Weaponising Speculation

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Weaponising Speculation. 
THE British playwright and wit Noel Coward once quipped that having to read a footnote was like having to go down stairs to answer the door while having sex; in fact, he didn’t say ‘having sex,’ he said ‘making love’ [i]. As if to further cement this distinction, in expressing his own trepidation at tackling the subject of ‘notes,’ in his work Paratext, the literary theorist Gerard Ginette described them as the ‘mediocre attached to the beautiful’ [ii]. ‘[O]ften so closely connected to a given detail of a given text,’ for Ginette, notes are ‘crumbly, not to say dust-like’ objects, with no autonomous significance; ‘hence,’ he suggests, ‘our uneasiness in taking hold of them’ [iii]. And yet ‘there is,’ for some, ‘no line of narration more concrete than a stream of dust particles,’ ‘each… with its unique vision of matter, movement, collectivity, interaction, affect, differentiation, composition and infinite darkness’; the annotations of a text, in this respect, form ‘a crystallised data-base or a plot ready to combine and react, to be narrated on and through something’ [iv].

This may well have been what Bruno Latour intended when he compared the un-annotated text to a child without an escort, ‘walking at night in a big city, isolated, lost, anything can happen to it’ [v]. For the latter ‘the presence or absence of references, quotations and footnotes is so much a sign that a document is serious or not that you can transform a fact into a fiction or fiction into fact just by adding or subtracting’ them [vi]. Implicit in Latour’s position is the belief that the higher number of notes in a text, the greater the measure of its erudition [vii]. In a Journal of Legal Education, we read that “[A]cademically uncouth”, as this assumption may be, it is a particularly common one for the unanointed: “Neophyte writers have a tendency to go for quantity [we learn]… The customary objective is 500 or more footnotes. Exceeding 500, [we are told], is a dramatic expression of footnote machismo”’[viii]. Well, the reader will find nothing even close to ‘500’ footnotes here, but even if
she did I do not believe this to be an expression of bravado or masculinity, rather an act of love, of a loving commentary; whose etymology, as Nicola Masciandaro suggests, ‘(via com-
minisci, to devise, invent) indicates the creativity of thinking with something’; like Latour’s ‘escort,’ ‘commentary is,’ for Masciandaro, an ‘homologous amor fati, that stays with its text gravitationally, remain[ing] faithful to it as what remains, as what it cannot depart from:’

*Formally, commentary makes of a text, its earth, an orbis, a round world, by bringing text into space around it. A dwelling in and on the text ... [quoting Heidegger, from ‘The Origin of the Work of Art,’ he notes of how]... The work lets the earth be an earth... likewise [commentary] does not break its text, but preserves its integrity, shaping itself to it even in the midst of digging through it interlinearly and dwarfing, dominating it circumferentially [*ix*].*

The acute observer will note immediately that with Caoimhe Doyle’s design we have inverted this logic here, we have elevated the footnote. The text proper, what Christina Bok once described as ‘consisting of nothing but a void – filled with the exegetical projection of our own imagination,’ now forms the ‘outside’ [*xi*]. To the avid annotator this layout may recall Rabener’s *Notes Without a Text*, a dissertation produced in the middle of the eighteenth century when enthusiasm for footnotes was at a peak. But rather than satirising academic values which saw at this time less merit in writing original work than in commenting on those of others, the appearance of the elevated annotation here refers only to itself as a kind of dream within a dream – a para-academic dream, co-existing in that moment at the DUST symposium when we drew our chairs closer to the speaker and bent forward: ‘Now we’re getting close to the good stuff, now we’re getting to the heart of it’ [*xi*].

*Edia Connole*

Teaching Augustine last night brought me across the cool expression 'mouth of the mind [os mentis]' which he uses to gloss the 'mouth to mouth' direct speaking with God in Numbers 12:8... I think the fun of connecting the os mentis formulation... is that it exposes the ingestive aspect of intellect... Mind as mouth, consciousness as [...] an animated image of ingestion as much as I am permitted?

– Nicola Masciandaro [3]

Meanwhile, I learned a great deal, much too much... and as mentioned, from mouth to mouth... and I might as well at last begin to give you, my friends, a little taste of this philosophy, as much as I am permitted?

– Friedrich Nietzsche [4]

[After all... It is wisdom to savor what is good.

– Bernard of Clairvaux [5]

With the speculative turn in philosophy there has been a surge of interest in mystical theology, of which Nicola Masciandaro is a leading exponent, and hence, the many studies arising from it, all strongly feature Nicola's thought. Rarely, however, do such studies attempt to present plainly the philosophical argumentation that underlies Nicola's work, and in the case of his own mystical writings such an understanding is particularly difficult to achieve because he notoriously eschews argumentation in favour of proclamatory exposition.

This paper is a prolegomena to a commentary on Nicola's work that would, following him, be infinite, that would be a work not so much 'on' him, but 'with' him in elaborating and embellishing his thought with ours and others, mouth to mouth. Before that, however, we have to try to locate ourselves in the philosophical tradition that informs his mysticism, the structures of thought and experience towards which his own is articulated. In particular here we focus on the Neoplatonic tradition exemplified by Dionysius.

I. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self Reliance and Other Essays (New York: Dover, 1993), 25; from the climactic sentence of Nicola Masciandaro's 'The Sweetness of the Law,' available from: The Whim, http://thewhim.blogspot.ie/2013/01/the-sweetness-of-law.html (accessed February 20, 2013); 'As much a law as not a law: the real principle of universal synthesis and sweetness (of the law), a sweet new style that is always invented by the few who are concerned only with what they must do, the “great man... who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”'

In relation to Nicola’s own ‘Sweetness/sweetness, it has been noted that ‘In a world of cosmic personalism the “great men” theory of history is valid. Great men do produce historical discontinuities that are crucial. But they make these changes within a framework of historical continuity. They become crucial as pivotal characters precisely because there is a broad historical milieu which is ready to be pivoted. The “great men” is nothing without the “little men,” past and present, who have participated in the development of the historical setting that at last makes a radical break with the past. The law of God is one important aspect of historical continuity. It is man’s tool of dominion, and the measure by which man is either blessed or judged. It speaks to men in all eras because man is still made in God’s image in all eras. Thus, it is true, as the French proverb says, that “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” It is also true that as things stay the same man’s creaturehood, God’s law – the more things are able to change. The radical discontinuity in a person’s individual life is ethical: from death unto life, from the old creature to the new creature, from condemnation to blessing, from rebellion to obedience, from covenant-breaking to covenant-keeping. Without this discontinuity, every man stands condemned by the original discontinuity of Adam’s ethical rebellion. Adam inaugurated a continuity of death by his act of rebellion. The continuity of spiritual death will otherwise prevail in each person’s life apart from the discontinuity of renewal’.


