hid or botched their work, which can only have been the cosmos, the world into which Adam has been thrown, but which would have been inferior to Adam (and to us) even if the demiurgical angels had not lost their nerve.

Our exegesis hardly has begun to open up the splendors of this Valentinian fragment. Even the two analogical clues—the angels’ fear of Adam, and their ruining of their work—are at once oddly alike and different, in that the angels’ fear of Adam is their fear of a name, just as the human artist’s fear is of a daemonic name, but the angels’ botching of creation comes rather from their lacking a name greater than their own in which their creation can share, unlike the frightened human artist who does not conceal or ruin his work, despite his terror. To understand these diverse analogical hints, I suggest that we read Valentinus’s brief text antithetically, which is precisely how that text itself interprets the texts having priority over it, Genesis and Plato’s Timaeus, and perhaps, more subtly, the Gospel of John. Valentinus is troping upon and indeed against these precursor authorities, and the purpose and effect of his troping is to reverse his relationship to the Bible and to Plato, by joining himself to an asserted earlier truth that they supposedly have distorted. The greater sounds uttered in his letter testify to the belatedness of the Bible and of Plato, who like the terrified angels have concealed or ruined their creation.

Valentinus, as we would expect of him, does not distinguish between Creation and Fall in regard to the cosmos, the work of the angels. His attitude to art is rather Paterian, in that the statue or poem exceeds in power what it represents, exceeds and surprises the artists’ expectations, because sculptor and poet do not know that they work in the name of a “god.” The cosmic Creation falls below angelic design, but the human creation rises above artistic design, because it sounds in the name of preexistence. What seems the kernel of Valentinus’s myth making here is this formula: to fashion in the name of a being more Sublime, that is a being higher in an agonistic hierarchy of measurement. The angels are ignorant, artists are ignorant, and Adam is evidently ignorant also. The preexistent Man is not ignorant, because presumably to be a God-Man is to be the Gnosis, is to be free.

Does Valentinus’s fragment imply that artistic fear is the consequence of angelic fear, or that it is only the analogy of the earlier terror? I come forward eighteen centuries from the Valentinian myth to its parodistic and ironic equivalent in Thomas Mann’s “Descent into Hell” that is the “Prelude” to his Joseph-tetralogy. Mann calls Gnosticism “man’s truest knowledge of himself,” and celebrates what he calls... the figure of the first or first completely human man, the Hebraic Adam qadmon; conceived as a youthful being made out of pure light, formed before the beginning of the world as prototype and abstract of humanity.

Mann describes the Gnostic and Manichean vision, which he compounds, as a “narcissistic picture, so full of tragic charm,” and he names the Gnostic quest pattern as “the romance of the soul.” Erich Heller, commenting on the Joseph saga, makes the Mannian judgment that the “Gnostic tradition is the exact theological version of Schoenhauer’s metaphysics.” I think that this should be modified from “exact” to “approximate,” except in regard to that part of Schoenhauer’s metaphysics which constitutes his aesthetic of the Sublime, as Schoenhauer’s Sublime does seem to me exactly Gnostic.

Heller speaks of Mann’s theology as being “the theology of irony,” and I will suggest later that irony is, in the rhetoric of Gnosis, only a preparatory trope. Mann therefore, in his playfulness, does not seem to me a Gnostic writer, as compared to Kafka, Rilke, and Yeats in our century, or in the nineteenth century, Emerson and Melville, Balzac and Victor Hugo, Novalis and Nerval, among others. Mann indeed seems hardly Gnostic compared to such genuinely mixed cases as Carlyle, Gnostic in his view of man but not in his vision of nature, or Blake, wholly Gnostic in his stance towards nature, but opposing the Gnosis in his vision of man.

