

Plotinus and the Gnostics on the Generation of Matter (33 [II 9], 12 and 51 [I 8], 14)

Jean-Marc Narbonne¹

UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL

An examination of the ancient reception of Platonism enables us to recognise three characteristic periods in the interpretation of relations between the existence of evil and the generation of sensible matter. With regard to Middle Platonism—authors like Plutarch of Chaeronea, Atticus, Numenius, Cronius, Celsus, and Harpocraton—it is matter (or let us say matter through an evil Soul, according to Plutarch, and rather bodies, according to Harpocraton's point of view) which constitutes evil, but this matter is not itself generated and therefore does not come from a prior principle.² Every Neoplatonist posterior to Plotinus considers matter itself not to be an original reality, but rather to come from a prior principle. Now, this matter is no longer identified with evil. Plotinus alone (or almost alone)³ would constitute an intermediary figure since he would profess, on the one hand, the intrinsically evil character of matter, and would claim on the other—even if not always most explicitly—that this matter is generated.

Of this audacious standpoint, Proclus wrote a famous refutation concentrated in Chapters 30 to 37 of his *De malorum subsistentia* (*On the Existence of Evils*), where Plotinus' doctrine is pushed to its last entrenchments. According to Proclus, if matter is indeed evil, either we are faced with a fundamental dualism bringing two original antithetical principles together, or evil has proceeded from the good and the responsibility for evil goes back to the good itself. The first alternative is judged to be impossible by Proclus and contravenes the very axioms of Neo-Platonism, given that multiplicity always

1. I wish to thank Valeria Buffon (Université Laval) for her translation of this text.

2. For Plutarch and Atticus, cf. Proclus, *In Tim.*, t. 1, 391, 10 Diehl; for Numenius, Fr. 52 Des Places; for Numenius, Cronius and Harpocraton, cf. Iamblichus, *De Anima* 375, 6–15, Wachsmuth (Festugière, 210; Finamore/Dillon, § 23, 49); for Celsus, cf. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 4, 65; 8, 55.

3. However, see the case of Moderatus who, if we believe in the complex testimony of Porphyry's Περὶ ὕλης reported by Simplicius (*In phys.* 230, 34–231, 24 = fr. 236 F Smith), would also himself have taught both things at the same time. See also the case of the *Chaldean Oracles* (fr. 34 and 88 Des Places; comp. Psellus, *Hypotyp.* 27, 75, 34 K). Porphyry's own position, very close to that of Plotinus, will be explained later.

assumes the prior existence of a unity: Plotinus himself refuses this alternative.⁴ However, the second alternative, supported by Plotinus, seems just as impracticable to Proclus and he accumulated objections to it, most notably (in Chapters 31 to 33): [1] that since the cause is, by definition, superior to its effect, the generating principle of evil would be even worse than the evil of which it is the principle; from this, there would be an inversion of its own qualities (it would be good and evil at the same time), and a corresponding inversion in its effect. [2] If it is necessary to the universe's construction, matter cannot be an absolute evil. [3] If matter is truly impassible, it should not be able to oppose anything. [4] Matter cannot be the cause of the soul's fall because the soul's weakness intervenes before it. [5] Moreover, if matter was the cause of the soul's fall, how could one explain the difference in attitudes among the souls? [6] Is there an action which could impose on others a matter incapable of acting in principle and which is itself without quality? [7] Finally, if the soul's appetite for the sensible is the cause of its fall, it is not matter, but rather the appetite that is evil; if it is matter, then the soul has neither its own autonomy, nor its own choice anymore—this conclusion is untenable.

According to Proclus, God cannot produce evil any more than heat can produce cold. In fact, neither unmixed, nor original evil exists, but evil actually reveals itself as a simple negative correspondent of each level of good, it is a “subcontrary to some good, though not to all the good” (§ 9, 18, 19; § 54, 23, 29), and as long as it does not have a principal cause, but rather several causes, it has only a “counter-existence” or only a “parasitic existence” (παρρηπόστασις)⁵ since it happens by accident in parallel to the good from which it borrows the very power of opposition (§ 53–54).

For the moment, I do not wish to address either the difficulties specific to Proclus' position, or the question of knowing whether several or at least some of the objections that he raises contrary to the Plotinian position backfire—as I indeed think they do—on his own analysis. However, I would like to link myself, more specifically, to Proclus' second alternative taken as a whole, i.e. to the problem of the dual opposition of good and evil inside an emanationist, *potentially integral* system like that of Plotinus. This is because it is without a doubt this particular difficulty that has brought several commentators either to deny any generation of matter,⁶ or to try to minimise matter's negative

4. 12 [II 4], 2, 9–10; 24 [V 6], 3, 2–3; for Proclus, *El. Th.* § 5.

5. For this term which is very difficult to translate, see A. Ph. Segonds, *In Alc.* I, 191, n. 98 (Budé).

6. Cf. Ph. V. Pistorius, *Plotinus and Neoplatonism* (Cambridge, 1952), 117–33; H.-R. Schwyzler, “Zu Plotins Deutung der sogenannten platonischen Materie,” in *Zetezis, album amicorum* [...] aangeboden aan Prof. E. de Stricker (Antwerpen/Utrecht, 1973), 276; H. Benz *Materie und Wahrnehmung in der Philosophie Plotins* (1990), 110–11, 165.

role or its intrinsically evil character.⁷

Here, I will start from O'Brien's analysis⁸ which, on the one hand, possesses, among other things, the interest of summarising and discussing the whole of prior studies devoted to this question in Plotinus, and which, on the other hand, claims for itself a certain originality, that of having introduced the notion of partial cause—implying soul and matter—in the explanation of evil's origin, allowing, according to this author, a better comprehension of the Plotinian position.⁹

Taken literally, O'Brien's assertion regarding this point is not exact since F. P. Hager,¹⁰ precisely concerning Plotinus, had already put forward a double causality of this type.¹¹ Nevertheless, this is not the principal point, which is

7. It is the case notably for Hager, Schwyzer and Rist. See, with regards to this point, our analyses in *La métaphysique de Plotin* (Paris, Vrin, 2001²), 124–25. In a quite convincing manner, Blumenthal (*Plotinus' Psychology* [La Haye, 1971], 1–2) has pointed out that Plotinus would maintain, *simultaneously*, two points of view on sensible matter: one according to which matter remains inert and subject to everything that communicates form, and one according to which matter, as an evil's source, is actively opposed to form.

8. "Plotinus on Evil. A Study of Matter and the Soul in Plotinus' conception of human Evil," in *Le Néoplatonisme. Colloques internationaux du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, sciences humaines* (Paris, 1971), 113–46. This is an enlarged and slightly corrected version of the study published under the same title in *Downside Review* 87 (1969): 68–110.

9. *Ibid.*, 143: "It is possible, I think, to see why this conception [of evil in Plotinus] has eluded the grasp of commentators hitherto. In the first place, the notion of part cause has been missed. Plotinus has been thought to be inconsistent, because the soul's weakness and the presence of matter have been taken to be each sole and sufficient cause of human evil. Instead, I suggest, the soul's weakness and the presence of matter are part causes of evil in the soul. They are never singly but only jointly a sufficient cause. In the second place, there has been confusion of sufficient condition and sufficient cause. Armstrong has taken the soul's weakness to be in effect a sufficient cause of sin."