2. The circumstance that God spoke to Moses not by dream or vision (12:6) but mouth to mouth (12:8) is adverted to as proof of the peculiar favor shown to Moses by God: God admitted him to a intimacy of intercourse he did not accord others. Still, even though Moses is thus distinguished, there is no distinction drawn between the revelations given through him and those given through other prophets in point either of Divinity or of authority. And beyond this we are told that we have no scriptural warrant to go on contrasting one mode of revelation (dreams or visions) with another (mouth to mouth). The etymological research into the Hebrew words – of which there were at least three: ro'eh/roeh, nabi'/n'adi and hozeh/chozeh – representing ‘prophet’ (from Greek prophets, from pro – ‘before’ or ‘for,’ and pherein – ‘speak’) in the Old Testament does, however, connote a definite difference, and accordingly a degree of heterogeneity in (grades of) prophecy (qua mystical vision; see below). Of all three Hebrew words, which are found in 1 CH 29:29: ‘Samuel the seer (ro'eh), Nathan the prophet (nabi’), Gad the seer (hozeeh).’ W. Graham Scroggie notes, ‘Roeh means one who is taught in visions divinely brought, and is usually translated as “seer”; that is, one who sees. Chozeh means one who beholds, who gazes, and is used constantly with reference to the prophetical vision. N’adi is from a verb which means “to cause to bubble up.” This is the word most commonly used, and signifies “to pour forth words abundantly.” From the divine prophets having been supposed to be moved rather by another’s power than their own (Hesecensus); hence we read that “men sent by God spoke as they were impelled by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:11). So the roeh is “the utterer of a divine message, one who conveys to his fellows truth otherwise hidden, and imparted to himself by God himself. He is, in short, the mouth of God’s mind towards men (Findlay). It would seem that the same person are designated by all these words, the first two pointing to the prophets power of seeing the visions presented to them by God, and the last, from their function of revealing and proclaiming God’s truth to man... This is pointedly illustrated by Exodus 4:16; 7:1, where Moses is seen to be the “mouth” of God to Aaron, and Aaron the “mouth” of Moses to the people... The bearing of all this on the subject at hand must be apparent... “How did they discern what was the will of God, under what conditions, and in what way did they receive divine communication?” A fairly exhaustive answer to these inquiries will be found in...
Having said what this paper is, we may as well say what it is not. This paper is not, in its present capacity at least, an exposition of the Judaeo-Christian aspect of Nicola's thought. This is regrettable, because for Nicola, as for Dionysius, Moses is equally as important a figure as Plato. Two 'ascent' prefigure their mysticism: the allegory of the philosophers ascent to wisdom in Plato's Republic 7, and Moses' ascent to a 'dark cloud' on Mount Sinai in Exodus (19:18-19) [6]. In both we find ascent to the darkness of excessive light, and in both a return to an opposed darkness of ignorance.

‘Light is darkness, knowing, an “cloud,” and the pain of contemplating it, is the pain of contemplating more reality than can be borne: “Man may not see me and live (Exodus 33:20)”’ [7]. Mystical sorrow is the sorrow of being, then, [8] ‘more than a feeling, it is the live form of the refusal of the principle of Reason whereby the absolute is alone thinkable,’ or as Nicola notes after Bonaventure, ‘this sorrow is the gemitus cordis [groaning of the heart] that is the essential double of the fulgor speculationis [brilliance of speculation] whereby mind is deliriously led beyond itself’ [9].

The entire vision of reality articulated here arises from the single fundamental principle that to be is to be intelligible. This, Parmenides Law, gives rise to what Nicola terms ‘Exhibit X: the folly of thinking that thought can pass beyond itself yet remain the correlate of oneself, [this is] the lie of all critique of correlationism that does not attack the correlation itself, the real -ism: you’ [10].

And so, at the end of this paper, in an homage to Nicola Masciandaro, and in order to really fuck the passions of finitude, we will invite you to ‘weaponise the correlation, to behead your being-in-the-world’ [11]. After all, speculation alone is not sufficient, ‘Better to study than to be ignorant. Better to feel than to study. Better to become than to experience...’ [12]. ‘Enter then into this () hole’ [13].

This ( ), the largest of the breaches in the sheath that protects your body. This ( ), the principal material incorporator of the outside world. This ( ), the last defence, the point at which the critical decision of incorporation occurs [14].
Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name. It is and it is as no other really is. It is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless, power... It does not live nor is it life. Per se. It is not number or order, these Nor is it speech per se, understanding light, error and truth – it is none of – Dionysius, Divine Names [15]

But I am a worm, and no man.

– Psalm 22 [16]

How to express the otherness of the divine in human language was the central question that exercised the Pseudo-Dionysius. How to weaponise the speculation that the Thearchy [17] is ontologically transcendent; beyond being, substance, and knowledge, and at the same time, the Cause of everything that exists [18]. ‘For it is above every essence and life,’ he writes, ‘No light, indeed, expresses Its character, and every description falls short of Its similitude... we rightly express its non-relationship to things created, but we do not know its super-essential, and inconceivable, and unutterable, indefinability’ [19].

As Enrica Ruaro has suggested, in scholarly discussions of this question the via negativa or path of negation is seen as the principal means by which Dionysius weaponises this speculation [20]. In his Mystical Theology, key to this methodology, he writes:

The Cause of all is above all and is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless, mindless. [Nor is it...] soul or mind. [It does not...] I possess imagination, conviction, speech or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality... It has no power, nor is it power... It does not live nor is it life. It is not substance, nor is it eternity or time. It is not wisdom... spirit... sonship... fatherhood... Darkness and light, error and truth – it is none of these [21].

For Dionysius, it is more true to say that God is not, rather than God is, because ‘being,’ ‘that which is,’ necessarily means ‘that which is available to thought’; thought is always the apprehension of some being, and since God is ‘beyond being,’ he is beyond intellection [22]. God is precisely unthinkable to us.