Mann plays at Gnosticism precisely because it gives him a model
for his own perhaps equivocal Modernism, and that is why Mann can be useful in answering our interpretative question about Valentinus’s fragment. The Modernist or mock-Gnostic would attribute artistic anxiety and fear of the created work to an angelic or daemonic fear or loss of nerve, but the truly Gnostic interpreter would find artistic anxieties-of-representation to be only analogous to the angelic failure of courage. The analogy touches its limit where Valentinian Gnosis properly begins, which is in a liberating knowledge that excludes all aesthetic irony, precisely because the inaugurating realization in such knowledge makes of all Creation and all Fall one unified event, and sees that event as belonging altogether to the inner life of God, and not to the life of man, except insofar as man is Anthropos or pre-existent Adam, that is, not part of the Creation.

A Gnostic aesthetic would say that works of artists become objects of fear, even to those artists, because the statues or poems are works of true knowledge. Yeats remarked, at the end of his life, that man could embody the truth, but could not know it, which is an inverted Gnostic formulation. Friedherich Schlegel said that the true aesthetic was the Kabbalah, an insight partly worked out in our time very seriously by Walter Benjamin, a true Gnostic, and parodistically by Borges, like Mann a Modernist pretending to a Gnosticism. I would revise Schlegel by asserting that the truest aesthetic is the Valentinian Gnosis, and its surprisingly close descendant in the Lurianic or recent Kabbalah, and I return now to Valentinus’s fragment to begin a sketch of this truest aesthetic.

The Adamic “greater sounds” that frighten the angels are necessarily poems. To ask how poems can be the Gnosis is to ask what is it that poems know, which in turn is to ask what is it that we can come to know when we read poems? But to make the question itself Gnostic we need to cast away nearly the entire philosophical tradition of knowledge. I say “nearly” because of my respect for and debt to Hans Jonas, whose work has demonstrated the authentic resemblances between Gnosticism and the Heideggerian revision of ontology and epistemology. But the Heideggerian revision, in its aesthetic implications, has fostered the capable critical school of Deconstruction, which has touched its limit precisely in the tracing of any poem’s genuinely epistemological or negative moments. To get beyond that critical dilemma or a poria or limit of interpretability, I suggest that we abandon Heidegger for Valentinus and Luria. “Poetic knowledge” may be an oxymoron, but it has more in common with Gnosis than it does with philosophy. Both are modes of antithetical knowledge, which means of knowledge both negative and evasive, or knowledge not acceptable as such to epistemologists of any school.

"Knowing," as an English word, goes back to the root gno, and one of its most frequent current usages is not far from Gnosis: “To perceive directly whether with mind or with the sense; to apprehend clearly and certainly.” We need amend this only by asking: what does the Gnostic perceive directly with his mind, what does he apprehend clearly and certainly? Jonas answers: “The 'what' of the knowledge contains the explanation of its own origin, communication, and promised effect.” Jonas’s language here is the language of the poetic Sublime, rather than of philosophy, and Jonas is centered even more firmly in literary tradition when he wisely goes on to describe the typology of Gnosis in terms of its imagination and mood as well as its thought. A knowledge that is at once “secret, revealed and saving” is indeed the language of a “transcendental genesis.” Like Milton’s Satan in his fall from the Godhead, a fall that opens up a new, Sublime, Negative creation in the abyss, so the Valentinian creation/fall brings about a Sublime and Negative cosmos, with the difference that the Gnostic fall is within the Godhead, and not just from it. Jonas sets the Valentinian cosmos as being a “stratification along a vertical axis, on the antithesis of the heights and the depths.”

In this cosmos, a negative movement of knowledge ensues, from divine loss of knowledge to demiurgical lack of knowledge to human want of knowledge until at last the dialectic of negation brings about a human restoration of knowledge as the vehicle of salvation. Jonas’s commentary again is far closer to a poetic than philosophical vision of time.

This progressive movement constitutes the time axis of the gnostic world, as the vertical order of aeons and spheres constitutes its space axis. Time, in other words, is actuated by the onward thrust of a mental life.... It is a metaphysic of pure movement and event.