10. "Die Materie und das Böse im antiken Platonismus," *Museum Helveticum* 19 (1962): 73–103 (reprinted in *Die Philosophie des Neuplatonismus*, ed. C. Zintzen [Darmstadt, 1977], 427–69).

11. One can judge by the following statement from Hager: "Es ließe sich zu dieser Widerlegung noch hinzufügen, daß zwar ein gewisser Mangel in der Seele die *Conditio sine qua non* der Schlechtigkeit, die in die Seele eindringt, und damit auch des Verfallens der Seele an die Materie ist, aber nicht die Hauptursache des Übels, das erst durch die fatalen Auswirkung der Materie richtig konstituiert wird. Mangel in der Seele wäre ohne das Vorhandensein und die Auswirkung der Materie bloß Schwäche der Seele und von ihr wird Plotin im 14. Kapitel zeigen, daß sie nicht das Böse ist" (449–50, our emphasis). According to Hager, evil's composition in Plotinus, which implies a wanting of the soul as a *necessary condition*, but to which one must add the presence and effects (?) (*Auswirkungen*) of matter as a *principal cause*, is obviously near O'Brien's conclusion: "Plotinus does not suppose that the first of these two factors, the soul's flight from the whole, can operate as a cause of evil without the other factor, the presence of matter" (139). The idea of an 'inequality' or disproportion between the two causes implicit in Hager is also found in the latter (144), who quotes the study of Hager published seven years earlier (145). I did not revisit the whole of the literature to see if the notion of partial causes goes back any earlier.

rather to determine the manner in which two related causes must be linked together once the necessity of their intervention has been admitted.

To help comprehend the action of these two causes, O'Brien has proposed an analogy¹² that in our view does not faithfully translate the relationships between soul and matter actually foreseen by Plotinus in his Treatise 51. We will call it the analogy of malicious talk.¹³ O'Brien explains that in the Plotinian version of this analogy, one must admit that B (=matter) talks maliciously, whether or not A (=soul) is weak enough to listen; whereas A is weak enough to listen to malicious talk, only if B is already determined to talk maliciously. In this situation, continues the commentator, "whenever A is weak enough" (141), both partial causes of the malicious talks will be working and there will be effectively malicious talks.

The prominent flaw of this analogy consists of linking the *malicious talk* with the simple fact, for matter, to be an *occasion* for sin.¹⁴ Talking is already at least a kind of act, it is a verbal act which is indeed not equivalent to the fact, let's say, of taking someone by the collar, but at least it is a kind of activity whose content can be discussed. Being the *occasion of* is not as such an act, but let's say a state, something essentially passive in any case. Thus we could say that the precipice is the occasion (and in this sense the cause) of a downfall, that a store is the occasion (and in this sense the cause) of an expense. Now, it is obvious that the description of matter provided by Plotinus in Treatise 51 has nothing to do with simple talking (malicious or not), and has even less to do with a simple inert state. Matter acts here in a concrete, physical and violent manner, which involves a significant movement from its part. This act cannot be reduced and has in fact nothing to do with a simple verbal act, nor to some inert state of matter. I revisit here the translation by A.H. Armstrong of a crucial excerpt of Treatise 51:

But there are many powers of soul, and it has a beginning, a middle and an end; and matter is there, *and begs it and, we may say, bothers it and wants to come right inside* (προσαιτῆι καὶ οἶον καὶ ἐνοχλεῖ καὶ εἰς τὸ εἶσω παρελθεῖν θέλει). "All the place is holy", and there is nothing which is without a share of soul. So matter spreads itself out

12. This one is introduced on page 140 and is developed within several pages.

13. The simplest thing here is to reproduce the author's description: "If A were weak enough to listen to malicious talk, only if B were already determined to talk maliciously; and if B were determined to talk maliciously, only if A were already weak enough to listen to him: then there would never be any malicious talk. In this situation malicious talk requires either that A should be weak enough to listen to malicious talk, even if B is not already determined to talk maliciously; or that B should be determined to talk maliciously, even if A is not already weak enough to listen to him; or both. Only if either is true, or if both are true, will the two part causes, A's weakness and B's determination, be jointly sufficient cause of malicious talk. Plotinus' system can be looked at in the same light" (140).

14. The expression "*occasion of* [or "*for*"] *sin*" appears some 11 times in pages 140–41 of this article.

under soul and is illumined, and cannot grasp the source from which its light comes [...] Matter *darkens* the illumination, the light from that source, *by mixture with itself, and weakens it* (ἐσκότωσε τῇ μίξει καὶ ἀσθενέας πεποίηκε) by itself offering it the opportunity of generation and the reason for coming to matter [...] This is the fall of the soul, to come in this way to matter and to become weak, because all its powers do not come into action; matter hinders (κωλυούσης ὕλης) them from coming by occupying (καταλαβεῖν) the place which soul holds and producing a kind of cramped condition, and *making evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft* (ὃ δ' ἔλαβεν οἶον κλέψασσα ποιῆσαι κακὸν εἶναι)—until soul manages to escape back to its higher state. (chap. 14, 34–49, Armstrong, I, 313–15)

Here we find without doubt the most accentuated expression of Plotinian dualism, that where matter is endowed with a kind of will (θέλει, line 36), and where matter attempts to darken, to weaken and to taint that which it seizes as if by theft.¹⁵ In this context, Plotinus is very consistent, since he announced some pages earlier, in Chapter 6, that matter was in fact a principle opposed to good (lines 33–35), that they were both like two separate wholes no longer having anything in common between them (lines 54–55), and he explicitly clarifies this thesis in Chapter 14, showing *how* this dualism manifests itself concretely.

Here, it is necessary to choose: either (first alternative) that by which dualism actually expresses itself in the text makes sense for Plotinus and then we cannot reduce matter's initiatives and attitudes to simple words or to the fact of being the *occasion of sin* (by doing this carrying the burden of responsibility to the soul that listens to malicious talk, or throws itself into the precipice that provides the *occasion for*); or (second alternative) we agree to maintain that the statement of matter as first evil and the act normally resulting from it (which Plotinus actually describes), is in fact essentially *metaphorical* and comes from a sort of *rhetoric* inherent to the story, and therefore there is no longer really a dualism in Plotinus. However, one cannot reproach one's predecessors (Armstrong, Rist) for having minimized the evil character of matter,¹⁶ and at

15. On matter's effective action, see some anticipations in 1 (I 6), 5, 31–39, where the parallel between “πεποίηκε δὲ αὐτὴν [matter] ἀκάθαρτον καὶ πολλῶ τῶ κακῷ συμπεφυρμένην” (line 33–34) and “φῶς ἐσκότωσε τῇ μίξει καὶ ἀσθενέας πεποίηκε” (51 [I 8], 14, 41–42) is quite striking, and also with 26 (III 6), 14, 5–10. However, the dualism is more pronounced in Treatise 51, for in Treatise 26, Chap. 14, matter “by its presence and its self-assertion and a kind of begging and its poverty makes a sort of violent attempt to grasp, and is cheated by no grasping” (8–9) (Armstrong, III, 269), while in 51 (I 8), 14, matter makes “evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft” (48–49, Armstrong, 315), and so succeeds in that which it could not achieve in 26. The opposition of principles then is indeed more radical in Treatise 51 than in any other place of the corpus.