Nicola notes after Plotinus ‘Contemplation (theoria [which, we can add here, is linked to the ‘gaze,’ chozeb; the one who beholds qua ‘speculation!’] and its object constitute a living thing, a Life, two inextricably one’; see Plotinus, The Enneads, trans. Stephen McKenna (New York: Burdett, 1992), 3.8.8., as cited in Nicola’s commentary on Stephen Shakespeare, ‘Of Plications: A Short Summa On The Nature Of Cascadian Black Metal,’ in Glossator Vol. 6, Black Metal, eds. Nicola Masciandaro and Reza Negerastani, available from: Glossator.org, http://glossator.org/last accessed February 23, 2013. For instance, both Augustine and St. Thomas agree that it is said in the person of God: No man shall see me and live (Exodus, xxxiii, 20). Augustine addresses this in addressing Paul’s rapture (2 Cor 12:2-4), when, in acknowledging the certainty that he was indeed ‘snatched up to the third heaven,’ he addresses Paul’s uncertainty, apropos different grades of prophecy or mystical vision, about the nature of alienation from the body when this happened: ‘whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows,’ Augustine will go on to say: ‘whether it left his body totally and simply dead or whether while the soul was in some way still there animating his living body, his mind was torn away to see or rather hear the inexpressible words (2 Cor 12: 4) of that vision; see Augustine, On Genesis, 469-470. As Nicola has noted on the ontology of theoria: contemplation apropo chozeb/chozeb: the ‘one who beholds,’ the ‘gazers,’ such vision is the telos of all speculation: ‘visio sine comprehensione, as Cusa defines it,’ or as we read elsewhere: ‘Seeing more than is comprehended – cf. Levinas’ thought “which thinks more than itself” – is precisely... vision without comprehension, [it is] speculation’ ... ‘It is the opening of reality measured by the space of the eclipse of what by that [and since ...] “The process of perception... runs parallel to the process of creation, ... the reverting of the process of perception without obliterating consciousness amounts to realising the nothingness of the universe as a separate entity”; see Nicola Masciandaro, ‘Absolute Secrecy: On the Infinity of Individuation,’ available from: The Whim, http://thewhim.blogspot.ie/2012/07/absolute-secrecy-on-infinity-of.html(accessed February 10, 2013), and Stephen Shakespeare, ‘Of Plications: A Short Summa On The Nature Of Cascadian Black Metal,’ in Glossator Vol. 6, 36.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, Section 9: What is Noble? Aphorism no. 295, in The Nietzsche Reader, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 360-361: ‘Meanwhile I learned much, all too much more about this god’s philosophy and, as mentioned, from mouth to mouth – I, the last disciple and initiate of the God Dionysus, may now be finally allowed to begin to give you, my friends, a little taste, as much as I am permitted, of this philosophy?’ In the post-Zarathustra period Nietzsche increasingly identifies with this Greek god-philosopher, even signing his letters, ‘Dionysus,’ in his last half-mad months of lucidity. His use of the ‘mouth to mouth’ formulation is fortuitous here as it suggests the extent to which prophecy is by no means a simple phenomenon. As Knudson has noted in relation to the historicity of prophecy, ‘we may distinguish the rank and file of the prophetic order... [OT] prophets come into special prominence at two important crises of the nations history during the Philistine wars of the eleventh century and the Syrian wars of the ninth century. But they are frequently referred to by the canonical prophets, and appear as late as the time of Nehemiah (6. 10-14). It is probable, then, that they formed a continuous institution in Israel, at least from the eleventh century before Christ down into the postexilic period. Groups or bands of prophets first appear in the time of Samuel (i Sam. 10, 5-13). They then apparently moved about the country devoting themselves to a rather extravagant type of religious life. They carried musical instruments with them, and by means of music and song seem to have worked themselves up into a state of frenzy, Indeed, so conspicuous a feature of their life was this physical excitement that they were called madmen (2 Kings 9. n; Hos. 9. 7), and the verb “prophesy” came to be used in the sense of “rave” (i Sam. 18. 10). They were thus ecstatics, resembling to a certain extent modern dervishes and the ancient Greek worshippers of Dionysius. They also bore some resemblance to the prophets of Baal in Kings 18. 25-29. The latter fact has led to the theory that prophecy was not an independent institution in Israel but was borrowed from the Canaanites. In support of this view it is claimed that the Hebrew word for “prophet,” nabi, was of foreign origin. But this claim is without adequate foundation. There is, it is true, no verbal root in Hebrew from which nabi could have derived; but this is also true of many other Hebrew words ... which no one thinks of regarding as loan-words. Then, too, the name nabi is applied to a number of persons before the time of Samuel, such as Abraham (Gen. 20. 7, 17), Moses (Deut. 34. 10), Miriam (Exod. 15. 20), and Deborah (Judg. 4. 4). This does not necessarily
mean that these persons were called prophets in their own time. We may have here simply the view of a later writer [see above footnote on this point], 2-3. On Knudson’s point that Israeli prophets were ecstasies that resembled to a certain extent modern dervishes and the ancient Greek worshippers of Dionysius, he later notes that prior to the time of Samuel prophecy had, in Israel, been confined to individuals; ‘Here and here a person was seized with the Spirit of God’ (compare Judg. 5: 12; 6: 34; 14: 6, 19). But in the time of Samuel whole groups of men were thus affected. The prophetic spirit became contagious,’ 3. Knudson then notes that the reason for this new development was probably the national and religious crisis brought about by the victories of the Philis times: the ark had been captured, Shiloh desecrated, and the land in a large part subdued,’ 3. While this is fascinating, what is of particular interest here is the nature of prophecy in relation to what Knudson identifies as its contagion, insofar as this further suggests the extent to which prophecy is by no means a simple phenomenon, but contains different and discordant elements, that are to a certain extent pan-historical. Hence in the Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche was able to say: ‘Either through the influence of the narcotic drink, of which the hymns of all aboriginal humans and peoples speak, or with the invigorating springtime’s awakening that fills all nature with passion, these Dionysian impulses find their source, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete loss of self-recognition. Even in the German Middle Ages singing and dancing crowds, ever increasing in number, moved from place to place under this same Dionysian impulse... There are people who, from the lack of experience or thick-headedness, turn away from such manifestations as from “folk-diseases,” mocking or with pity derived from their own sense of a superior health. But of course these poor people have no idea how corpse-like and ghostly their so-called “health” looks when the glowing life of the Dionysian swarm buzzes past them; see Nietzsche, Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music, in The Nietzsche Reader, 45. Consider what is given by Zangwill in relation to Jeremiah, the ‘greatest of OT prophets,’ as the definitive definition or ‘scientific diagnosis’ of prophecy proper: ‘He is mocked and derided and there is upon him the fear of even graver persecution. Nevertheless, “If I say I will not make mention of Him/Nor speak any more in His name/Then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire/Shut up in my bones/And I weary myself to hold it in./But cannot.”.’], 68. Is it not the same mystical sorrow and holy foolishness unfolding here, visible and readable in all its social dramas, that we find in the time of Symeon, for example, who, in having spent a number of years in the desert, fasting, praying, and through silence separating himself from all earthly bodies, decided to return to the city in order to “mock the world” (empaizw – to ridicule, make dance, make fun of; or that we find in the Middle Ages, in Margery of Kemp’s uncontrollable sobbing, for example: ‘so loud and wondyrfull that it made the pepyl astonyd’)? See Andrew Thomas, The Holy Fools: A Theological Enquiry (PhD: University of Nottingham, 2009); see also Nicola Masciandaro, ‘Eros as Cosmic Sorrow,’ in Mystics Quarterly, Vol. 35, No. 1-2 (March/June 2009), pp. 59-103; and The Book of Margery of Kempe, trans. Lynn Stanley (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 50.

5. Sapentia Sapor Boni. ‘Perhaps sapentia, that is wisdom, is derived from sapor, that is taste, because, when it is added to virtue, like some seasoning, it adds taste to something which by itself is tasteless and bitter ... For in nothing is the victory of wisdom over malice more evident than when the taste for evil – which is what malice – is purged away, and the mind’s inmost task senses that it is deeply filled with sweetness!’ see Bernard of Clairvaux, On the Song of Songs, trans. Irene Edmonds, 4 vols. (Kalamazoo Mi: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 85:8-9, IV.204-5, as cited in Nicola Masciandaro, ‘The Sweetness (of the Law).’ As Nicola states here, ‘the deep logical connection between the gustatory and the elective is shown in IE root gens: to taste, chose (origin of both choose and gustus). As knowledge proceeds via discrimination, so is pleasure or disgust also a choice. The horizon of knowledge is governed by the ethics of taste.’ Nicola’s entire ouevre, is, to borrow his words, moved ‘towards realising the profound relation between wisdom and taste, sapentia and sapor, according to which truth is always a matter of discriminating for and through oneself the difference between good and bad, a process of tasting or providing its right flavour,’ or as we read elsewhere: ‘“The Psalmist says ... Taste and see. Taste refers to the affectus of love; see refers to the intellect’s cogitation and mediation. Therefore one ought first to surge up in the movement of love before intellectually pondering ... For this is the general rule in Mystical Theology: one ought to have practice before theory. For this is what you do anyway’; see Nicola Masciandaro, ‘The Severed Hand: Commentary and Ecstasy,’ in English Language Notes 50.2 Fall/Winter 2012, 96.

The doctrine that God is beyond being, and beyond thought, is not an ungrounded starting point or doctrine of faith for Dionysius, but rather the conclusion of a rigorous sequence of philosophical reasoning that began with Parmenides [24]. In first making explicit the idea of being as intelligible, Parmenides had said that one ‘could not know that which is not, for it is impossible, nor [could one] express it; for the same thing is for thinking and being’ [25]. In establishing this correlation it necessarily followed that to think non-being would be to have no object or content for thought, to be not thinking anything, and hence not to be thinking. If we trace the development of this reasoning down through Plato to Plotinus we witness the birth of the via negative in negative or apophatic theology (from Greek apophatikos meaning ‘negative,’ from apophasis: ‘denial,’ from apo – ‘other than’ and phanai – ‘speak,’ intending (knowledge of God) obtained through negation) [26]. According to which, to think or refer to the divine One at all is, inevitably, to treat it as some being. For even in thinking and saying it is ‘not this,’ we are precisely thinking and saying it is ‘not this,’ thought and language can deal only with beings. To say that the One is ‘not this’ is also, inescapably, to think it as something else; not as multiple and complex but as unitary and simple, because even the term ‘One,’ as Plotinus points out, ‘contains only a denial of multiplicity’ [27]. And so, in the end, we must negate even such negative definitions, including the name ‘One’ itself, because all language represents conceptual definition and intellectual apprehension. The profundity of this statement arises from the fact that it would seem, as Paullina Remes puts it, ‘unity must be connected to a first principle [for Plotinus]’ [28]. But he himself says that ‘if the One – name and reality expressed – were to be taken positively, it would be less clear than if we did not give it a name at all; for perhaps this name was given it [he suggests], in order that the seeker, beginning from this, which is completely indicative of simplicity, may finally negate this as well’ [29].

