TWO RESPONSES

To


1. WORDS AND SILENCE

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Raoul’s monumental work on negative theology displays an admirable evenhandedness. I do not refer to the fact that he has devoted volume one to the Rise of *Logos* and volume two to its defeat at the hands of silence. I do not refer to the fact that the text is full and discursive while the footnotes are totally silent. I refer rather to the fact that he is able to treat with sensitivity and understanding both the negative theologians with whom his study is finally concerned and earlier philosophers with their seldom-questioned faith in the powers of *logos*: the powers of speech and reasoning to unveil the physical world, man’s place and duties therein, and even the power or powers which rule it.

There is no absolute contrast between the earlier embracement of *logos* and the later attempt to transcend it. The Neoplatonists and the Christian Fathers saw the aim of their work as essentially theological. In some cases they aimed at approaching as close as possible to an understanding of the highest God; in others at approaching as close as possible to that highest, or only, God Himself. Greek philosophy’s aims had formerly been much wider, and one could claim that theology did not become a distinct branch of philosophy until Aristotle, that it is inseparable even there from the rest of ‘first philosophy’ or metaphysics, and that it became a branch of physics again in the Hellenistic age. *Logos* ruled when the intended objects of knowledge were many, and it paled when man desired above all to make himself aware of some supreme and unearthly divine being.

In some ways this is scarcely surprising. If language has arisen in accordance with our need to describe the familiar world of the senses and the familiar world of man’s responses to it, then to expect language to be able to lead the would-be recipient of divine revelation to his transcendent goal would be asking that language to perform a task for which it was never designed. The reasoning process cannot be divorced from language. The would-be instructor in theology therefore has a problem, and this problem will depend to some degree on his theory of language itself. If language is purely conventional then his problems are greatest; if language is a natural symbol of reality then natural symbols of
the divinity may be found. But it may also be that there exist certain divine names which have a special status of their own: God-given names, or names expressing in some mysterious fashion the very essence of the divinity. In that case, as with Eunomius' ingeneracy, the special name or names will be applicable to their objects in a manner in which other names are not. Theory of language and of names is thus a recurrent theme in Raoul's book.

Where a theologian cannot fall back on such theories then his guidance of the pupil through language must stretch language itself to its limits. Transcendence can be implied by the suggestion that God exceeds certain qualities; by the suggestion that he does not possess certain qualities; by the suggestion that certain groups of qualities are totally non-applicable to him. His nature can also be hinted at, as some believed, by analogy. Hence in early Christian times the via eminentiae, the via negativa and the via analogiae sat side by side; but gradually the first and the third were dropped as thinkers became more and more conscious of the need to stress the remoteness either of the Father or of the One.

As time went on, however, even the via negativa became subject to closer and closer scrutiny. One could not just remove certain qualities from some vague notion and end up with a concept of God. The starting point was entirely inappropriate, for it would presumably be some ordinary thing, and the finishing point would be a thing deprived of everything that made it a thing. One had to start with the notion of the divine, and simply deny that certain terms were applicable to it. These very denials might in fact be regarded as useful descriptions. They could point the pupil in the right direction as long as he reacted to them in the right way. The problem arises, however, when these descriptions by means of negative adjectives attain doctrinal status instead of remaining pointers. As soon as this happens somebody will sense that the term not-F is being applied to God in a way which indicates opposition to all that is F, and the effect of such opposition is frequently to put the not-term somehow on the same level as the positive term. It might suggest that it would not be utterly unthinkable that God should be described by the positive term. Negations may be useful as we struggle to reach up to the Divine; but once we get there it may be salutary to reflect on the inadequacy of these negations to help us up the final slope. Hence Proclus feels that in the end we must leave our negations behind.