Jonas packs in so much here that it wrongs him to analyze only the time-element in his remarks. But time is the puzzle that Gnosis and modern poetry meet in sharing. By “modern poetry” here I mean the Renaissance and later, down to our various contemporary modernisms. Puech and other scholars have emphasized the Gnostic hatred for time, but only Jonas has caught the precise accent of belatedness that characterizes what is unique to Gnosis. Comparing
Valentinus and the early Heidegger, Jonas brings them together in their abdication of the present moment, in their destruction of the temporal aspect of metaphorical presence. Valentinianism, Jonas observes,

makes no provision for a present on whose content knowledge may dwell and, in beholding, stay the forward thrust. There is past and future, where we come from and where we speed to, and the present is only the moment of gnostis itself, the peripety from the one to the other in the supreme crisis of the eschatological now.

Jonas is unsurpassed in his rapid characterization of what he calls Heidegger’s “breathless dynamism,” with its precise analogue to the Valentinian Augenblick:

...‘facticity,’ necessity, having become, having been thrown, guilt, are existential modes of the past; ‘existence,’ being ahead of one’s present, anticipation of death, care, and resolve, are existential modes of the future.

No present remains for genuine existence to repose in....

I follow Jonas then in reading the Gnostic temporal dilemma as being caught at the crisis-point between past and future, a dilemma perhaps more Kafkaan even than it is Heideggerian. But here I come to the darkest puzzle that Gnosis and belated poetry share: what is that which can be known when there is no present moment in which a knowing can take place? I take it that this is why a Gnostic never learns anything, because learning is a process in time. I think that the poet in a poet, the strong poetic self, also cannot learn anything. The thought-form of the Hebrew Bible depends upon a movement in the fullness of time, a movement in which moral learning can take place, which is another reason why both Gnosis and belated poetry are so remote both from Hebrew ideas of reality, and from the Hebraic mode of listening to the voicing of the Word. Belatedness sees a writing in space; it cannot hear a voicing in time. What is known through seeing a writing is more problematic than the urgency of an oral revelation, the urgency of a time always open to redemption.

What a Gnostic or a strong poet knows is what only a strong reading of a belated poem or lie-against-time teaches: a freedom compounded of three elements, and these are: negation, evasion, extravagance. It is the mutual audacity of belated religion or Gnosis, and of belated poetry or Petrarch and after, to create a freedom out of and by catastrophe. I will examine first the dialecic of negation, evasion, and extravagance in Valentinianism, and then suggest a version of the same dialectic in the history of poetry.

Negation in Gnosis needs to be distinguished from negation in Hegelian philosophy and from what Freud calls negation, though the distance from psychoanalysis is not nearly so great as it is from philosophy. If philosophy is, as Novalis said, the desire to be at home everywhere, then Gnosis is closer to what Nietzsche thought the motive of art: the desire to be elsewhere, the desire to be different. Jonas illuminatingly contrasts Gnosis to its own contemporary philosophic rival:

...Gnostic emanationism, unlike the harmonistic one of the Neoplatonists, has a catastrophic character. The form of its progress is crisis....

... For tragedy and drama, crisis and fall, require concrete and personal agents, individual divinities—... The Plotinean descendus of Being, in some respects an analogy to the gnostic one, proceeds through the autonomous movement of impersonal concept, by an inner necessity that is its own justification. The gnostic descensus cannot do without the contingency of subjective affect and will....

Following Jonas, I turn to Hegelian negation as the first movement of that affect and will. Whereas Hegelian negation also insists that true knowledge begins when philosophy destroys the experience of daily life, such destruction is a phase on the way to a universal, and so Hegelian truth finally negates both the per se existence of the object and the individual ego. But Gnosticism would not accept this shifting of the truth to a universal. The warrant for the truth remains personal, indeed is the true personal, the pneuma of the Gnostic, his self as opposed to his mere psyche or soul. Shall we say, against the philosophers, that Gnosis is the rapid, impatient labor of the Negative?