Genuinely apophasis consists then, for Plotinus, not in any words or thoughts whatsoever, however negative or superlative, but
The old Theologians were fascinated by the picture of Moses entering the theological tradition, states unhesitatingly that Moses did not see God. His audacious prayer to see God's glory meets with a clear refusal. 


7. Turner, 18. Turner is citing Exodus (33:20). St. Thomas notes, "If the ontological dependence of our understanding on phantasms prevents us in this life from understanding other pure spirits, much less can we in this life see the divine essence, which transcends all angels. Of this fact the following may also be taken as an indication: The higher our mind is raised to the contemplation of spiritual things, the more it is abstracted from sensible things: but the final terminus to which contemplation can possibly arrive is the divine substance; therefore the mind that sees the divine substance must be totally divorced from bodily senses, either by death or by some rapture. Hence it is said in the person of Moses: No man shall see me and live (Exodus, xxxiii, 20); Summa Contra Gentiles, trans. J. Rickaby (London: Burns and Oates, 1905), 216. See also Johnston on this point, he says "A solid theological tradition, rooted in Exodus itself, states unhesitatingly that Moses did not see God. His audacious prayer to see God's glory meets with a clear refusal [...] (Exodus 33:19-20). The Lord then comes down in a cloud; Moses is filled with awe as the Lord passes before him; but the face of God he does not see. And this scene finds an echo in the fourth gospel which firmly declares that "no one has ever seen God." [...] (John 1:18). In his ... study, Western Mysticism, Edward Cuthbert Butler... maintains that the tradition that neither Moses nor anyone else sees the face of God is firmly grounded throughout Christian theology. Therefore, the other theory, that Moses and Paul enjoyed a fleeting vision of God, is found in Augustine and Thomas... Augustine based his claim principally on the text of Numbers that God spoke to Moses "mouth to mouth." [...] Edward Cuthbert Butler rightly says that this text (like others stating that God spoke to Moses face to face) says nothing about the aesthetic vision... In the face of ... biblical evidence [Cuthbert Butler says], and of the grave philosophical difficulties involved, it may well be thought that but for St. Augustine's "evacuated speculation, accepted and endorsed by St. Thomas, the idea of the vision of God's essence by any man would not have found a place in the theological tradition"; our emphasis [St. Thomas himself says: 'Further, the Lord said to Moses: "I speak to him mouth to mouth" and plainly, and not by riddles and figures, nor he see the Lord' (Numbers 12:8); but this is to see God in His essence. Therefore it is possible to see the essence of God in this life. Pseudo-Dionysius, Num. XII dictum dominus de Moyse, ovei os loqueri ei, et palam, et non per aenigmatum et figuram, videt Deinm. Sed hoc est videre Deum per essentiam. Ergo aliquis in statu huius vitae potest Deum per essentiam videere. St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica XI-XIII Iª q. 12 a. 11 arg. 2; leaving Cuthbert Butler behind, Johnston then goes on to say] The old theologians were fascinated by the picture of Moses entering the darkness. Remember how God came down in a thick cloud. Snarled was wrapped in smoke. "And the people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (Exodus 20:21). In his Life of Moses, Gregory of Nyssa, watching [Moses enter the thick darkness, claims that [...] he did have a direct vision of God, a knowledge which is ignorance. Graphically he describes how the mind (the mind of Moses or any mystic) travels beyond all sensible seeing, beyond all imaginative seeing, beyond all understanding and reasoning until it sees God in darkness," Johnston concludes via Nyssa and St. John of the Cross that we see God through 'faith', and that in 'naked faith this dark vision of God is filled with mystical suffering,' 31-32.

8. This is obviously an over-simplification due to time/space constraint here in the introduction, see rather Masciandaro, 'Eros as Cosmic Sorrow,' particularly pp. 81-82, and in relation to what follows: 'This sorrow leads to the joy, not of enclosure, but of escape, identified by Levinas as "the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that I [I] am; is oneself [soi-meme]. Yet the Clouds of sorrow does not break out of self into anything, a new container, but is rather purely opened from within via the very ecstasy of escape, via becoming "able to receive that jove, the which reviveth fro a man all weyting and feyling of his beying."' (44. 1560-61).'

9. Nicola Masciandaro, 'Absolute Secrecy: On the Infinity of Individuation.' Masciandaro is referring to the prologue of the Itinerarium here, where Bonaventure invites the reader of the work to enter upon it with a deep longing, with prayerfulness, and with the groanings of inner man, "so that he may not believe that reading is sufficient without union, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy ... knowledge without love ... or reflection without divinely inspired wisdom," see Bonaventure – The Souls Journey Into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 55-56.

10. Nicola Masciandaro, 'Absolute Secrecy: On the Infinity of Individuation.'

11. Nicola Masciandaro, 'WormSign.'

12. Masciandaro, 'WormSign.'

13. Masciandaro, 'WormSign.'

14. This is our variant on a statement made by Paul Rozin in 'Food is Fundamental, Fun, Frightening, and Far Reaching' in Social Research 66 (1999), 9-30. In "Truly the Ear Tests Words as the Palate Tastes Food (Job 12:11)?: Synaesthetic Food Metaphors for the Experience of the Divine in the Jewish Tradition," Jonathan Brumenberg-Kraus situates Rozin's statement in a discussion of Job (12:11, above), and says "when Job compares the palate's tasting of food to the ear's testing words, he's referring precisely to this sort of 'critical decision' whether or not to incorporate his friends words: to take them intimately to his heart." We similarly cite (a variant of) Rozin's statement here in the context of Nicola's work, as a figurative guide to what he calls above the 'ingestive aspect of intellect.' Brumenberg-Kraus' text is available from: Wheaton College.edu, http://wheatoncollege.edu/faculty/files/2011/07/Brumenberg-Kraus2009.pdf (accessed February 20, 2013).

15. CEH (5838); This translation is from Colm Luibheid, Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).


17. This term is used by Dionysius to define the divine unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for a discussion of the term see Enrica Ruaro, 'God and the Worm: The Two-Old Otherness in Pseudo Dionysius's Theory of Dissimilar Images,' in Antiquity Catholic Quarterly (Vol. 82, No. 4, 2008), 1, 501.

18. See Ruaro, 581; Eric D. Perl, Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 5-34; Dermot Moran, 'Neoplatonic and


20. Ruaro, 582.

21. MT: CH IV, V (1040D - 1045D); Parker translation.

22. Perl, 6 - 34.


24. Perl, 5-16.


26. We follow Perl's argument here; Perl's Theophany is the culmination of more than twelve years of research into the Neoplatonic thought of Dionysius; taken together with that of Plotinus and Proclus, as philosophy, i.e. as a rationally justified, coherent account of the nature of reality.

27. As cited by Perl, 12.


30. Perl notes in an aside of how in refusing to attribute to God the properties which make up the matter of affirmative theology, Dionysius was aiming expressly at the Neoplatonic definitions: 'He is neither One, nor Unity, and that in negating the name 'One' Dionysius is simply following the precepts of Plotinus here. See Perl, 117.