As a result of reading Raoul's book I am left with this feeling that successive developments in negative theology have much to do with the progressive feelings of Neoplatonists and Christians alike that more and more of language - even negative language - must be left behind: not so much because it is useless in man-to-man instruction, where one can always see how the pupil is reacting to one's words, but because it is dangerously capable of misinterpretation when enshrined in the theological treatise. The transcending of language finds its natural result in the silence of the mystics, but mystical silence is something which the mystic experiences for himself. Is he content to achieve the supreme vision for himself or for his transcended self? Or does he want to assist others along the same road? If he has this wish then silence itself is no answer; he must re-enter the cave of every-day language, and assist his fellows also to
transcend language through language. For the Christian, I suspect, the problems were in some ways alleviated by the existence of a body of scriptures of such a type as to cry out for in-depth interpretation; here were words which had the power to lead man towards his goal; in Christ there was God's Word, leading us from the here to the there. One might object that such scriptures put severe constraints upon the solutions open to their believers; but I am not convinced that the Fathers felt the scriptures to be a constraint of this kind. They were, it is true, an added element in the argument; they did not, in the end, make Christian descriptions of the Father so very different from Neoplatonist and other comparable approaches. Mysticism could make Christianity its own in a way in which Christianity has never wholly made mysticism its own.

Raoul correctly draws parallels between negative theologians and Greek scepticism. The sceptic's goal of untroubled tranquillity had some similarity to the mystic's goal of blissful silence. Two passages from Stobaeus' Eclogues (2.2.20-21), taken from Carneades (presumably via Clitomachus) and Clitomachus himself, attempt to describe dialectic in informative ways which we might like to take note of. Carneades sees it as like an octopus, which grows its own tentacles and then allegedly devours them. The imagery is wonderful. The tentacles branch out in various directions, pointing this way and that like a bunch of conflicting arguments from conflicting doctrines. The effectiveness of the octopus relies upon its ability to get these tentacles firmly under control and to have them all working towards the same end. They are its means of propulsion, and they are its weapons. The sceptic utilizes the arguments of all schools as a way forward, and as a weapon against the schools themselves, balancing the force of one against the force of another. The negative theologian uses language of many types as a way forward, using chiefly negative terms to balance such positive ones as those of which we find it difficult to be free. But as the goal is neared and the balance achieved, all those tentacles - those arguments or those descriptions - which just inevitably tip the scales this way or that, are themselves the victim of the octopus-like creature: scepticism finally consumes the arguments which fed it, negative theology finally devours the negations which had been the sign-posts on the negative way.

Clitomachus' own analogy had compared dialectic with the moon; it waxes and it wanes. It waxes as the sceptic follows his sceptical methods; it wanes as he nears his goal, and according to the sceptic much the same problems occurred for Chrysippus the Stoic, who in his perpetual pursuit of arguments in favour of cognitivism, often unearthed material threatening the very foundations of his philosophy, arguments and all (Cic. Ac. 2.96, cf. 75, 87). So dialectic waxes and wanes for the individual; and Raoul would argue that it waxes and wanes through the ages, waxing in Classical and Hellenistic times, waning in the days of the Roman Empire. Nobody can deny that there is some truth in this thesis, but even Raoul will acknowledge (11, p.242) that the seeds of the fall of logos were there at its floruit. If Clitomachus' analogy had also been meant to have an historical aspect, then he would have detected rises and falls in the fortunes of dialectic before the late first century B.C. Raoul would certainly admit that there were hiccups in the rising path of Logos towards its crescendo in Stoicism, though I should prefer to regard them as actual crises.
The sophist age thrived on the belief that opposite points of view were always arguable, and opposite arguments always capable of engineering belief. Eleatic logic in particular was called into question both by Gorgias' work *On Non-Being* and by the second part of Plato's *Parmenides* (regardless of the actual intention of these works), and Plato's *Euthydemus* pours scorn on the sophist-brothers’ attempt to make argument achieve the most preposterous conclusions. Even in the *Phaedo*, where Plato seems to be trying to make argument prove the immortality of the soul, he knows that the earlier arguments are only pointers, he knows that this is because a great many arguments are quite deceptive, and that an enormous amount of skill is required to judge the true from the false. But Plato lacks any wonderful ideas about how we must judge *logoi*; *logos* has no magic power to convert right opinion into knowledge, for one would require knowledge of the correctness of the *logos* too (*The 209e*). *Logoi* are only pointers in Plato too, pointers best tailored to suit the needs of an individual addressed. The goal in the *Phaedo* is *phronesis* (69), and *phronesis* is no matter of ordinary knowledge boosted by *logoi* : it is the inner awareness of the soul, the foundation of morality, and the guarantee of well-being in the after-life (107d2, 108c6). Is *logos* forgotten in the final consummation of philosophy there too? In *Republic* V1 (511b4) it is more prominent, but does it not fail in the final reckoning to reach up to the pinnacle of reality (509ab)?