Freudian negation, perhaps because of its hidden root in Schopenhauer’s concept of the Sublime, has one revelatory resemblance to Gnostic Negation. In the Freudian Verneinung, a previously repressed thought, feeling or desire enters consciousness only by being disowned. A kind of truth is thus acknowledged intellectually, even as it is given no emotional acceptance. This psychical duplicity or metapsychological dualism empties out the presence of the present moment just as the Hegelian negative does, but it carries also the implicit “thesis that there is sense in everything, which in turn implies that everything is past and there is nothing new,” to quote J. H. Van den Berg’s critique.
of Freud. What Freud calls the bodily ego’s Negation by a mingled act of projection and introjection is very close to the Gnostic Negation of Time and of the Creation. But here I enter again upon the Gnostic vision of time, which is the ultimate form of Gnostic Negation, and I will discuss this darkest of visions in some detail.

The Hermetic Aesopius sets all time into the context of the lie by its declaration that “where things are discerned at intervals of time, there are falsehoods; and where things have an origin in time, there errors arise.” Much fiercer is the vision given to us of Ialdabaoth the Demiurge in the Gnostic Apocryphon of John, where that deluded creator is said to have “bound the gods of the heavens, the angels, the demons, and men in measure, duration, and time, in order to subject them to the chain of destiny.” Heimarmene, cosmic fate, is our sleep, our exile, our anxiety, and above all our ignorance. Time is thus the supreme negation, because it parodies the truth of Gnosis.

Time in Gnosis is what Shelley called “an envious shadow,” and aesthetically is an acute withdrawal or contraction of meaning. In strictly poetic terms, the time of the Gnostics is any poem’s fiction of duration, that is, its way of figurating the illusion of a temporal sequence. Mallarmé may seem more a Hegelian than a Gnostic in his negative moments, but his tropes of duration and visions of the void are thoroughly Gnostic. When the serene irony of the eternal blue stuns the poet in what he called a sterile desert of sorrows, and what the Gnostics called the Kenoma, then he inhabits the cosmos of Valentinus and not of Hegel. It is a cosmos of mirrors that mirror only nothing or the void, in a fall in which we never stop falling, hence the terrible Mandæan formula: “How long I have endured already and how long I have been dwelling in this world.”

This demonic temporality becomes necessarily the most extreme mode of negative theology ever known, far surpassing the Christian negative theology that was to stem from the Neoplatonic temporal vision of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. A God who transcends the principles both of deity and goodness of course transcends all temporality also; there is nothing left of the Hebraic hearing of the dynamic motion of God in time, in the vision of the pseudo-Dionysius, which is really a belated exercise in Platonic theology, and yet became a permanent element in Christianity. But Gnostic negative theology is yet more drastic because Gnostic transcendence really needs a word beyond transcendence to designate so hyperbolic a sense of being above the world, “that world,” our mere universe of death.

Gnostic metaphor depends therefore upon the most outrageous dualism that our traditions ever have known. In a Gnostic metaphor, the “inside” term or pneuma and the “outside” cosmic term are so separated that every such figuration becomes a catachresis, an extension or abuse of metaphor. Metaphors of time become particularly abused, as in the Valentinian parody of Plato’s Timæus, where I again follow Jonas’s path-breaking work.

Freud says that “negation, the derivative of expulsion, belongs to the instinct of destruction.” Developing Freud’s remark in his book Allegory, Angus Fletcher points to the near-identity between a kind of satire and Gnosticism:

In a way Freud’s term “negation” names the process by which, unconsciously, the mind selects terms to express its ambivalence. Extreme dualism must cause symbolic antitheses. One gets the impression sometimes that the most powerful satirists are dualists, users of “negation,” to the point that they become naive gnostics. They, like Gnostics, hover on an edge of extreme asceticism which can drop off absolutely into an extreme libertinism....

Something of the destructive, ambivalent satire that Fletcher describes can be seen in the sophisticated Gnosticism of the Valentinians when they directly parody Plato. Something indeed of the violence of the Gnostic satire of Plato can be surmised by the counter-violence of the ordinarily gentle Plotinus, when he writes: “Against the Gnostics; or Against Those that Affirm the Creator of the Cosmos and the Cosmos Itself to be Evil”:

Misunderstanding their text [Plato’s Timæus]... in every way they misrepresent Plato’s theory as to the method of creation as in many other respects they dishonor his teaching....