16. O'Brien, *art. cit.*: “Rist's first move towards this haven of consistency takes the form of trying to water down Plotinus' assertion that matter is the primary evil” (123); “Both Rist's attempted reconciliations have turned on an attempt to weaken the notion of matter as evil” (127).

the same time find a way for matter no longer to act in any manner and for its evil character to be reduced to the fact of lying there, waiting for the soul's weakness. It is very important to remember that for Plotinus, every evil must ultimately find its source in matter, whether it is a question of physical evil or of psychological evil. Now, from this final cause, O'Brien removes all efficacy and keeps in fact only the name: matter continues to be called a first evil, but it no longer does anything, and it no longer has any power; it is nothing but the *occasion for*.¹⁷ The manner in which the commentator elaborates his theory of partial causality then goes back exactly to that of which he accuses the others, i.e., reducing the level of opposition between matter and good. Matter is no longer a sufficient cause of vice in the soul, nor even a necessary condition (for the soul's evil has to be added as a sufficient condition).¹⁸ The suggestion in itself is not inept, but it is necessary to restore what it is: a significant watering down of Plotinus' dualism. For it is very difficult to reconcile this result with the clear and frank assertion of Plotinus in Treatise 51, 14, concluding: "So matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil" (49–51, Armstrong, I, 315); or even with the categorical refusal, formulated earlier by Plotinus, to transfer the responsibility to the soul: "If this is true, then we must not be assumed to be the principle of evil as being evil by and from ourselves; evils are prior to us" (chap. 5, 26–28, Armstrong, I, 291).

It has been recently suggested¹⁹ that this primarily psychic version of evil's origin corresponded eventually more to the Gnostic or Christian worldview, where evil refers to a soul's perverse choice.²⁰ On this point, one has to recall

17. It is striking, by the way, to see that in the entire part of his study where he criticizes his predecessors, O'Brien talks about matter as that which is at the same time an evil in itself *and in its effects* ("it seems clear to me that Plotinus intends matter to be evil both in itself and in its effects" [124]; "matter is still evil in itself, and cause of evil in the soul" [126]), whereas in the second part of his study where he develops his theory of partial causes, this expression does not appear anymore, matter becomes, as we have seen, "occasion for sin" (140) or even it is "part cause of evil in the soul" (140), but *part cause* signifies here no more than being the *occasion for*, since matter proves to be inoperative.

18. O'Brien, *art. cit.*, 143: "Thus matter is a necessary cause of evil in the soul. But it is not a sufficient cause, nor a sufficient condition, of there being sin." D. O'Meara, the last French translator hitherto of Treatise 51 (*Plotin. Traité 51* [Paris, Cerf, 1999]), has not joined this position either: "Elle [matter] ne se réduit pas à une condition nécessaire (et en soi pas forcément mauvaise) de l'apparition du vice [...]" (157). We find the same reaction in Hager, in a supplement to the article already quoted (republished in *Die Philosophie des Neuplatonismus*, ed. C. Zintzen [Darmstadt, 1977], see "Nachtrag 1973," 473–74), as well as in Schwyzer (*art. cit.*, 274 and *ff.*).

19. Cf. O'Meara, *Ibid.*, 15, 118 et 163, who refers us for Gnostics to 33 (II 9), 12, 35–44, and for Christians to Origen, *On first principles*, I 5, 2–3; II, 9, 6.

20. This version also corresponds to the Porphyrian version of dualism, which is more mitigated than that of Plotinus, and which, according to the contexts, calls for the intervention

the disturbing similarity between the Gnostic position denounced by Plotinus in Treatise 33 (II 9), 12, 3–44, and the final statement of 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54. Can we imagine that he who criticizes Gnostics—or certain Gnostics—for making evil depend on the soul instead of on the sensible universe and on matter itself, is the same person who in 51 announces the generation of sensible matter, which is evil, by the soul?

In his critique of the Gnostic thesis, Plotinus is clear at least on two points, first that the world's creation is not carried out within time, and second, that evil cannot come from superior beings and particularly from the soul's productive activity. He writes:

of two causes of evil, either that of the soul, or that of demons influenced by matter (cf. especially *De abst.* II, 38, 39 et 46; *Ep. ad Marc* XVI et XXI). By this same ambiguity, which has rightly embarrassed several interpreters, we can say that Porphyrian dualism remains close to Plotinian dualism. However, there are notable differences between both authors.

First, Porphyry states nowhere explicitly, as we have seen in Plotinus, that matter is evil in itself and the primary cause of every evil of the soul, even if it seems that according to him matter is implicated, sometimes even apparently actively (especially in *De abst.* II, 39, but does Porphyry make entirely his own the demonology that he exposes there?), in the production of evil [Regarding this point, it is necessary to correct Hager's judgement (*art. cit.*, 454), Waszink's judgement ("Porphyrios und Numenius," in *Die Philosophie des neuplatonismus*, *op. cit.*, 199) and Betchle's judgement (*art. cit.*, 81), who based on *Sentences* 30 and 37 as well as on *De abst.* I, 30, infer a material origin of evil in Porphyry and, in the case of Waszink, Porphyry's incoherence not only from one writing to another, but also within one same writing (in this case, it is *Sentences* that are targeted); but in *Sentence* 30, 14–16 (= Lamberz, 21, 3–5), matter is said not to be an evil in itself but for particular souls who have the power of turning to it (same approach in *Sentence* 32, 45–47 [Lamberz, 26, 2–4]); *Sentence* 37, quite complex to interpret, nevertheless allows the power of the soul to appear as a differential factor in the emergence of evil, what is also, definitively, the teaching of *De abst.* I 30, 4, where the *προσπάθεια* of the soul for terrestrial things is mentioned, and where the soul's perversity (*τινα μοχθηρίαν τῆς ψυχῆς*, 30, 7) is identified as a cause of evil.

Second, Porphyry never goes to the point of talking about the opposition of two antithetic principles, as Plotinus dares to do in 51 (I 8) 6, 33. Thirdly, Porphyry insists sometimes on the fact that it is the soul and nothing else that is responsible for its faults, in the displayed intention to deny all possible recourse at another instance different from itself, whereas he states nowhere, as we have seen, the opposite thesis. It is a known excerpt, but it is worth it to quote it here: "N'accusons pas non plus la chair d'être cause des plus grands maux et ne tournons pas notre humeur contre les choses; cherchons-en plutôt la cause dans notre âme et arrachons tout vain appétit, toute vaine espérance de l'éphémère pour devenir entièrement maîtres de nous-mêmes" (*Ep. Ad marc.* XXIX, French translation, Des Places). Consequently, Plotinus' dualism in Treatise 51 is not only a more radical dualism, but also much more conscious and assumed than Porphyry's. For all these reasons, it is clear that Plotinian dualism cannot find its legitimacy in this type of analysis, which makes of the soul's attitude the evil's last resort, to which Porphyry's more watered-down dualism will lend itself.