I am not here trying to refute Raoul, as he recognises the relevance of these passages, and deals with them in a manner entirely appropriate. But I wonder whether Platonism differed substantially from Neoplatonism in its dissatisfaction with *logos* and even with *nous* as a means for apprehending the highest principle itself; if it is to be known at all, it seems that it has to be recreated and experienced within one. The big difference in my view is the willingness of earlier Platonism to attach importance to the things that could be reached by *Logos*.

I appear, then to be asking whether the book is not too schematized, too inclined to take a neatly organised view of successive periods of the history of ancient thought. Certainly less convenient views of many of the classical Greek thinkers tackled are arguable; their commitment to *logos* would not seem so certain or so fundamental to every scholar. The focus of this book, however, is on a later period; its real insights seem to me to begin with Philo Judaeus. For understanding the philosophy of the Roman Imperial period it is not so important to interpret classical Greek philosophy correctly as to know how it could be interpreted in the light of the issues of the time. Raoul's account of the rise of *logos* thus has value in placing his later studies in perspective. Furthermore the schematic framework had indeed been necessary as a tool of presentation: it is the vehicle which gives his work momentum. Once the book nears its goal, and momentum gives way to stillness and silence, *then* it may shed the tentacles upon which it had ridden.
The story in *From Word to Silence* is many pages in the telling; and when the tale is finally told, one might be tempted, just for a moment, to respond in Hamlet's dying (and immortal) words: 'The rest is silence'. But what is called for in fact are words.

The first word must be an acknowledgement of the fine achievement of this book. *From Word to Silence* is a work of impressive scholarship. In its two volumes it moves across the great sweep of a thousand years of Greek and Graeco-Christian thought, from Parmenides in the early fifth century BC to the closing of Plato's Academy in the early sixth century AD; at the same time, there is detailed commentary and argument at each stage of the inquiry, bearing on aspects of pre-Socratic thought, on ideas in Plato and Aristotle, and subsequent development in Greek philosophy, especially in Neoplatonism, and a succession of Christian thinkers culminating in the Cappadocians, Augustine, and the enigmatic Pseudo-Dionysius. For the rest of this paper I propose to develop a word of critical but limited reflection on this large inquiry. I will concentrate on what is, I suppose, the most general theme of the study, the idea of the limits of language and of the discovery of this idea in the chosen period. I will try to give voice to some misgivings I have about the treatment of this theme in the book; at the same time, I hope to contribute some reflections on the topic of language and its limits prompted by a reading of the text.

The relevant argument of the book might be described as 'the rise and fall of logos — and its rise again'. It can be put as follows. Classical Greek philosophy beginning with Parmenides conceived an immense confidence in the power of language. Plato to his credit raised questions about the scope and power of language, but in major respects had no serious doubts about its efficacy. Confidence in language reached its supreme expression in Aristotle. In Mortley's words:

Aristotle is the supreme Greek rationalist and verbalist... What are the limits of this faculty of speech? Aristotle has no real sense of there being any limits, or any serious deficiency. His confidence in the power of the intellectual process is boundless. He has no "dreams" about unknowable atoms, or suspicions about the drug-like qualities of the written word; for him the world and mind is impregnated with logos, and the task is that of the demonstration of essences. He reduces silence to the idea of breaking wind. (Mortley, p.118, vol.1; see Aristotle, *Problems*, 948b22ff.)
Later, a pessimism about the efficacy of language set in; or better, a conviction arose about the limits of language together with a new valuing of the sounds of silence, on the part of Philo or some early Gnostics for example. This was to emerge in the form of a *via negativa* in Greek philosophy and Christian theology, a move which took its cue predictably but paradoxically from the loquacious and *logos*-minded Aristotle. The heights (or depths) of the advance beyond language by negation, and then by the negation of negation, were reached in different ways by Proclus and Damascius. But Damascius was the more radical for he rejected the *via negativa* too as one more linguistic exercise and espoused, though not quite entirely, the way of silence. These ideas had their impact on Christian thinkers and were given their strongest expression in this context by Pseudo-Dionysius. But Christian thinkers, even those who developed a form of negative theology, remained committed to the Word; and Augustine, while he paid a certain court to the tradition, is hailed as 'the greatest exponent of the value of language in ancient philosophy, whether Pagan or Christian' (11, p.247). So *logos* fell but rose again.

In discussion of this thesis I will be particularly concerned with some ideas brought forward in vol.1, ch. V1, 'The silence beyond names', and with the treatment of some figures in vol.11, Proclus, Damascius, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius in particular.

The phrase 'the limits of language' and questions about confidence or pessimism in regard to language can mean different things in different contexts. I will distinguish two or three broad emphases with reference, by way of example, to ethical discourse. One view is that language is satisfactory for some purposes, but it goes only so far - the really important things lie beyond its reach. The best example of this view in modern times is Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: ethics and religion, the experience of beauty and terror, the sense of the mystical - these things manifest themselves, but cannot be put into words; and Wittgenstein's final word, then, is 'What we cannot speak of, we must treat with silence' (Tr. 7). His conviction about the limits of language here went with an immense confidence in its powers when properly understood and applied to its proper object, viz. states of affairs in the objective, empirical world, expressed in scientific discourse or, more loosely, in empirical descriptive language. We can call this the view that language fails in the face of the ultimate and must there give way to silence.

A different emphasis in regard to the limits of language can be found if one compares Plato and Aristotle in regard to ethical discourse. Plato sought for, though he did not find, an account of ethical matters which would shine with the exactness and profundity of truths in mathematics; against this (projected) standard, actual ethical discourse limps along miserably. As against this view, Aristotle insists on drawing limits - we cannot achieve the same degree of precision in ethics and politics as in logic or mathematics: 'it is the mark of the trained mind never to expect more precision in the treatment of any subject than the nature of that subject allows' (N.E. 1.3, 1094b12ff). Aristotle would say the same about the ultimate, the mind of God for example: we say what we can though it might not be very much; we do not have that sort of knowledge. In Aristotle, then, there is a definite view about the limits of language, but there is
Parmenides' view of language and its relation to its proper object is an immensely obscure topic; but I will venture the idea that it bears some comparison with the Wittgensteinian view in the *Tractatus* though the chosen object of language is entirely different: language properly conceived and its object, what-is, fit together with exact and unbreakable bonds, the eternal revelation of truth-and-being, accessible to (pure) reason. But this confidence had to be bought with hostages: Parmenides put in brackets the whole sense-perceptible world, the world of space and time, change and multiplicity. We can speak of this world, he allows; it is not consigned to silence; but speech in this case is full of contradiction. The effect of Parmenides' powerful arguments, ably supported by Zeno's paradoxes, was to bring developments in Greek science to a standstill: a great silence fell among those drawn to talk about the world of nature - though, of course, some, like Empedocles, tried to keep the conversation going. Plato, as everyone knows, was profoundly shaped by the way in which Parmenides set the boundaries between discourse and silence. The study of natural science as pursued by the cosmologists was seen to hold no hope of enlightenment as he makes clear in the *Phaedo*. In its stead, he looked to the eternal world of Forms for knowledge which would be matched by language which could speak clearly and truly of ultimate things and show how everything fitted together, nature and the source of nature, in one all-embracing and infinite totality. Plato's ambitions for and faith in reason and language transcended Parmenides', for he wanted to find a place for everything, including the world which Parmenides had thought of as well lost. But Plato also knew that the task had just begun. In our contemporary academic jargon, he set up a research programme and left it to posterity.