32. DN 1.4, 592 CD; Parker translation.

33. MT 1.3, 1001A; Parker translation.
experience, but its content as it were – a virtual virtual whose realness is infinitely in excess of all presence. The mystical secret is one’s identity with the immanent hiddenness of secret itself in its radically literal sense of something set apart, severed, disjoined (secret is substantive of the verb seeerno). Mystical vision is the unitary realisation of oneself as radical actuality, a pure actuality or absolute individuation, the infinite haecceity of nothing/everything, next to which one’s person is necessarily an indivisible division – as figured in Dionysius’s legendary cephalophory, a perfect emblem of the non-difference between individuation and the divine actus purus if there ever was one. In one direction, mystical vision secrets the subject, unites it with the Hidden. As John of the Cross says, “we call mystical wisdom ‘secret’ – and it is actually so – because it has the characteristic of hiding the soul within itself ... so engulf[s] souls in its secret abyss that they have the keen awareness of being brought into a place far removed from every creature.” In the other direction, mystical vision hacks open the subject, evaporates and airs it into the limitless open of perfect, primordial actuality, a totally simple and unimaginably flat place, not of profound wisdom, but of sublime stupidity, the instant, dumb, unquestionable intelligence with which Dionysius’s corpse rises and picks up his head. “Tunc erigens se sancti viri corpus exanime, apprehendit propriis manibus sanctum caput abscessum.” [Raising itself, the lifeless body of the holy man then grasped with his own hands the sacred severed head].

The stupidity of which the philosopher accuses mysticism is his ownmost, disregarded stupidity, his deferred intoxication whose literally returning repression is the post-conference drink. This stupidity, “the very stone which the builders rejected” (1 Peter 2:7; Ps. 118.22), is the cornerstone of mystical intelligence. This intelligence, the real intelligence of intelligence, is the actuality of a knowledge that surpasses memory, of a pleasure that surpasses its object. The “custom of such Souls,” says Marguerite Porete, “is to understand much and to forget quickly . . . and she is inebriated not only from what she has drunk, but very intoxicated and more than intoxicated from what she never drinks nor will ever drink.” As though foreign to it, absolutely foreign. I am not an alien, but something stranger still, an insider whose essence is to actually be a virtual absolute outsider. The hellishly real impossibility that you are you is the true stupidity according to which the absolute is alone thinkable.’

47. Psalm 22 (21:6).

48. Masciandaro, ‘WormSign.’ Masciandaro provides a full break-down and translation of the extended commentary on this Psalm: ‘John Scotus Eriugena comments Psalm 22.6: ‘For none of the material things in nature is more lowly than the worm, which is conceived from simple earth. Nevertheless, through this is represented the incarnation of the Word of God, which transcends every sense and intellect [Phil 4.7].’ ‘Who will explain his begetting?’ [Acts 8.33, from Isa 53.8, cf. Augustine, Expositions of the Psalms: In what sense “no man”? Because he is God. Why then did he so demean himself as to say “worm”? Perhaps because a worm is born from flesh without intercourse, as Christ was from the Virgin Mary. A worm, and yet no man. Why a worm? Because he was mortal, because he was born from flesh, because he was born without intercourse. Why “no man”? Because In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; he was God [Jn 1.1]’] It can also be understood thus: “I am a worm and a human is not,” that is, I am a worm and human is not a worm. As if he were to say, I who am more than a human penetrate the secrets of all nature, as a worm [penetrates] the bowels of the earth, which no one participating only in human nature can do. With the sense agrees that which is written in another Psalm, ‘and my substance in the depths of the earth [PS 139.15], that is, and my substance, which is wisdom in itself, subsists in the depths of the earth, that is, the innermost folds of created nature. For the divinity beyond being is the being of all.” Thus the worm that penetrates the hidden things of all creation is the Wisdom of the Father, which, while human, transcends all humanity (Commentary on the Dionysian Celestial Hierarchy).


‘God savours Himself, says Eckhart. This is possible, but what He savours is, it seems to me, the hatred which He has for Himself, to which none, here on Earth, can be compared (could I say: this hatred is time, but that bothers me. Why should I say time? ... Why should anyone be interested in time? I cannot imagine. The scrappiness of an arm, a finger, an enigma of a face; these things (hurt). Time, on the contrary, is as vacant as a marriage, or God alone in the dark’, 94.

Of importance to the proposed relevance of [God’s hatred toward] time in Land, here – and with specific reference to Masciandaro’s Neoplatonism – is Woodard’s dark vitalism, which occurs over and through time, in Slime Dynamics (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2012):

‘Summed up, for Deleuze, Guattari, Bergson and Merleau Ponty, vitalism cannot be a thing (since gene are what is passed on, not life itself) and it cannot be a force because it says nothing about life itself as a force, only that it develops but not how. What all the aforementioned critiques leave out is Time as something beyond thought which is the force of vitalism (life emerges over time) and the substance of vitalism is not the germ plasm trumping heredity but space as it is filled with life,’ 9.

‘Vitalism, as it has been articulated here, is a minimal-ist metaphysics which operates on reality by way of
following an ontological cascade mirroring the cosmological procession of forces and matter. At the root of this vitalism is the forces of forces following from an original One, a One not as pure unification but the possibility of ‘isness’ itself stemming from the original explosion of time and space as well as from the resulting emanations, immanences, emergences and transcendences. That is, vitalism is a mental shadow of the progression of the universe, from the speculative moment before the Big Bang, as highly condensed mass, to its extension into time and space and matter, to biological life, and finally to reflective thinking. The above mentioned ontological cascade moves (in philosophical terms) from the Real, to Materiality, to Sense, and finally to Intelligence. Or, put in terms of the levels of possibility, to the configurations of matter and energy, to the interaction of stimulus and cascade (in philosophical terms) from the Real, to reflective thinking. The above mentioned ontological cascade moves (in philosophical terms) from the Real, to Materiality, to Sense, and finally to Intelligence. Or, put in terms of the levels of possibility, to the configurations of matter and energy, to the interaction of stimulus and sense, ending with the extension of ontic being via symbols, structures, technologies et cetera. The degenerate take on vitalism and the Neo-platonic One will be taken together as a dark vitalism,’ 10.

49. ‘A few remarks must be made on this subject. The body of a large worm consists of from 100 to 200 almost cylindrical rings or segments, each furnished with minute bristles. The muscular system is well developed. Worms can crawl backwards as well as forwards, and by the aid of their affixed tails can retreat with extraordinary rapidity into their burrows. The mouth is situated at the anterior end of the body, and is provided with a little projection (lobe or lip, as it has been variously called) which is used for prehension. Internally, behind the mouth, there is a strong pharynx...which is pushed forwards when the animal eats, and this part corresponds,... with the protrudable trunk or proboscis of other annelids. The pharynx leads into the oesophagus, on each side of which in the lower part there are three pairs of large glands, which secrete a surprising amount of carbonate of lime. These calciferous glands are highly remarkable for nothing like them is known in any other animal. Their use will be discussed when we treat of the digestive process. In most of the species, the oesophagus is enlarged into a crop in front of the gizzard. This latter organ is lined with a smooth thick chitinous membrane, and is surrounded by weak longitudinal, but powerful transverse muscles. Perrier saw these muscles in energetic action; and, as he remarks, the trituration of the food must be chiefly effected by this organ, for worms possess no jaws or teeth of any kind. Grains of sand and small stones, from the 1/20 to a little more than the 1/10 inch in diameter, may generally be found in their gizzards and intestines. As it is certain that worms swallow many little stones, independently of those swallowed while excavating their burrows, it is probable that they serve, like mill-stones, to triturate their food. The gizzard opens into the intestine, which runs in a straight course to the vent at the posterior end of the body. The intestine presents a remarkable structure, the typhloposis, or, as the old anatomists called it, an intestine within an intestine; and Claparede has shown that this consists of a deep longitudinal involution of the walls of the intestine, by which means an extensive absorbent surface is gained... The circulatory system is well developed. Worms breathe by their skin, as they do not possess any special respiratory organs. The two sexes are united in the same individual, but two individuals pair together. The nervous system is fairly well developed; and the two almost confluent cerebral ganglia are situated very near to the anterior end of the body.’