For their “illumination of the darkness,” if it is investigated, will make them admit the true causes of the universe. For why was it necessary for the soul to illuminate, unless the necessity was universal? It was either according to soul’s nature or against it. But if it was according to its nature, it must always be so. If, on the other hand, it was against its nature, then there will be a place for what is against nature in the higher world, and evil will exist before this universe, and the universe will not be responsible for evil, but the higher world will be the cause of evil for this world, and evil will not come from the world here to the soul, but from the soul to the world here; and the course of the argument will lead to the attribution of responsibility for the universe to the first principles: and if the universe, then also the matter, from which the universe on the hypothesis would have emerged. For the soul which declined saw, they say (φάσιν, line 40), and illuminated the darkness already in existence. Where, then, did the darkness come from? If they are going to say (φήσουσιν, line 41) that the soul made it when it declined, there was obviously nowhere for it to decline to, and the darkness itself was not responsible for the decline, but the soul’s own nature. But this is the same as attributing the responsibility to pre-existing necessities; so the responsibility goes back to the first principles. (Armstrong, II, 273–75)

Now, it is this same idea (i.e., that it is impossible to attribute the evil’s cause to intelligible realities which are prior, and notably to the soul) which also prevails in Plotinus’ exposition of Treatise 51, for example in 5, 26–28: “If this is true, then we must not be assumed to be the principle of evil as being evil by and from ourselves; evils are prior to us;” or in 14, 49–51: “So matter is the cause of the soul’s weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil.”²¹ The idea that soul is not the source of evil goes hand in hand with the idea that evil, which is originated from matter, is an *exterior* element which, added to the soul, corrupts it or rubs off on it (the thesis of evil as an “addition” is already present in the first treatises, such as 1 [I 6], 5, 31–34; 2 [IV 7], 10, 11–12, and we find it again in the end: 51 [I, 8], 5, 17; 8, 20; 14, 24).

On this sole basis, the generation of sensible matter by the soul turns out to be impossible.²² To attribute this doctrine to Plotinus is to offer him to

21. This assertion does not lead, however, to an individual’s radical non-responsibility. In 51 (I 8), 5, 29–30, Plotinus indeed specifies that there is “an escape from the evils in the soul for those who are capable of it, though not all men are.” Consequently, even in this treatise of a more accentuated dualism, a certain amount of leeway is left to human initiative. For more on this see again later, n.40.

22. D. O’ Brien defends this thesis without batting an eyelid, but, as we have seen it, it is because matter is no longer truly evil for him, but the (static) occasion of evil, for an evil action that comes in fact from the soul. He can also assert that “the soul’s production of matter may perhaps be counted an imperfection, in so far as the product is something ‘worse’ than soul, a further falling away from the One” (*art. cit.*, 128). But matter is not “something worse” it is *evil in itself*, absolute evil and the ultimate source of all evils. The same idea is repeated 22 years later (*Théodicée plotinienne, théodicée gnostique* [Leyde, 1993]), when it is said that generating evil in itself simply assumes ‘une certaine défaillance’ (33) in the soul, or even that “la production de la matière est innocente” (35), whereas in the Gnostics this same creation would take root in

the criticism made by Proclus, Simplicius, and all those who subsequently considered his doctrine to be problematic or the text they read in 51 [I 8], 14, 51–54 to be untenable (I propose here a translation of the text of H–S²):

Even if soul itself produced matter, being affected in some way, and became evil by communicating with it, matter is the cause by its presence: soul would not have come to it unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth.” (Armstrong’s translation modified, I, 315)

Faced with this text, which is a sort of retort to the Gnostic generation of matter by a soul which bows (or declines), it is comprehensible that the attempts at avoidance were numerous. Is there any way in which the *result* of the soul’s creative activity is here not the appearance of absolute evil? How can we admit this possibility, when we know that Plotinus already rose up against it in Treatise 33, and that he objects to it once again in the preceding lines (49–51)? Let us remember as an example the remark formerly made by Theiler: “Der Schluß ist so überraschend, daß Müller τῆ ὕλη (mittels), Bury, *Class. Quart.*, 39, 1945, 85 τὴ ἐν ὕλη konjizierte.”²³ According to Müller (and to all editors after him until Henry-Schwyzler), it was reasonable to lightly amend the text in such a way that the soul would no longer generate matter (which becomes evil), but “is generating while being affected by matter.” Bury proposed that we read that the soul “has generated something *in matter* while being affected,” arguing that it is “bad Platonism” that such a matter is so produced by the soul. In fact it is, especially when this matter is the evil in itself. Deep down, Müller’s and Bury’s conjectures are similar and elegantly permit both of them to avoid teratogenesis, to which certain Gnostics lead (as well as Plotinus according to some). Is it an excess of conservatism that pushed Henry and Schwyzler to reject these conjectures? Maybe, but probably not that alone, and we will come back to that subject in a moment. According to Schwyzler (for whom matter is not generated), the entire final sentence must be read as an unreal conditional proposition, and should therefore not count as a Plotinian proposition. In Greek, this is possible (Armstrong, for example, translates in this sense), and a discussion about it has followed. However, even understood as an unreal conditional, the sentence remains embarrassing. How indeed could one sensibly affirm that *even* if soul *had generated matter* (that which it would not have done), matter would have been the cause of it? Even in an unreal mode, the idea of “a vicious activity of the soul.” However, a weakness would be different from a sin (cf. 33), a pretended innocence (in Plotinus), different from a culpability (in the case of Gnostics, cf. 35), to generate *by weakness* and *innocently* radical evil would remain to generate radical evil, and it does not solve the *aporia* that not only the Ancients, but almost all modern commentators have inevitably noticed.

23. *Plotinus Schriften*, Band V b (Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1960), 416.

an effect that is the cause of its cause continues not to make sense. Hence, it is necessary to find something else, or come back to Müller's and Bury's conjectures.

Let us reflect a minute on the following: within the entire Plotinian corpus, this part of a sentence in Treatise 51 (I 8), 14, 51 (αὐτὴ ἡ ψυχὴ τὴν ὕλην ἐγέννησε), is the only one that postulates a psychic origin of the ὕλη.²⁴ To dispose of this text is to dispose of the doctrine itself, which does not find any other support in Plotinus' writings. There are two considerations here. On the one hand, none of the other passages referred to in support of this interpretation (essentially two passages on which everything would rely)²⁵ mention the creation of ὕλη; they always mention something that undoubtedly shares some features with it, but that we cannot identify (and that Plotinus himself never identified) with matter. On the other hand, what is produced in this way by the soul (a 'darkness,' an 'non-definition,' a 'non-being,' a 'generated without life')²⁶ makes and presents itself as matter itself does not (i.e., as a friendly environment, a body, as opposed to matter which remains exterior, does not manage to pass into the interior). To eliminate the ambiguity in these two passages would bring us back to this single text of Treatise 51 (I 8), 14, where Plotinus would personally support a Gnostic doctrine that he, all the same, destroys somewhere else.

Let us remove a first misunderstanding: the Gnostic generation of material darkness rejected by Plotinus in Treatise 33, Chap. 12, is indeed a Gnostic thesis and it is not, as has been defended,²⁷ an inference of Plotinus

24. The alternative of 6 (IV 8), 6, 18–23, which leaves open the question if sensible matter is generated or not, does not provide any information about the eventual production mode of matter and remains silent on the eventual role of the soul in the process.