Aristotle, again as everyone knows, did not believe in Plato's Forms as separate, transcendent entities. In direct confrontation with Parmenides, he argued that the teaching that what-is is one and unchangeable begins with false premises and compounds the unhappy start by bad arguments: 'Parmenides assumes what is not true and infers what does not follow' (*Physics* 1.3,186a22ff.) Aristotle thereby rescued nature from limbo and restored it to the domain of discourse; and he did this with a sense of conscious excitement: 'every realm of nature is marvellous'. . . like Heraclitus' kitchen, everything is charged with the divine, everything in nature, no matter how lowly, 'reveals something beautiful' (*De Partibus Animalium* 1.5,645a16-25).

Aristotle believed in the world of particulars, natural things such as plants, and animals and human beings, and things in the heavens such as the stars and planets. His world, eternal and infinite as it is (not spatially infinite) but vastly more limited in character than Plato's world, contains moving spirits and is related as a whole to God as its First Mover unmoved (who moves the world as object of desire). But about God in himself and the divine life of love and contemplation Aristotle says little. There is the recognition that one has reached the limits of language. The recognition is not accompanied, however, by a sense of failure, for access to the world of God lies beyond our powers.
In summary, the question of confidence in language has to be specified in terms of confidence for what purposes and in what domains. We then get different answers in the case of Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, and different ways of drawing the boundaries of language. In this light, Mortley's claim that Aristotle has no real sense of there being any limits to the faculty of speech is incorrect. What is true is that its limits are not treated as a deficiency - but then it is not a deficiency of the human eye, for example, that it cannot see through a brick wall. Aristotle's confidence in the powers of reason is as wide as the world, but is not boundless for the mind of God lies beyond it.

There is an important contrast to be drawn here between Plato and Aristotle, but first I want to comment briefly on the topic of Aristotle on silence, viz., that 'Aristotle shows very little interest in the limits of discourse: he scarcely mentions silence, or the unspeakable' (I.117); and reference is made then to a point in the Problems linking fear, silence, and breaking wind. This is amusing enough though it is doubtful whether the Problems was written by Aristotle even at his most pedestrian. One might make things worse for him, however, by noting that in the Politics where he proposes that the gift of speech is the basis of the special social and political character of human beings, he also quotes with approval a line from Sophocles' Ajax: 'Silence is a woman's glory', and goes on to say 'but this is not equally the glory of man' (Pol. 1.2,1253a 8-18; & 1260a28-31). (He gives us here in a nutshell his view of the polis: the men talk in the City while the women work at home). Leaving such matters aside, a consideration of Aristotle's views on silence would need to take account of more than his explicit discussion of the term. The primary locus, I suggest, would be the value he places on contemplation (theoria) as the supreme activity of human life, the activity in which we are most like God (N.E. 10.7,1178B8-23 - where Aristotle provides, incidentally, a neat exercise in the via negativa). Such contemplation is reflection in silence and bears on ultimate things and ultimately on God; on the evidence of the Eudemian Ethics in particular, the ideal life is one shaped by 'the contemplation and worship of God' (E.E., 1249b20). Of course, Aristotle's theology (Metaphysics Lambda) is problematic and his views concerning religion even more so. But that is another question.

I want to go back now to what I called Plato's research programme as a way of getting forward to a consideration of some of the thinkers discussed in vol II of From Word to Silence.

Plato was driven by the desire to know, and the knowledge he sought was characteristically out of grasp, something of which he had caught a glimpse but which was now beyond the horizon. Take the Euthyphro for example. Socrates ties the over-confident young theologian Euthyphro in knots in regard to what he claims to know about piety and what it is that the gods approve and disapprove. Socrates effects this outcome in the name of a search for the essence of piety; but while this idea is invoked, it is never properly uncovered. With Plato weaving his words of magic, however, we are drawn to agree that it is there, waiting to be uncovered if we only go about it in the right way. Still, the revelation is not vouchsafed. Or consider the discussion of Forms in the Phaedo or in the Republic and especially the Forms of justice and goodness which preside over the inquiry but never come into clear view - though we learn
that the Good lies beyond Being. The path we must take to this great end, we are told, is dialectic; and quite a lot is said about dialectic. But it too remains elusive. Dialectic, as one commentator puts it, has the appearance of being the best form of inquiry whatever the best form of inquiry is! (Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, Oxford, 2nd ed., 1953, 70) In short, Plato seeks to convince us that there is a vast and profoundly important world beyond our grasp; and in one way or another he keeps talking about it and trying to get it into focus.