What exercised Plotinus (as Jonas and others have shown) was the Gnostic misprision of that beautiful passage in the Timæus (73c.f.) where Plato makes the best case he can for time. For Plato, time’s positive and formal aspect is that it reflects and imitates its original, eternity, but its negative and qualitative aspect is that the mimesis is necessarily imperfect:

When the father and creator saw the creature which he had made moving and living, the created image of the eternal gods, he rejoiced, and in his joy determined to make the copy still more like the original, and as this was an eternal living being, he sought to make the universe eternal, so far as might be. Now the nature of the ideal being was everlasting, but to bestow this attribute in its fullness upon a creature was impossible. Where-
fore he resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity, and this image we call time.

What Plato gives here has been a kind of analogical model for literary criticism from second century B.C. Alexandria down to the orthodox academic present. Indeed, this appears to be the ultimate model for the benign notion of literary influence as a positive transmission from source to later text, and from writer to reader, throughout Western history. Though there is some loss acknowledged and regretted by Plato in this passage, the loss is a necessity of demiurgical creativity, and the clear implication is that every subsequent and even more belated poet must imitate the Demiurge. Alexandrian or analogical literary criticism, from Aristarchus to modern American Formalism or New Criticism, assumes the image of a verbally represented temporality as a fit mimesis for a fullness somehow present beyond time. The analogists of Alexandria followed Plato and Aristotle in being able to assume that literary texts were analogous to their interpretations, and since the Greek “analogy” means an “equality of ratios,” such an assumption allowed a literary text the status of a unity that might have a fixed meaning. Opposed to the Library of Alexandria in the second century B.C. was the Library of Pergamon, as headed by Crates of Mallos. Crates set the Stoic concept “anomaly” or “disproportion of ratios” against the Platonic-Aristotelian “analogy.” To apply a Stoic anomalous or allegorical reading to a literary text is indeed to see it not as a unity but as an interplay of disproportionate ratios or differences. A meaning rising out of such ratios will not be fixed but wavered, or as we say these days, “intertextual.” Valentinus, beginning again in Alexandria four centuries after Aristarchus, accepts the Stoic system of interpretation by anomaly and applies it to Plato, much to the dismay both of Neoplatonists and of the Great Church. For here is the Valentian reading of the Platonic “moving image of eternity”:

When the Demiurge further wanted to imitate also the boundless, eternal, infinite and timeless nature of [the original eight Aeons in the Pleroma], but could not express their immutable eternity, being as he was a fruit of defect, he embodied their eternity in times, epochs, and great numbers of years, under the delusion that by the quantity of times he could represent their infinity. Thus truth escaped him and he followed the lie. Therefore he shall pass away when the times are fulfilled.

The Stoic mode of allegory or irony as produced through the operation of anomaly, or disproportion of revisionary ratios, makes this Valentian parody also an allegory of reading, and again an allegory of misprision. By misprision I mean literary influence viewed not as benign transmission but as deliberately perverse misreading, whose purpose is to clear away the precursor so as to open a space for oneself. For Plato, the Demiurge is a valiant though finally inadequate yet faithful copyist. For Valentinus, the Demiurge is a liar, whose lies is both about Eternity and also against Eternity. Valentinus, in opposition, also lies, but his lie is not about time, but rather against time. This is a remarkably Nietzschean lie or parody or antithetical fiction, for as a lie it expresses the will’s resentment against time, and even more against time’s cruel statement: “It was.” Valentian Negation is thus the opening movement in a poetic dialectic, and so is remarkably akin to its collateral descendant in the Lurianic zimzum, or creative contraction of the Divine, upon which Gershom Scholem has been the definitive and invaluable commentator. Both mythopoetic motions fall away from time by a catastrophic account of origins.