25. According to K. Corrigan, *Plotinus' Theory of Matter-Evil and the Question of Substance: Plato, Aristotle, and Alexander of Aphodisias* (Peeters: Leuven, 1996), there would in fact not be two, but only one passage in the entire Plotinian corpus to positively defend the generation of sensible matter by a partial soul, that is in Treatise 15 (III 4), 1 (cf. 258–59). The author, as he says elsewhere, is himself surprised: "Surely it is remarkable that only one passage in the *Enneads* should yield conclusive proof (without need of any further argument) that matter is generated by the partial, but pure soul ..." ("Positive and Negative Matter in Later Platonism: the Uncovering of Plotinus' Dialogue with the Gnostics" in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism*, ed. J. Turner and R. Majercik [Atlanta, 2000], 31). But this last passage (where the term ὕλη is not present), is itself more than doubtful, as we will verify it later on.

26. These are not "à n'en pas douter, les traits propres de la matière" as O'Brien imprudently writes (*op. cit.*, 24), since in Treatise 27 (IV 3), 9, 22–29, a light generates a darkness (σκότος, line 25) which is not matter, but the place (τόπος) which will then be informed by the soul to form a body.

27. This is O'Brien's hypothesis, for whom the Gnostics criticized by Plotinus would believe in the existence of an already present darkness, this is "ce qu'ils disent," whereas Plotin "les contraint d'abandonner cette théorie, pour leur en imposer une autre: celle d'une generation de la matière (voilà ce qu'ils "diront")" (*ibid.*, 20).

himself seeking to impose here his own thought. Several Gnostic schools of thought, including those represented in the Nag Hamadi texts, maintain the idea of a generation of matter by Sophia, for example, *Hypostasis of the Archons* (II 94), and the Treatise *Zostrien* (VIII 9).²⁸ In his *Treatise Against Gnostics*, Plotinus obviously does not have the objective of faithfully and methodically exposing, as a doxographer would, the different Gnostic lines of thought known to him, but, as is normal with him, he intends to use all available means against his opponents.²⁹ Hence, from a Gnostic point of view, we cannot draw any conclusion from the shift from the present to the future tense (φάσιν/φήσουσιν) in Plotinus' presentation of their doctrine; the transition is easily explained rhetorically ("they say that ..." to which we answer that ..., and then maybe "they will say that ...," etc.). Moreover, we know through Porphyry (*Vit. Pl.* 16), that a great number of Gnostic treatises circulated in the School, many times refuted by Plotinus himself in his courses, whereas Amelius and Porphyry themselves were ordered by Plotinus to refute, one the *Zostrien* and the other the *Zoroaster*. Plotinus, then, has drawn from a rich and diverse background of Gnostic doctrines to organize his counter-attack.³⁰

28. See notably the analysis provided by J. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Québec/Louvain-Paris: PUL/Peeters, 2001), 572 sq. As a sample, here there is the translation provided by Turner of the passage of the *Hypostasis of the Archons* II 94: "Within limitless realms dwells incorruptibility. Sophia, who is called Pistis, wanted to create something, alone with her consort; and her product was a celestial thing. A veil exists between the upper realm and the aeons below; and a shadow came into being beneath the veil; and that shadow became matter; and that shadow was projected apart. And what she had created became a product in the matter, like an aborted fetus. And it assumed a plastic form molded out of shadow, and became an arrogant beast resembling a lion."

29. On the only comparison of 33 (II 9), 10, with that which we know about Gnosis, Turner could conclude: "The underscored material is very similar to the account in *Zostrianos*, while the other material could have come from many sources, including *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and others including Valentinian ones" (*ibid.*, 575). M. Tardieu has the same conclusion ("Les gnostiques dans la *Vie de Plotin*," in *Porphyre et la Vie de Plotin* II (Paris, 1992), 503–63), who notes: "Plotinus has not refuted a particular text but rather doctrines represented by several texts" (529).

30. D. O'Brien himself admits that at least one version (but we have just recalled that there are several others), reported by Hippolytus (*Refutatio omnium haeresium*, VI 29–36; 155, 15–166, 14 Wendland), was in fact generative of matter. But there is here an evident strategic flaw, since the author tells us that he has limited himself strictly to Gnosticism as seen by Plotinus (*ibid.*, 21, n.4), and that he wanted to leave "to others the task of deepening the relations (assuming that there had been some) between the Gnosis of which Hippolytus speaks and the theory which is the object of Plotinus' critic" (*ibid.*). But which is the force that can have a conclusion drawn from such a partial analysis' base, considering that several pertinent Gnostic texts are indeed available? To this purpose, see, for example, the study of E. Thomassen, "The Derivation of Matter in Monistic Gnosticism," in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism*, *op. cit.*, 1–17) which refers to different sources (Irenaeus of Lyon, *Haer.* I, 2.3; 4.2; 8.4; II, 10, 3–4; 13, 7; 18, 7; 19, 4; 20, 5; Clement of Alexandria, *Exc.* 67, 4; Tertullian, *Val.* 15, 1) and concludes:

Now, we can come back briefly to the two famous passages that *supposedly* carry the doctrine of matter's generation in Plotinus. Let us begin with 13 (III 9), 3, where Plotinus writes:

The partial soul, then, is illuminated when it goes towards that which is before it—for then it meets reality—but when it goes towards what comes after it, it goes towards non-existence. But it does this, when it goes towards itself, for, wishing to be directed towards itself it makes an image of itself, the non-existent, as if walking on emptiness and becoming more indefinite; and this [we read here τοῦτο] indefinite image is every way dark: for it is altogether without reason and unintelligent and stands far removed from reality. Up to the time between it [the Soul] is in its own world, but when it looks at the image again, as it were directing its attention to it a second time, it forms it and goes into it rejoicing. (7–16) (Armstrong's translation modified, III, 411–13)

We wonder if this completely dark image thus produced, lacking all reason, is matter. Three facts permit doubt. First, the soul delights in informing this image and entering into it, whereas we know that relationships between soul and matter are not of the order of serene pleasure, but of a fight on a battlefield—in Treatise 38 [VI 7], 33, 32–34, moreover, Plotinus specifies that the lovable (ἐράσιμον) which receives form *is not matter* (“But matter is necessarily furthest from it, because it does not have of itself any one even of the last and lowest shapes. If then what is lovable is not the matter, but what is formed by the form ...” (Armstrong, VII, 191). Nothing in our passage evokes this confrontation and the soul's usual discomfort when facing matter.³¹ Second, this image is informed by the descending soul which enters into it, but the peculiarity of matter is *to be not informed* and *to take no form*. Passages confirming this point are numerous here, and we cite as an example Treatise 12 (II 4), 13, 23–24, where Plotinus writes: “The distinctive characteristic, too, of matter is not shape: for it consists in not being qualified and *not having any form*” (Armstrong, II, 139–41). Likewise, in Treatise 25 (II 5), 5, 20–22, Plotinus notes “it is only left for it to be potentially a

“A theory about the origin of Matter forms part of all the attested variants of the Valentinian system” (2). Thomassen adds that this fact had already been noted by H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1963), 105.