Plato's influence was immense, and rightly so. But when the talk which he initiated goes on for a long time without resolution, a variety of responses might arise. Some might say, Aristotle for example, that we need to get clear about the limits of language; we can then say some things about the world beyond - that God exists, and a few things more by way of negation and affirmation, but nothing else. There are others who might say 'there isn't anything there - there is no One, knowable or unknowable - let's stop talking about it'. The silence of unbelief would follow: it might be a silence of complacency, or regret, or even of quiet despair. (No one of this outlook is considered in *From Word to Silence*; atheism was not a common option). Others might say: there is something there, but we cannot say anything positive about it; what we can do is to proceed by way of negation, in which case we have to say, contrary to Parmenides, that what-is both is and is not; in proceeding by negation we can keep talking for a time but have to recognise that we are in a domain in which language fails us and in the end one must proceed by silence. Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius would fit this pattern. There are others who might say: there is something there, we have a sense of it, but it is unspeakable; what we cannot speak of we must contemplate in silence; and more or less without linguistic mediation, they choose the way of silence. This is Damascius' position. Finally, there are those who accept something of the force of all these responses to Plato's vision and then come to the belief that what Plato glimpsed (or merely suspected) is in some way revealed in human history in the Word of God. Here we have Augustine for example; and with Augustine, of course, the talk began again in a big way.

Of the people just mentioned, Proclus is fairly unproblematic, I think, except for his extraordinary thesis of linguistic realism (as Mortley interprets it). I mention this view only in passing. Mortley says of it that it was a late departure in the world of Greek ideas. I wonder about this, however, since it echoes a magical conception of names which did occur in early Greek thought and which possibly formed part of the problematic of Parmenides. But Proclus' other views on language seem more straightforward (if that can be said of the views of any Neoplatonist). The question of the limits of language for him, and the need to reply on negation, arise in the specific domain of language about the ultimate; negation itself must then be negated, at which point, language can go no further. But the end of the road for language is not the end of the road for Proclus. Carried on the anguish of soul (δύσεις)"which desires both to know and speak of the One" he embraces the way of contemplative silence.
Damascius, the last of the Academic philosophers, was more radical (as noted earlier). He is also more problematic. No problem arises, however, in what he has to say about the domain of species or limited being: here knowledge, and presumably language, are on firm ground. Once again, the questions of limits and the difficulty concerns the ultimate. Damascius rejects the via negativa as the path to silence and proclaims silence without linguistic mediation. Language in the domain of the ultimate, as he sees it, is the mere expression of subjective states, 'walking in the void', 'stepping into a hole'. Yet Damascius does say things about the ultimate - that it has nothing in common with the things of this world, that the One is beyond Being, and then, in a move which trumps everyone, he says that beyond the One there is yet a further principle called only 'that yonder'! (11,123). If we were to say that the name 'that yonder' is an expression of a subjective state, a 'walking in the void', Damascius might reply 'Exactly so'. At this point I would say that one should say no more. Mortley speaks of Damascius as 'the most sceptical of all the most (sic) ancient writers' (11,253). What strikes me rather is the mixture of boldness and discretion in his position: to say that the One is beyond Being is orthodox neoplatonism, but the proposal that beyond the One is a further principle is bold; then to embrace the way of silence at that point appears to be an exercise of cautious discretion.