50. Masciandaro, ‘Absolute Secrecy: On the Infinity of Individuation.’


52. Psalm 78 (:65); this is one of Dionysius’ favorite sources of symbols: ‘the Lord awoke, like a strong man, powerful but reeling with wine.’


55. Masciandaro, ‘WormSign.’


Only this Neo-platonic argumentation enables us to grasp the meaning and philosophical just-ification of Mas-ciandaro’s extreme ‘mystical’ formulations. In Absolute Individuation, [39] a text that radically disrupts our habituated understanding of mysticism as an experiential realisation that necessarily dislocates the integrity of the individual, Nicola repeats this position, adopted by Dionysius and expounded by Eruigena in the Perypheson [40]. Here, in a crucial passage, we are perforce reminded of Plotinus, who, in ruminating the ‘One,’ had said: ‘Even to say “cause” is not to predicate something accidental of it, but of us, that we have something from it;’ he continues, ... whatever that is in itself... neither ought one who speaks say precisely “that” or “is”’ [41]. All that we are left with, actually left with, on this view, is ‘in itself’ – ‘a flight of the alone with the Alone,’ then, in Masciandaro’s twist of Plotinus’ terms, [42] the phoenix flight you can never properly undertake because it is your actuality’ [43]. ‘The radical spatio-temporal asymmetry of this [“actuality”] curves and distorts the entire cosmos. It is the universal twist which reveals the identity of inner and outer worlds. Wrapped around the black ( ) hole of the fact that I am me, everything is unveiled to be a vast mirror or speculative reality,’ where, or rather not where, the nullibiquitous not ‘not this’ or ‘whatless that’ [‘I am That I am’] [44] standing at the occluded placeless center of being, in
the mirror itself, is equivalent to...[45] an essential stupidity, to my stupidity, to stupid human being: ‘I am an insider whose essence is to actually be a virtual absolute outsider’ [46].

Correlatively Christ would say: ‘I am a worm and no man, a reproach of men, and despised of the people’ [47]. ‘As if he were to say [comments Nicola, after Eriugena], I who am more than human penetrate the secrets of all nature, as a worm [penetrates] the bowels of the earth, which no one participating only in human nature can do’; or after Land: ‘If I am inhuman it is because my world has slopped over its human bounds, because to be human seems like a poor, sorry, miserable affair, limited by the senses, restricted by moralities and codes, defined by platitudes and -isms’ [48].

But I am a worm, and no man [49].

This image of Otherness incarnate, given in what Masciandaro terms ‘the hellishly real impossibility that you are you,’ [50] is an absurd, incongruous, stupid image, from Latin stupere, meaning ‘stupor,’ and from which etymologically if not etymologically we get ‘stoope’ and from which ontologically if not etymologically we get ‘stoop,’ indicating the very same near-unconsciousness or insensibility: ‘the instant, dumb, unquestionable intelligence with which Dionysius’s corpse rises and picks up his head,’ [51] for example, as if in a drunken stupor, the holy man (=realizing with wine [52]) condescends to do something and in having the shoulders and neck habitually turned to the ground, precisely ‘turns’ (as if to enter into this hole as a worm); this is a tautology in fact, the worm does not turn, we worm – from Proto-Indo European wer meaning ‘turn’ [53]. At any rate Dionysius’s worming on this occasion is the perfect ocular analog of what Masciandaro terms ‘true stupidity’ according to which the Absolute is alone thinkable, and therefore representable [54].

[But] all this talk of ‘turns’... [he would say], [talk] that now infects every culture, of this turn and that turn, is only deferred, perverted desire to become, to convert to the worm you already are, to the multiple singular agency that is culture’s very ground. When we behold a wide, turf-covered expanse, [he would add] we should remember that its smoothness... is mainly due to all the inequalities having been slowly levelled by worms. It is a marvellous reflection that the whole of the

thought: ‘The love of black metal twists toward absolute cosmic exteriority along a mystical path of intensive inversion. Ordinate mysticism takes an inward and upward path to God as the source and goal of everything, withdrawing from the exterior phenomenal world in order to ascend beyond it to the One in a movement that is analectic, apophatic, and apogogic (Plotinus, Enneads, 4.8.1; Augustine, Confessions, 7.10.16; Pseudo-Dionysius, Mystical Theology, 1.1). The love of black metal, reversely and contrarily, leads downwards and outwards into a paradoxically disordered and multiple cosmos that is no less divine; pursuing a mystical path that is cataphatic, apophatic, and apogogic (a path, however, that necessarily twists these terms according to its own essential negativity); ‘On the Mystical Love of Black Metal (P.E.S.T. Abstract),’ available from The Whim, http://thewhim.blogspot.ie/2011/09/on-mystical-love-of-black-metal-pest.html (accessed February 22, 2013).

57. CH II, 1-3.

58. Qua ‘incongruous,’ apropos of Proclus, or ‘absurd,’ qua ‘absurdities.’ See Parker’s translation; and see Ruaro, 586, and 583, respectively.

59. CH II, 5 (143A-B); Parker translation.

60. CH II, 1-3 and Ep. 9/IX (1104B-1105C).

61. CH II, 5 (144D-145A); Luibheid translation.

62. CH II, 5 (144D-145A); Parker translation.

63. As above: Psalm 22 (21:) 6.

64. Psalm 22 (27:) 46.

65. Ruaro, 588.

66. Ruaro, 588; for Christological commentary on the worm see Masciandaro WormSign, as above.

67. Masciandaro, ‘WormSign.’

68. Ruaro, 588.

69. Ruaro, 588.

70. See Aristotle, History of Animals [Elibron Classics:


73. Ruaro, 590-591.

74. Masciandaro, ‘WormSign.’

75. Ruaro, 590-592.

76. Ruaro, 592; See Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption* 762b28-763a7. As Ruaro notes Aristotle’s standard view is that the human race is eternal, this is just a brief, if intriguing, hypothetical discussion.

77. Ruaro, 592.

78. Or ‘Leper Creativity,’ or even ‘Slime Dynamic’ apropos Woodward, though Woodward would seem to suggest that what separates his ‘dark section’ from the Neoplatonic tradition is a notion he has that the Neoplatonic One, apropos Plotinus, is ‘transcendent,’ whereas his One is radically immanent: merely the generative material sum as the speculative epoch prior to the Big Bang (2012, 58): ‘However, as Perl has noted, and as is evident throughout Nicola’s oeuvre, ‘In Neoplatonism, in Plotinus, Proclus, and Dionysius, divine transcendence is conceived so radically that it coincides with divine immanence,’ [112].


84. Nicola Masciandaro, ‘On The Mystical Love of Black Metal [MS],’ forthcoming; Masciandaro is quoting the opening prayer from *The Cloud of Unknowning* ed. Patrick J. Gallacher (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1997), 24. Of interest here is the worms place in a discussion of black metal music. As Darwin notes in a discussion of their senses: ‘Worms do not possess any sense of hearing. They took not the least notice of the shrill notes from a metal whistle, which was repeatedly sounded near them; nor did they of the deepest and loudest tones of a bassoon. They were indifferent to shouts, if care was taken that the breath did not strike them. When placed on a table close to the keys of a piano, if care was taken that the breath did not strike them. When placed on a table close to the keys of a piano, which was played as loudly as possible, they remained perfectly quiet. Although they are indifferent to undulations in the air audible by us, they are extremely sensitive to vibrations in any solid object. When the pots containing two worms which had remained quite indifferent to the sound of the piano, were placed on this instrument, and the note C in the bass clef was struck, both instantly retreated into their burrows. After a time they emerged, and when G above the line in the treble clef was struck they again retreated. Under similar circumstances on another night one worm dashed into its burrow on a very high note being struck only once, and the other worm when C in the treble clef was struck. On these occasions the worms were not touching the sides of the pots, which stood in saucers; so that the vibrations, before reaching their bodies, had to pass from the sounding board of the piano, through the saucer, the bottom of the pot and the superficial mould over any such expanse has passed, and will again pass, every few years through the bodies of worms.