31. The passages to this effect are so numerous that it is pointless to give the list here. However, let us look at 12 (II 4), 10, 34, where Plotinus tells us that the soul suffers from the indeterminate character of matter. From its contact or even from a simple glance towards matter, the soul receives an injury: 1 (I 6), 5, 32; 2 (IV 7), 10, 25; 6 (IV 8), 5, 28; 51 (I 8), 4, 17–18, 20–22. This doctrine is coherent with the idea, constant in Plotinus, that evil is something exterior that is added to the soul: ὡς προσθήκαι τὰ κακὰ τῇ ψυχῇ καὶ ἄλλοθεν (2 (IV 7), 10, 11–12). In trying to explain this sudden soul's delight, Theiler proposes in his commentary *ad locum* the parallel with 6 (IV 8), 8 22, but in this last passage the soul feels a false pleasure that disappoints, what is clearly not the case here (the other parallels proposed by Theiler do not resolve this difficulty).

sort of weak and dim phantasm *unable to receive a shape* (μορφουῖσθαι μὴ δυνάμενον)” (Armstrong, II, 69). It is necessary here to avoid assimilating Plotinian to Aristotelian matter. Aristotle’s participates effectively in the compound, but Plotinus’ never does. The latter always remains below any implication in body. It never comes to actuality, and its fate is never improved in any manner by something coming to it. Plotinian matter, placed beneath, always remains the same, unchanged, unchangeable, incorruptible. In other words, it remains in a way exterior (ἔξω, Treatise 26 [III 6], 14, 19) to the site occupied by the soul, “single and set apart from all other things (μόνον καὶ ἔρημενον τῶν ἄλλων)” (*ibid.*, 9, 37, Armstrong, III, 249), because it is “altogether different (πάντη ἑτέρων)” (*ibid.*, 13, 23, Armstrong, III, 263–65). Therefore, there is only one and the same matter that, in Treatises 12 and 36, runs *under* the greatness of the volume which form communicates to it, without being able to mix with it or to benefit in any manner from the greatness and qualities which come to reflect on it.³² Again in Treatise 51 the same matter, as we have seen, wants to enter inside (εἰς τὸ εἶσω, 14, line 36), but is unable to do so because the entire place is sacred. In consequence, from the outside it throws itself beneath (ὑποβάλλουσα ἑαυτήν, 14, line 38) and is illuminated by the soul. Thirdly, the entire set of themes from Chapter 3 of Treatise 13 (III 9) is not that of matter (unnamed throughout the entire chapter) but of the *place*, more specifically of the “there where” (ὅπου, line 2) the World-Soul *does not have to come to be*, since it is not in any place, in contrast to other souls that possess at the same time a “from where” and a “that towards which” they go (ὄθεν... εἰς ὃ, lines 4–5) to form a body, and it is evidently natural to think that it is still about that which Plotinus speaks in the remaining part of this short chapter (the real strength of this argument will be discovered later).

Recalling these facts shows at the same time that the other passage, from which one tries to support one’s findings in order to confirm the psychic generation of matter, is still less convincing than the preceding one. In it, Plotinus specifies that the absolute undefined which is produced by the soul becomes a *body* and is taken to *perfection, achieved*, etc. ... Here is a translation:

When it is perfected it becomes a body (Τελειούμενον δὲ γίγνεται σῶμα), receiving the form appropriate to its potentiality, a receiver for the principle which produced it and brought it to maturity.” (15 [III 4], 1, 14–16, Armstrong, III, 143–45)

This language is obviously not that which Plotinus uses in respect to matter. As we well know, matter does not actually become a *body*, it is never *perfected* in any manner, and it never receives a form appropriate to its power.

32. Cf. 12 (II 4), 11, 34–36; 26 (III 6), 17, 33–35; 18, 19–21.

This still undefined thing described in Treatise 15 (III 4) is the place—that is, the receiver—of that which comes from the soul for the formation of a body, something that will be objectively perfected, and which consequently is not and cannot be ὕλη.³³ For anyone who is attentive to the precise and

33. D. O' Brien attempted in vain to dismiss this obstacle by indicating first of all that “in a later treatise, matter would never become more than an ‘image’, because it is ‘incapable of being formed (μορφοῦσθαι μὴ δυνάμενον)” (*Théod. Plot., op. cit.*, 59). But this impossibility, as we have just seen, is already raised in a treatise not *posterior* but *prior* to Treatise 15, Treatise 12 (II 4), first in Chap. 13, 23–24 quoted above, where it is stated that what is proper to matter is *not to have form*, and in two other passages of the same treatise, first in 8, 13–15, where Plotinus states that matter cannot form a compound and that, even when one says that it ‘receives’ a form, it does not assume as such this form that remains ‘other’ (i.e., different) than matter: “Matter must not be composite, but simple and one thing in its own nature; for so it will be destitute of all qualities. And the giver of its shape will give it a shape which is different from matter itself (ἄλλην οὐσαν παρ’αὐτῆν)” (8, 13–15, Armstrong, II, 123); and in 12, 30–33, he repeats again that matter cannot be a body: “Is it [matter] touch then? No, because it is not a body (μηδὲ σῶμα), for touch apprehends body, because it apprehends density and rarity, hardness and softness, wetness and dryness, and none of these apply to matter” (Armstrong, II, 137).

At a second moment, O' Brien believes that he is able to solve this ‘contradiction’ (his term) by relying on the phenomenon of ‘non-participating participation’ of matter developed by Plotinus in Treatise 26 (III 6), 14, 21–22. But in this passage and elsewhere in Treatise 26, ‘participation’ of matter always remains *below* corporeal participation (a simple reading of the text is enough to convince of that), since his oxymoronic expression (‘participating without participating’ μὴ μετέχον μετέχει) is exactly there to explain how, while matter always remains poverty, the non-transformable and incorporeal being in potency that it is (7, 4, 7), whereas it does not grasp anything and remains totally different (πάντη ἕτερον), it can participate without uniting in any fashion to that which it receives. The answer resides in the fact that, throwing itself beneath, or running in step with the greatness that comes to it (“ghostly image of bulk” 7, 13, Armstrong, III, 241), it adapts itself as from the exterior to what is glittered on it and thus offers its seat (7, 1) to that which must become, but from which matter does not draw any benefit, since it never becomes something different from what it was and does not undergo any alteration (10, 19, 27). In addition, contrary to what D. O' Brien suggests (*ibid.*, 58–59), no escape to the definitive incorporeity of matter can be found in the image of a “decorated corpse” (12 [II 4], 5, 18, Armstrong, II, 115), or of the outfit that somebody would wear (26 [III 6], 11, 21), for it is a question, as Plotinus explains it, of an appearance that leaves matter unaffected (11, 30), its mode of participation maintains it exactly as it is (11, 38–39). The ‘mystery’ of non-participating participation does not then soften at all the incompatibility between *materiality* and *corporeality* in Plotinus, it corroborates it. D. O' Brien apparently had a different opinion himself when, in another study (*Plotinus on the Origin of Matter* [Bibliopolis, 1991]), and precisely about the subject of sensible matter’s participation, he wrote answering K. Corrigan: “matter and form are never one” (72); “the soul (we might paraphrase) does her best to cover matter with form, but her best is never enough, because the object of her attention can never cease to be what it was: non-being, pure potentiality” (72); “Plotinus argues that since matter cannot be ‘changed’ (ἀλλοιοῦσθαι) without thereby ceasing to be matter and evil, it therefore only ‘appears’ to participate” (73, n.30). To propose this is to confirm what we have just advocated: matter cannot become a body. But it is not enough to say it just once, it is necessary to maintain this, and especially to draw out the corresponding consequences. Corrigan (“Positive and Negative