The treatment of Augustine on language (chap. XI) is illuminating: Mortley shows very well how Augustine's association of discourse with time highlights the problems which are bound to arise when language is stretched to speak of what is eternal. On the matter of Augustine's limited resort to the via negativa, Mortley thinks that too much is made of the remark in the De Ordine - 'God, who is better known by knowing what he is not...'. He draws attention rather to a passage in the De Doctrina Christiana, 1.6.6:

Have I spoken anything, or uttered any sound which is worthy of God? On the contrary, I am aware that I have done nothing other than wish to speak. But if I have spoken anything, this is not what I wished to say. How do I know this unless God is ineffable? (Quoted, Mortley, 11,217).

Mortley speaks of this passage (p.218) as 'the most radical of (Augustine's) commitment to the negative way' and as constituting 'a remarkable departure from the linguistically conservative position normally adopted by Augustine.' (loc.cit.) I am not sure that so much should be made of this passage either in relation to the via negativa. In reading it, one can hear an anticipatory echo - if that is possible - of Thomas Aquinas' words that, in comparison with the experience of God he had been given in prayer, all he had written seemed 'as straw'. Still, Aquinas' words about God stand and continue to deserve attention. So too do Augustine's words, especially the remarkable De Trinitate.

In connection with the logical problem of speaking about God as ineffable, Augustine went on to say (in Doc. Christ., loc. cit.):

Therefore God should not even be spoken of as ineffable, because when this is said, something is indeed said, and this causes some sort of contradiction.
And he adds:

This linguistic contradiction should be guarded against by silence rather than resolved by speech.

Mortley's comment on this is that 'there is certainly a contradiction here'... but Augustine's 'rhetorical soul was not quite capable of the great leap into silence of the Greek metaphysicians, and so he chooses to present the need for silence as a simple recommendation to hush up the problem' (11,220). My view is that Augustine was too ready to concede the contradiction and to caution silence. One could suggest that the contradiction is pragmatic rather than logical. I have in mind that its pattern could be compared to the politician's problem of saying 'No comment' and being judged thereby to have made a comment. This 'sort of contradiction' could be ironed out by distinguishing between levels of discourse. Alternatively, one might argue that the contradiction is superficial and that the term 'ineffable' on analysis is not so much a name of God as an expression of our incapacity to know or to speak about God adequately. In other words, rather than opting for silence, Augustine should have said a little more.

The question of contradictions comes in for even more attention in the chapter devoted to Pseudo-Dionysius (11,ch. X11). In broad terms, the Areopagite is presented as fairly close to Proclus in treating the *via negativa* affirmatively; at the same time, there are similarities with Damascius in his emphasis, in the end, on mystical silence before the inexpressible essence of God. The matter I want to draw attention to, however, is the proposal that Pseudo-Dionysius flouted the principle of non-contradiction with abandon, happily spouting contradictions right and left, spurning in doing so the cornerstone of Western philosophy (11,237-40). The evidence adduced for this is that in connection with the Christian teaching of the Incarnation he employs (with reference to Christ) paired terms such as 'hidden and revealed', 'spoken of and unspeakable'; also, in connection with the Trinity, there is the suggestion that it was not in the nature of Pseudo-Dionysius to worry over any problem of contradiction in saying that God is one and three, distinguishing between such terms as *ousia* and *hypostasis* - Pseudo-Dionysius went ahead and contradicted himself; he simply asserts 'p and not-p' (11, 239).

It would be a pity if this reading were correct for it would suggest that the Areopagite was a shallow thinker, something of an early sixth century Walter Whitman exclaiming "So I contradict myself? I am large - I embrace contradictions". The examples brought forward seem too much in need of interpretation to fit the pattern of 'p and not-p' without a lot more argument. In some ways the principle of non-contradiction, and especially the associated law of excluded middle are blunt instruments: they work very well, and can be seen to work well, in formal logic or a canonical language. But an ordinary natural language like Greek or Latin or English is too rich and too subtle and too subject to vagueness, and slippage, and ambiguity for a straightforward application of the principles in many instances. And ordinary experience, to say nothing of experience related to ultimate things, is too rich and multi-layered to be readily
captured by formulations of the 'p or not-p' type - as if one were to say that every book in the library is either good or bad, with no shades in between, or that it is either raining or not raining, forgetting such things as Scottish mists. Consistency still matters in most domains of discourse, but tests for consistency are often quite complex; and the first thing one needs to get clear about is the context of utterance.