Lying against time, despite Plotinus’s attack on the Gnostics, is as much a Neoplatonic as it is a Gnostic starting point. Jonas, in one of his later essays, on “The Soul in Gnosticism and Plotinus,” notes that at the “critical point”—when the question is: why there should be this lower world at all outside the Intelligible—Plotinus cannot make do without the same language of apostasy and fall for which he takes the Gnostics so severely to task.” Jonas’s acuity can be evidenced by contrasting Plotinus’s mockery of the Gnostic myth of the soul’s fall, with Plotinus’s own gnosticizing account of the origin of time. Here is Plotinus against the Gnostics:

To those who assert that creation is the work of the Soul “after the falling of its wings,” we answer that no such disgrace could overtake the Soul of the All. If they tell us of its falling, they must tell us also what caused the fall. And when did it take place? If from eternity, then the Soul must be essentially a fallen thing: if at some one moment, why not before that?

Yet here is Plotinus himself, on “Time and Eternity”:

Time was not yet there, or was not for those intelligible beings… But there was there a nature which was forward and wished to own and rule itself and had chosen to strive for more than it had present to it. Thus it started to move, and along with it also moved time… the Soul first of all temporalized herself, generating time as a substitute for eternity.
Jonas comments that this Neoplatonic myth "tells of forwardness and unrest, of an unquiet force, of unwillingness or inability to remain in concentrated wholeness, of a power that is thus at the same time an impotence, of a desire to be selfsubsistent and separate." I would add to Jonas's commentary only the observation that such a myth of negation, at the origins, is a necessity for any poetic of belatedness, and Neoplatonism, despite itself, is in the same cultural stance of belatedness as is Gnosticism, Kabbalah or post-Miltonic poetry. I think that this shared problematic of belatedness accounts for why Kabbalah was able to merge two such incompatible visions as those of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, and also for why poetic mythology from the Rennaissance to the present day has been able to blend together so easily all three of these different esotericisms, as well as other arcana.

The stance of belatedness, as a cultural manifestation, has been studied hardly at all, partly because belatedness is invariably adept at disguising itself either as one Modernism or another. The English word "late" goes back to an Indo-European root meaning "to let go" or "to slacken," and thus there is a sense of weariness and entropy held back even in the prehistory of the word. Valentinian Gnosis, like literary Modernism, is an Alexandrian invention, and I think we can speculate that belatedness, as a cultural stance, is uniquely the product of Alexandria in its six great centuries, from the mid-third century B.C. through the mid-third century A.D. Belatedness is a highly dialectical notion, and so by no means wholly a negative one, even if its cutting edge or initial trope is negation. F.E. Peters, in his massive history, The Harvest of Hellenism, credits the later Hellenes of Alexandria with taking the creative insights of the Greeks from Homer to Aristotle and distilling them "into principles and norms which could be taught rather than merely transmitted." The monuments of Hellenistic Alexandria, as Peters summarizes them, are "gnosticism, the university, the catachetical school, pastoral poetry, monasticism, the romance, grammar, lexicography, city planning, theology, canon law, heresy and scholasticism." Peters seems to me to be definitive in this catalog of belatedness, and I like his putting Gnosticism first on his list, because we can call Gnosticism the essence of belatedness, and Valentinianism the purest version of that essence.

Belatedness is perhaps best defined by the traditionalists who cannot bear it, in every major sense of the verb "bear." Here is Charles Williams, one of the neo-Christian Inklings of the C.S. Lewis-Tolkien-

Eliot-Auden school, rather unhappily characterizing Gnosticism in his celebrated book, The Descent of the Dove, subtitled The History of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Williams calls Gnosticism a Christian "grand intellectual Romantic movement ... almost a literary movement" and he adds that in an age of printing, Gnosticism would have been a literary movement, though a deadly one. In fairness, I quote Williams again, though I have not encountered a more misleading description of Gnosticism than this:

The lost or pseudo-Romantic, in all times and places, has the same marks, and he had them in the early centuries of the Faith. He was then called a Gnostic... The Gnostic view left little room for the illuminati to practise love on this earth... The Church anathematized the pseudo-Romantic heresies; there could be no superiority except in morals, in labor, in love. See, understand, enjoy, said the Gnostic; repent, believe, love, said the Church...