*Inhabit the interface and turn into the worm that you are* [55].

As the only image the Thearchy applies to itself, worm is the prototype in a dissimilar imaging of the Absolute that operates as a functional counterpart to Nicola’s negative theology [56]. Called cataphatic theology (from Greek Kataphatikos meaning ‘affirmative,’ from káta – ‘as an intensifier,’ and phánai – ‘speak,’ intending (knowledge of God) obtained through affirmation), this theory of dissimilar images is first presented by Dionysius in the *Celestial Hierarchy*. Here, having explained the distinction between similar and dissimilar images applied to angels or to the Thearchy itself in the scriptures, Dionysius outlines three levels of images present: high images, middle images, and low images, which proceed from the less dissimilar and higher in the ranks of sensible things to the more dissimilar and lower in the ranks of sensible things [57]. The low images, which Dionysius himself calls stupid, [58] are in fact preferable, he explains, because ‘If the negations respecting things Divine are true, but the affirmations are inharmonious, then the revelation as regards things invisible, through dissimilar representation, is more appropriate to the hiddenness of things unutterable’ [59].

Toward the end of the second chapter of the *Celestial Hierarchy* (and the same topic returns in *Epistle IX* [60], Dionysius discusses images that are distinctively applied to the Thearchy itself. He begins with the less dissimilar (‘star of the morning’ and ‘light’) and moves on the more dissimilar (‘non-consuming’ fire), and then onto the most dissimilar (‘sweet-smelling ointment’ and ‘cornerstone’), and having mentioned even more incongruous animal imagery (such as ‘lion’, and ‘charging bear’) [61]. Dionysius ends with that which is conceived as the lowliest and most incongruous of all ‘viz. that distinguished theologians have shown it to us as representing itself under the form of a worm’ [62]. The source of this reference is clearly Psalm 22, [63] in which the persecuted Christ raises his complaint to his Father while suffering on the cross, ‘My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ [64] which Dionysius interprets as lament, and
then ‘But I am a worm, and no man,’ which is taken to be a self-definition of Christ himself [68].

In the earliest extant commentaries on Dionysius’ text, this interpretation is supported and accompanied with an explanation: Christ calls himself ‘worm,’ we read, because like a worm he came to life from the Virgin Mary without sexual intercourse [66]. This ‘old doctrine of spontaneous generation,’ which is, as Nicola suggests, ‘not only biologically incorrect but ontologically true of every entity,’ – ‘moved from within itself,’ [67] – alleged that worms came to life, not through copulation, but directly from matter – as fleas from dust, they were borne of mud and dirt, and other animals corpses, in the so-called generatio equivoca authoritatively endorsed by the church fathers [68]. Though he himself remains silent on the matter, it is widely agreed [69] that this doctrine, coherently synthesised by Aristotle [70], could not but have motivated Dionysius in his selection of worm as Otherness Incarnate.

The worms equivocal generation epitomises its otherness to every form of animal life, but in particular to man, as is well shown in the Pseudo-Aristotelian Problems; one of which concerns what is proper to man with regard to his offspring. Aristotle asks: ‘Why is it that, if a living creature is born from our semen, we regard it as our own offspring, but if it proceeds from any other part or excretion, we do not consider it our own? For many things proceed from decayed matter as well as from semen [he says, and then,] having established an opposition between what is ‘proper’ and ‘good’ qua ‘natural,’ and what is ‘improper,’ and ‘bad’ and therefore alien or ‘other’ to man, Aristotle says...’ If then, anything should be born from our semen, for instance, a worm from putrefying semen, it must not be called our offspring’ [71].

The worm is portrayed as ‘Other’ to man here, indeed to all forms of life produced through copulation, and it’s Otherness is portrayed as a ‘bad’ otherness, emerging as it does from excretions and putrefactions, which Aristotle adamantly adds ‘do not belong to us,’ but ‘are other and foreign to our nature’ [72]. This portrait certainly could have preempted the worms place in the Dionysian doctrine of dissimilar images, in which worm is low otherness, and God, high otherness, and according to which – based on the equivocal generation of both Christ and worm, which emphasised the genetic dissimilarity and incarnate Otherness of both, with respect to the human and animal kind – these two entities can be compared, indeed, are connected in a certain mysterious way [73]. As Nicola notes,

> Worms is not a self-grooming we. It is the only, unbounded community – a line of openness that slashes through God, the human, the earth – the unimaginable ever-present perfect abyssal consumption of all in one [74].

Nonetheless this connection qua consumption here is itself better exhibited in what are offered as two alternate explanations behind Dionysius’ motivation to select worm as Otherness incarnate [75]. The first of these takes us momentarily back to Aristotle, according to whom, in writing On Generation and Corruption, one of the possible explanations of the origin of humankind is that the first human beings were (spontaneously) born from earth in the shape of worms: ‘with regard to the generation of human beings and quadrupeds,’ he says, ‘if, once upon a time, they were “earthborn” as some allege, one might assume them to be formed in one of these ways: either it would be by a worm taking shape to begin with or else they were formed out of eggs... It is however less reasonable to hold that their generation would take place out of eggs,’ he adds. Moreover, in current times, he says, ‘it looks as though all animals produce a worm to begin with, for the fetation in its most imperfect state is something of its sort’ [76]. This ambiguity of the worm, who is portrayed as the radical opposite of man, and at same time considered to be his origin here, could certainly have been an inspirational source for Dionysius in his selection of worm as Otherness incarnate, insofar as it recalls the contradictory doubleness of God who is origin and Otherness at the same time [77]. What this explanation lacks however, is a consideration of the worm’s place within the Dionysian cosmos, which, while speculative, is not only realistic, but Neoplatonic. We would suggest then that this explanation is better situated in relation to Nicola’s work through a ‘deformed dynamic’ [78] that underscores this entire (Neoplatonic) tradition, which, of course, he himself is situated in [79].

While Christian theological speculation speaks of the retention of personal identity in beatitude, the language of mystics such as Nicola, is distinguished by ideas of absorption into God, permeation by God, and divine ravishing, emphasising the annihilation of the soul, and the disappearance of the self into the Godhead: ‘Being united in love in this way... the soul becomes as it were changed into... God’ [80]. Everything goes back to Paul’s word in Galatians, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me’ [81]. Varieties of this claim can be found throughout the mystical tradition, where-in the re-emergence of the negated self in God presents the self that is attained by abandoning
true identity discovered to inhere in the ‘Other’ [82]. ‘The spirit dies, and yet it is alive in the marvels of the Godhead’ [83]. Or as Nicola himself would say contra ‘this self without a self,’ which he terms ‘metal head,’ in opining the love of black metal as the love of that which materially makes and perceptually does what mysticism spiritually is: ‘All love is a fire, but a spiritual fire. What a corporeal fire does for [metal], this fire... does for an impure, cold and hardened heart... and the mind changes into the similitude of him who inflames it. The whole mind becomes white hot... flares up and, at the same time, liquefies in the love of God’ [84]. Loss of self here is clearly related to loss of form and to loss of order [85]. Deformity shows forth the reality of Form, it disorders to reveal the full nature of Order itself [86]. ‘A soul in this state,’ says Catherine of Sienna, ‘sees that in itself it is nothing, that all its virtue, all its strength belongs to God...’ [87]. In Neoplatonic metaphysics disorder provides a proper description of the Absolute, both in its basic negativity and its unlimited potential, because the One is also properly described as ‘the matrix of permanent possibilities of order’ [88] – above all order, source of existence beyond existence, origin of movement without movement: ‘Worm’ is the ‘Sign’ of this disorder because ‘It knows how to bring forth from its very powerlessness to do so’ [89].