It is a fair general rule, for example, that any attempt to talk seriously about God in philosophy is bound to put a strain on language. The thing about contradiction is that it marks one main point of collapse.

I would not say that the case I have sketched against accepting the alleged contradictions of Pseudo-Dionysius as contradictions is absolutely open and shut. Few arguments in philosophy are. But the idea that we have a logical contradiction in remarks such as "God is one and three", "God is nameless and has many names", "Christ is hidden and revealed" etc, is curiously positivist in character: it is precisely what the logical positivist would say (if he didn't say that it was all senseless anyway). Pseudo-Dionysius, let us say, was not interested in logic-chopping or in the sorts of genuine questions to which Boethius, for example, gave prominence. But neither should we be disposed to say that he was confused or complacent or merely wilful. Mortley sees his approach as reflecting in part a degree of scepticism and the contrary desire to exclude nothing. This is certainly a possible (though not complete) diagnosis, I think. Mortley's more positive proposal is that contradiction as employed by Pseudo-Dionysius is a linguistic manoeuvre designed to force language to work against itself. I am not exactly sure of the sense of this colourful image-language being forced to work against itself - but it suggests a use of language which is powerful, imaginatively, subversive, even iconoclastic. This is all very well, but a simple use of self-contradiction is none of these things; it is not so much subversive as suicidal. But that brings me back to the point that the examples of contradiction attributed to Pseudo-Dionysius are really pseudo-contradictions. Pseudo-Dionysius finds himself drawn to say things about God which are in tension, which clash and spin off in different directions and cannot be held within the categories of normal discourse. But their utterance, one may propose, is grounded in the (reasonable) conviction that the different ideas are reconciled in reality, in the being of God beyond our grasp. Perhaps Pseudo-Dionysius hoped for too much; but that is not the same as embracing contradictions.
NOTE

There is some pertinent discussion of scepticism, however, with attention being drawn to its role in the development of the via negativa and the way of silence; see 1, 84ff. and 11, various chapters - (there is a good analytical table to contents in From Word to Silence but, alas, no index.) In this light, one could find a response to Plato in the agnostic mode in Caecilius' speech in Minucius Felix's early third century dialogue Octavius ('the pearl of apologetic literature' as Renan called it). In his defence of Roman values against Christianity, Caecilius (the 'devil's advocate' so to speak) invokes sceptical considerations:

Yet, if philosophize you must, let any that is equal to the task imitate if he can Socrates, the prince of wisdom. When questioned about things in heaven his famous answer ran, 'that which is above us, does not concern us.' Well did he deserve the testimonial of the oracle to his superior wisdom. The reason, as he himself divined, why the oracle set him before all others, was not that he had found out the meaning of everything, but that he had learned that he knew nothing; so surely is the confession of ignorance the highest wisdom. From this source flowed the guarded scepticism of Arcesilas, and later of Carneades and most of the Academic School, on all the deepest questions; this is the kind of philosophy in which the unlearned may indulge with caution, the learned with distinction. May we not all admire and follow the hesitation of Simonides the poet? When Hiero the tyrant asked him what he thought of the being and attributes of the gods, he first begged for a day for consideration, next day for two days more; then on a new reminder, for yet another. Finally when the tyrant asked his reasons for so much delay, he replied "because to him the longer the progress of the search, the more obscure became the truth." Greek and Roman Philosophy after Aristotle, ed. J.L. Saunders (New York, 1963), 304.

Caecilius' agnosticism, it should be added, goes along with a warm attachment to Roman pietas and the venerable traditions of Roman religion as bound up with Roman greatness; and in the end, Caecilius becomes a believer, convinced by Octavius' defence of Christianity (in a speech which blends, in de Labriolle's words, 'reasons of the heart with reasons of Reason'). But Minucius Felix was an imaginative and fair-minded writer, and Caecilius' speech is by no means a straw argument.