Williams is not very interesting when he identifies true Romanticism with the Church and false Romanticism with Gnosticism. Such identification makes Eliot and Auden truly Romantic, while Yeats somehow is not. But Williams is interesting and valuable for the understanding of Gnosticism if we read him with an eye to his anxieties and to the defenses his anxieties spur. The peculiar mark of his neo-Christianity is his obsessive concern with the idea of substitution, an idea which in the Gnostic dialectic is usurped by the idea of evasion. Substitution, Williams implies in his "Postscript," is the truly Christian idea of order, giving a properly rhetorical meaning to the doctrine of co-inherence, the "taking of the Manhood into God." Now substitution, whether in erotic, religious, or literary contexts, is always the doctrine of the Second Chance. Gnosticism evades, rather than substitutes, because like every mode that battles its own belatedness Gnosticism insists upon the First Chance alone. Hating time, Gnosticism insists upon evading time rather than fulfilling time in an apocalyptic climax, or living in time through substitution. It is a familiar formula to say that failed prophecy becomes apocalyptic, and that failed apocalyptic becomes Gnosticism. If we were to ask: "What does failed Gnosticism become?" we would have to answer that Gnosticism never fails, which is both its strength (through intensity) and its weakness (through incompleteness). A vision whose fulfillment, by definition, must be always beyond the cosmos, cannot in its own terms be said to fail within our cosmos.

How can evasion be an idea of order? Only by identifying itself
with an elitism, is probably the only answer, whether one thinks of evasion in erotic, religious, or literary terms. Evasion is in flight from or represses fate, and again, whether erotic, religious, or literary, the principle of evasion denies that existence is an historical existence.

Without evasion or the lying against time that brings back the First Chance, no mythology is possible, and Gnosticism brought mythology back to monotheism. Evasion, on the rhetorical level, is always misinterpretation or misreading, and in such visionary hermeneutic, Gnosticism was a great innovator. Irenaeus, furious at the capture of the Pauline term the Pleroma or “fullness” by Valentinus, says that Valentinianism “strives ... to adapt the good terms of revelation to [its] own wicked inventions.” Certainly, it is one of the achievements of Valentinus that Paul’s term is now forever the mythological possession of Gnosticism. Evasion, in poetry, can be manifested only as the faculty of invention, and invention in turn depends always upon strong interpretation of prior texts. Jonas summarizes “the speculative principle of Valentinianism” as being a knowledge that “affects not only the knower but the known itself; that by every ‘private’ act of knowledge the objective ground of being is moved and modified.” To which I would add that such motion and modification textually must be misprision or creative misreading. Hence Jonas’s observation that “the speculative principle of Valentinianism actually invited independent development of the basic ideas by its adherents,” and hence the complaint of Irenaeus that Jonas cites: “Every day every one of them invents something new, and none of them is considered perfect unless he is productive in this way.”

Nothing like that freedom of invention was to be seen again in the psychopoetics of theology until the disciples of Isaac Luria began to elaborate upon him, some fourteen hundred years later.

So far in this account of Valentinian dialectic I have shown negation taking the place of fate, and evasion substituting itself for the logos or freedom of meaning. The third term of the triad is extravagation, the restitutio of power by a mode of figuration that moves from the symbolic or synecdochic through the Sublime or hyperbolic and that ends in an acosmic, antitemporal trope that reverses the Alexandrian predicament of belatedness. This final Extravagation is the earliest instance I know of the rhetoric of transumption, which is the ultimate modal resource of post-Miltonic poetry, and which projects lateness and introjects earliness, but always at the expense of presence, by the emptying out of the living moment.

Near the close of *The Gospel of Truth*, Valentinus (or his disciple) bids farewell to us, with a graciousness that only the conviction of an achieved earliness is likely to permit in an heresiarch.

Such is the place of the blessed; this is their place. As for the others, then, may they know, in their place, that it does not suit me, after having been in the place of rest to say anything more.