strictly limited role of matter in the sensible world, Plotinus' assertion in Treatise 15 (III 4, 1) to the effect that the absolute indefinite is transformed into a body in which it is perfected (τελειούμενον) is equivalent to a sort of signature, or, if one prefers, to a warning. It is as if Plotinus said: "Do not be mistaken about this thing of which I am talking, this thing is like matter, undefined and informed, however, it is not matter, since things happen to it which cannot happen to matter." This is also why, in such contexts, Plotinus never talks about ὕλη. Thus, Schwyzer was right to note, in reference to 13 (III 9), 3, 7–16: "Mit dem dortigen μὴ ὄν, εἶδωλον, πάντη σκοτεινόν *ist nicht die Materie gemeint, sondern der Körper.*"³⁴ There exists a text, as we have already mentioned³⁵ (but it is necessary to look at it again and this time closer), which definitely justifies Schwyzer's position, *i.e.*, Treatise 27 (IV 3), 9, 20–26. In this text, as we will immediately understand, the soul generates for itself a place (τόπος), without which it cannot proceed and produce this body that it is going to inhabit and that matter, as we have observed, cannot incarnate. Plotinus writes:

For the truth is as follows. If body did not exist, soul would not go forth, since there is no place (τόπος) other than body where it is natural for it to be. But if it intends to go forth, it will produce a place (τόπος) for itself, and so a body. Soul's rest is, we may say, confirmed in absolute rest; a great light shines from it, and at the outermost edge of this firelight there is a darkness (σκότος). Soul sees this darkness and informs it, since it is there as a substrate for form. (Armstrong, IV, 63–65)

If that which soul generates for itself is this place that it is going to inhabit, born from the soul's own light that becomes in its limits a darkness because of a loss of power, the conclusion is that, in fact—properly speaking—the soul never goes out from itself. On its side, matter, as we have seen, cannot enter in the soul's place, which is a sacred place. This explains at the same time the relation of exteriority to evil with regards to the soul, which according to the model inherited from *Phaedo*, is always an addition, an agglutination of something foreign to the soul. Darkness thus produced, which is the soul's

Matter," 31) also attempts to get around this pitfall by referring to the passage of Treatise 12 [II 4], 16, 11–13, where it is said that infinite (ἄπειρον) is conduced "to actuality and perfection" (εἰς ἐνέργειαν καὶ τελείωσιν) by limit (πέρας). But besides the fact that it is not, properly speaking, question of the body in this passage, and that Plotinus denies explicitly elsewhere in this same Treatise that matter could become corporeal, the continuation of the text alleged by Corrigan confirms that *actuality* or *perfection* to which the infinite has access is, paradoxically, to become more and more the infinite that it already is, "like the unsown field when it is sown, and as when the female conceives by the male, and does not lose its femaleness but becomes still more female: and that is, becomes more what it is (ὅ ἐστι μᾶλλον γίγνεται)" (13–16, Armstrong, II, 149), and not to become a body or something else in act.

34. *Art. cit.*, 275–76.

35. Cf. note 26.

place of residence, is precisely this friendly environment in which the soul *delights* in Treatise 13 (III 9), 3, 16, and at the same time, that which becomes a body and is perfected in Treatise 15 (III 4), 1. In all of that, the ὕλη is not in question and this is why it is not mentioned.³⁶

This point having been established, we can now go back to the problematic text of Treatise 51 (I 8), 14, which becomes then the only passage to talk objectively of matter's generation by the soul. Since Plotinus does not defend this thesis anywhere else, and since he fiercely opposes a comparable thesis in Treatise 33 because it puts the responsibility for evil on an activity belonging to prior principles, a conclusion imposes itself: the text of Treatise 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54 (where we find the chapter's conclusive lines) does not reflect Plotinus' thought but simply reconsiders, in order to oppose it again, the old Gnostic thesis already defeated. In other words, *this text is a revival of Treatise 33 which Plotinus, when he is coming to a conclusion on evil, recalls as an impossible inanity.*

Let us now reconsider the theme of the “illumination of darkness” in Chapter 12, Treatise 33 (II 9). This illumination which contributes to the world's production, Plotinus explains, is either in accordance with nature (κατὰ φύσιν), or contrary to nature (παρὰ φύσιν). If it is in accordance with nature, it must always be, with the consequence that it is eternal. If it is not in accordance, the world (as a counter-nature product and evil's cause) will come from prior principles. Plotinus continues:

and if the universe, then also the matter, from which the universe on this hypothesis would have emerged. For the soul which declined saw, they say, and illuminated the darkness already in existence. Where, then, did the darkness come from? If they are going to say that the soul made it when it declined, there was obviously nowhere for it to decline to, and the darkness itself was not responsible for the decline, but the soul's own nature. But this is the same as attributing the responsibility to pre-existing necessities; so the responsibility goes back to the first principles. (12, 39–44, Armstrong, II, 273–75)

What emerges clearly from the conclusion of this chapter is that the question of knowing *where darkness comes from* cannot find its solution in a bowing (or declining) soul, because 1) the soul does not yet have a place where to bow (logical argument)—we can only bow or decline towards that which already exists; 2) the fault of evil-darkness goes back to the soul in any case—an argument from theodicy. Maintaining that darkness cannot come from a declining soul is a self-justifying argument both logically and teleologically, independent of the supplementary difficulty stemming from

36. We can also compare this text to 38 (VI 7) 7, 6–16, where Plotinus mentions a preliminary outline (προὔπογραφή) produced by the Soul of the All that, as a precursor light, traces in advance on matter the individual path of the souls.

the fact that *the* (or *some*) Gnostics would state at the same time that darkness was already present. At this precise point, we cannot know if Plotinus only seeks to turn his adversaries against themselves by exploiting the contradiction between an *already present* darkness before the soul's arrival and a darkness produced by the soul; or if he could acknowledge an already present darkness, but which would not be produced by the soul, either because a) the darkness has a different origin than the soul, or b) it was there for all eternity.

Is this not, however, the exact exegetical context in Treatise 51? What is there stated, if not 1) that the responsibility for evil must in every and all case be attributed to matter; and 2) that this attribution prevails even if one maintains that the soul, by being affected—as it would bow (or decline) towards that which does not yet exist!—has become evil through contamination with matter? It remains only then to translate the text of 51 [I 8], 14, 51–54, taking into account these previous elements, that is to say restoring the frame of discussion with the Gnostics, from which this passage is the reflection:

So matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil. Even if soul, [as certain Gnostic adversaries maintain], produced matter, being affected in some way, and [according to them] became evil by communicating with it, matter [according to us] is the cause by its presence. For, the soul would not have come to it unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth. (Armstrong's translation modified, I, 315)

Several facts militate in favour of this last interpretation:

1. It is already well-known that because of his exceptional brevity of speech, as Schwyzer³⁷ had observed, it is often difficult to comprehend the exact sense of such or such a passage of his work. It is necessary to add to this fact, again noted by Schwyzer,³⁸ that in several places, Plotinus neglects to signal that the presented thesis is not his own, but the adverse thesis he intends to refute, which can only be understood afterwards or by taking into account his whole philosophy. This is why we have not become aware that we were faced with a resumption of the Gnostic argument already exposed and defeated, recalled now only to demonstrate once again its impossibility.