The second of the alternate explanations behind Dionysius’ motivation to select worm as Otherness incarnate [90] tends to the etymology of the word ‘worm,’ which, according to one school of thought, used to mean ‘dragon,’ until that meaning declined to mere ‘snake,’ and from then slowly to the lowly ‘earthworm’ we find in our garden today [91]. The ‘dragon’ meaning is said to have lasted for centuries however, as late as 1867 in fact; when William Morris could still write that wonderful line: ‘Therewith began a fearful battle twixt worm and man,’ and keep a straight face [92]. According to another pagan school of thought ‘worm’ designated nothing like the exotica of a fire-breathing monster but rather meant mere ‘matter’ itself, matter in its radical otherness [93]. In Celsus’ True Discourse, for example, which makes use of this etymological association, we read: ‘But beings are never without being which, in turn, comes from the Preexistant. He is not a facet of being. Rather, being is a facet of him. He is not contained in being, but being is contained in him. He does not possess being, but being possesses him; Luibheid translation.

92. Forsyth, 175-176.
93. Ruaro, 590.
94. Ruaro, 591; see Origen, Contra Celsum IV. 52 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); see Ruaro, ‘Resurrection: the Hope of Worms. The Dispute between Celsus and Origen on the Resurrection of the Body,’ for a discussion of the role of the image of the worm as to represent matter (and the material part of man) in Celsus’ polemic against the Christian theory of Resurrection.
95. Ruaro, 591.
96. Ruaro, 591.
97. DN V (824A): ‘But beings are never without being which, in turn, comes from the Preexistant. He is not a facet of being. Rather, being is a facet of him. He is not contained in being, but being is contained in him. He does not possess being, but being possesses him; Luibheid translation.
98. Perl, 33-34; see DN VII (872A): ‘He is not one of the things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things and he is no thing among things. He is known to all things from all things and he is known to no one from anything; Luibheid translation.
99. As cited by Perl, 24.
100. Masciandaro, ‘WormSign.’

While Dionysius was most likely aware of this aspect of the Christian evaluation of the worm, as it perfectly fits the paradoxical construction of his theory of dissimilar images that underlies so much of Nicola’s work, this cannot be the last word on it, because Masciandaro’s metaphysics is not a form of ‘pantheism,’ if by this we would read into the above statement the doctrine that ‘everything is God.’ On the contrary, for Nicola, following the Neoplatonic tradition that Dionysius is situated in, every being, in that it is a being, ipso facto, is not God [97]. The God of Dionysius is ‘all beings and none of beings,’ ‘all things in all things and nothing in any,’ and in these formulas the ‘all’ can never be separated from the ‘none’: ‘Wherever we look, we are not seeing God, in that every being, and every object of thought, is not God; and wherever we look, we are seeing God, as he appears, for every being, every object of thought is nothing but a presentation [or appearance] of God’ [98]. Nicola follows Dionysius in negotiating a path by means of the Platonic concept of appearance, which is taken up into the doctrine of being as Theophany, according to which, as we read in Plotinus:

The last and lowest of things, are in the last of those before them, and these are in those prior to them, and the one thing is in another up to the First, which is the principle. But the Principle, since it has nothing before it, has nothing else to be in, but since it has nothing to be in, and the other things are these in which came before them, it encompasses all other things. The One, then contains, or better, is the undifferentiated containment of all beings [99].

Or, as we read in Masciandaro’s mad-dening mystical formulation:

The worm stands for not standing for anything. It even knows how to bite off its own head, to swallow itself whole. ‘What should I do now?’ And a voice said, ‘Eat! Eat Yourself! He had no choice but to eat, so He ate Himself! At that moment He found that He was Everything’ [100].
Welcome, good worms to the food part of our session which we have entitled ‘Decaying into Divinity: The Culinary Cosmology of a Twenty-First century Mystic,’ featuring worms of heretical perversity, devil’s cheese and seaweed. I want to say a few words concerning the rationale for the food and how it relates to Edia’s paper. When we committed MOUTH to this event we both – and I believe Mairtin & Pat also – immediately thought of Carlo Ginzburg’s famous micro-history The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmology of a 16th Century Miller (1980). This is the story of a Miller called Mennochio who was executed as a heretic because he believed that the cosmos was made out of cheese. Under interrogation about his beliefs he said that in the beginning in his ‘opinion all was chaos... and out of that bulk a mass formed – just as cheese is made out of milk – and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels, and there was also God, he too having been created out of that mass at the same time...’ In this subversive, folk inversion of both Neoplatonic and Christian creation myths, worms are the elemental forms from which human beings, angels, even God take shape, paradoxically base forms that are spontaneously generated out of cheese, the One Big Cheese (that Plotinus calls ‘the undifferentiated containment of all things’) which here has congealed as a putrefying mass out of a chora of chaotic cosmic milk.

Now, I was interested in this story because I was working on a paper on Gilles Deleuze’s phobia for milk products, schizophrenia and the schizophrenic horror of worms that you see recurrently throughout his work. I’m not sure why Mairtin and Pat were interested in the story, but Edia was interested in the story because, as I found out later, she was working on the culinary divinological aspects of Nicola’s work which you can find in his spice essay, the sweetness of the law, the Wormsign essay and the essay on habit and cataclysm. In these essays Nicola does not, as far as I am aware, mention the story of Mennochio although in Wormsign he does reference Leibniz’s use of the idea to suggest that mass is the aggregate of corporeal substances, just as cheese was sometimes believed to consist of a concourse of worms. And indeed for Nicola’s own ‘neoplatonism’, the worm is not simply a specific life-form but something prior to all life forms,
something weirdly and undecidably both form and matter. The worm is ‘the elemental idea’ or the ‘real concept of corporeal life’, and therefore an element of being, which at the same time it is also the ‘self-othering of matter’ and ‘the formlessness of form’. Born in decay and associated especially with decaying flesh, the worm for Nicola is a figure not of demise but of ‘the negative emergence of spontaneous being into the subject’ and of the ‘real immanence of that which is beyond and outside’ of the flesh that is co-emergent with the ‘real arrival of post-subject individuality’.

The worm writhes at the heart of the self that places itself in darkness and unknowing all the better to hunger for the hunger of the impatient God who can ‘hardly wait’ for you to open up and enter Him. As Nicola insists, the worm is not just hungry, but the pure agent of hunger, prior then to the hunger of the subject or even of God, tasting and moving in the famished anteriority of all the dimensions of being. And yet, even as the worm may bite off its own head, its hunger is not simply the hunger of radical openness that characterises both Dionysus’s God and the ‘nihilistic carnage’ of Reza Negarestani’s acephalous mouth, a mouth which scorns ‘taste’ as both a ‘strategic illusion’ and the ‘judicial basis of subjectivity.’ For Nicola the worm ‘tastes and moves’; it is the agent of a taste that establishes, throughout his oeuvre, a ‘profound relation to wisdom, sapentia and sapor, according to which truth is always a matter of discriminating for and through oneself the difference between good and bad, a process of tasting or proving its right flavour.’

Or as we have said previously on another occasion when we invited Thinking Absolutists to taste the corpse of God as a form of ordeal or test, where taste became therein ‘not a form of aesthetic judgement, nor even a “strategic illusion,” but a form of culinary transubstantiation, [God’s wound’s] “sinister convalescence” becomes salivating mouth, a pool of chaotic sensations’ ‘in which forms and forces mingle and (re)produce both corporeally and incorporeally.’

So come you worms, hungering for all the dimensions, decay into divinity by feasting on the pure forms of yourself in the satanic mirror of cheesy putrefaction.