Such majestic certitude reflects earlier celebratory statements in this text, that “each one will speak concerning the place from which he has come forth” and that for each: “his own place of rest is his pleroma.” I shall conclude by bringing together these Valentinian assurances with the fundamental concerns of our own belatedness when we study poetry and its criticism. Walter Benjamin beautifully remarked of his favorite writer that “Kafka listened to tradition, and he who listens hard does not see.” When I reflect upon Benjamin’s aphorism, I recall that from Akiba until now, the rabbinical tradition insists that the authority of Torah as Yahweh’s Word is absorbed by listening. Hence the rabbinical tradition *did not see*, which made room for the oxymoron of a Jewish Gnosis in the Lurianic Kabbalah. Poetry and criticism, after Milton in our language, are attempts to see, in frequent contradistinction to the main Protestant tradition of listening to the Word. But they are attempts to see *earliest*, as though no one had seen before us. Is this not the mark of Gnosis, that seeing is the peculiar attribute of certain spiritualized intellectuals, Faustian or favored ones, whose particular knowledge is itself the highest power? When you have the Gnosis, when you see truly, then you are in the place of rest, you are in your own internalized pleroma.

The modern study of Gnosticism begins with Mosheim in 1739, in the Age of Sensibility during which the Enlightenment waned rapidly. This was no more accidental than was the onrush of studies in Gnosticism in the High Romantic period, with Horn in 1805, Lewald in 1818, and Matter in 1828. In poetry, a “place” is *where* something is *known*, but a figure or trope is *when* something is willed or desired. A Classical or Enlightenment “commonplace” is where something is already known, but a Romantic or Post-Enlightenment “place” is a more inventive and indeed a Gnostic “knowing,” a knowing in which one sees what Walter Benjamin called the *aura*. In the *aura* what is known knows the knower, what is seen sees the seer, but the *aura* is principally visible in its disintegration, its Gnostic disappearance at the moment of acosmic, atemporal shock.
A Gnostic "place," like the classical topos or "commonplace," is always a name, but the anomaly or difference of the Gnostic name is best conveyed by the notion of name as an "image of voice" as *The Gospel of Truth* once calls it. Such a Gnostic or Romantic name comes by negation; an un-naming yields a name. A written space has been voided of its writing, so that the Gnostic place displaces a prior place. This is why the best model for Post-Romantic poetic place or image of voice is the Valentinian pleroma or its curiously similar analogue in the Lurianic *tehiru*. The pleroma or *tehiru*, like the Romantic and Modern poetic place, is both a fullness and an emptiness.

Any new poetic place, or image of voice, empties out a previous place in the same spot. Into this emptiness, a new fullness is placed, but a revisionary fullness, one that postpones or defers the future. Walter Benjamin says of Kafka's stories that in them "narrative art regains the significance it had in the mouth of Scheherazade: to postpone the future." Gnosticism would go further and banish the future altogether, until that acosmic, atemporal restoration to the pleroma takes place of all pneumatics simultaneously. Perhaps this is the ultimate difference between orthodoxy and the Gnosis. The rabbis said of God that "he is the place of the world, but the world is not his place." With the second half of this topological aphorism, the Gnostics were in agreement, but they dissented altogether from the first half. This dissent implicitly commits Gnosticism to an aesthetic that is neither mimetic, like Greek aesthetic from Plato to Plotinus, nor antimimetic, like Hebraism from the Bible to Jacques Derrida. Gnostic writing, when strong, is strong because it is supermimetic, because it confronts and seeks to overthrow the very strongest of all texts, the Jewish Bible. That supermimesis is an intolerable burden, whether for literature or for the fallen poetry of theology. But out of the titanic efforts to bear that burden have come the equivocal triumphs of the Romantic tradition, in poetry, in criticism, and in theology as well. Valentinus, who taught us what Hans Jonas eloquently calls "the self-motivation of divine degradation," is the truest precursor of our own divinely degraded visions of belatedness.