2. Thus, the contradiction between the two passages is avoided, *i.e.*, the contradiction between the thesis in Treatise 33, Chapter 12, according to which the soul generates the evil darkness and becomes consequently the source of evil, which is refused,³⁹ and the thesis in Treatise 51 of a soul as

37. *Plotinos* (Alfred Druckenmüller Verlag, München, 1978) [= "Plotinos", in *RE*, XXI, 1 (1951)], col. 520.

38. *Ibid.*, col. 524.

39. Plotinus own position, as far as it can be decoded in the dense anti-Gnostic argumentation of Chapter 12 Treatise 33, is shown in lines 22–23 where, opposing the arbitrary succession of the production of things in Gnostics, Plotinus answers: "Why then, in the making of the

cause of the evil matter but which incomprehensibly would not be responsible for evil.

3. We avoid the ridiculous tactic of proposing a retrograde causality from the effect to its own cause, which constitutes a logical monstrosity and which reveals itself as catastrophic to Plotinus' theodicy.

4. We better understand the curiously Gnostic tone of the description provided at the end of Chapter 14, which Theiler (*ad locum*) has already pointed out: "Es ist in halb philosophischem Gewande ein gnostischer Satz, wonach Trauer und andere Affekte der Sophia sich zur ὕλη konkretisieren, z. B. Epiphanius Panar, 31, 12, 1 ff.;" for we are indeed facing a Gnostic thesis, one which Plotinus already knows and which he reiterates here only to reinforce the ineluctable conclusion he wishes to reach: evil's origin is material and is not to be researched ἐν θεοῖς (*Theaetetus*, 176 a 6). The result is that θεὸς οὐδαμῆ οὐδαμῶς ἄδικος (*ibid.*, 176 b 8–c 1), as Plato had repeated—a position and authority Plotinus is seeking to rally to his cause here.

5. We also understand that it is a bad reading of the soul's role in the sensible world's generation which has polluted the understanding of this passage, otherwise quite clearly discernable; indeed, it is because some have believed themselves to be able to detect a generation of sensible matter by the soul elsewhere in the *Enneads* that, having taken strength from this conviction,⁴⁰ they believed that they were obliged to develop here an *ad hoc* theory allowing the inexplicable to be explained, the last sentence of Chapter 14 remaining indeed incomprehensible ("soul would not have come to it [matter] unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth"), if it is the soul itself which generates matter.

6. We free ourselves from the problem, in itself insoluble, of knowing if the sentence relative to the generation of matter (Chap. 14, lines 51–53), which is devoid of a verb in the principal clause or apodosis, must be understood as an unreal clause (thus Schwyzer) or not (O'Brien). Indeed, as soon as it is revealed as a Gnostic position, as it must be, both readings become possible and doctrinally equivalent.⁴¹

world, too, was not matter marked in outline with the form of the universe, in which form earth and fire and the rest were contained?" Thus Plotinus opposes the whole plan of the universe, designed first on matter by the soul, to which different individual souls are then adapted, to the arbitrary succession of the Gnostics. For more on this, also see note 36, on the teaching of 38 [VI 7], 7, 6–16.

40. This is why Theiler, who signals himself the Gnostic character of the Plotinian sentence, does not reach the conclusion that it is a question of a Gnostic revival, persuaded of having found elsewhere in Plotinus "der Gedanke, dass die Seele die Materie Schafft," referring to some passages already analysed above: III 9 [13] 3, 12 ff. and IV 3 [27], 9, 22 ff.

41. Here we provide for a comparison the translation of the clause in unreal mode: "Even if soul had produced matter [*as certain Gnostic adversaries maintain*], being affected in some way, and [*according to them*] had become evil by communicating with it, matter [*according to*

7. We avoid the problem of having to intervene artificially in the text to give it back its sense. We remember, however, that basically, Müller and Bury had, from a doctrinal point of view, the best motives for proposing these conjectures.

8. Plotinus' own solution appears, from then on, with complete clearness and simplicity: it is necessary for matter *to be already there*, because one can no more bow (or decline) towards what does not yet exist (this is the lesson of Treatise 33), than suffer from what does not yet exist (this is the lesson of Treatise 51). In consequence these two hypotheses collapse: sensible matter *is already there*, because it is not generated by soul,⁴² and because it is *already there*, first, on account of its presence, matter is the cause of the soul's fall, and second, because of both its presence and its actions, matter remains the ultimate source of all evil.

It remains that I must give a reason for Plotinus' peculiar position in this late Treatise, where matter's counter-action to the descending soul is more pronounced than elsewhere. It seems most reasonable to suppose that Plotinus wanted through this means to distance himself from this threatening form of dualism—not only Gnostic—where it is soul that ends by being identified as evil's source. This identification occurs not only because the soul would generate evil matter, but also because, insofar as the initiative would come exclusively from the soul, it would remain primarily responsible for its own weakness or for its perversion independently of the presence in front of it, generated or not, of an evil matter. This is an extremely important point; the soul remains evil's source in the two following cases. It is not only the source if it produces an evil matter. It remains the root also if it is the ultimate source of perversion when faced with an evil matter which is already there (not produced by the soul), but which is not the active cause of any discomfort or vice, which does not oppose soul in any concrete manner, and which simply represents the good's degree zero. It is necessary that evil comes positively from matter (not created, obviously, by the soul), and from a matter that is more than the good's degree zero. Without this the fault continues to rely on a psychic perversion, which corresponds more or less, as

have been the cause by its presence: soul would not have come to it unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth (Armstrong, I, 315, our additions in *italics*).

42. Some of Plotinus' texts underline the existence of matter *prior* (of course from a logical point of view) to the soul's arrival or evoke the state in which matter would be without it. The most important text is that of 10 (V 1), 2, 25–27 (Armstrong, V, 17): “before [the installation in it] of soul, it [the heaven] was a dead body, earth and water, or rather the darkness of matter and non-existence.” In 26 (III 6), 16, 15 ff., Plotinus explains that if heaven and all it contains stopped to exist, “matter would be left what it was (καταλειφθήσεται ὅπερ ἦν) and keep none of the qualifications which previously existed in it” (Armstrong, III, 275). Also see in the same sense 52 (II 3), 9, 43 ff.

we have observed, to the Gnostic or Porphyrian version of dualism. Plotinus has not then changed his mind in 51, since he never believed that the soul is responsible for evil.⁴³ He has, however, felt the need to restate, with more strength than otherwise he would have wished, the active and determinant role of matter, in order to terminate the Gnostic exegesis all around him, which was perhaps gaining in popularity—Porphyry himself in his own way would have rallied that exegesis to his cause.⁴⁴

43. The interpretation presented in this study differs in an essential point from the analysis that I developed in my *Plotin. Les deux matières* (Paris, Vrin, 1993). I have always thought, and I still do now, [1] that the question of the matter's origin is difficult to solve because of the ambiguity maintained by Plotinus; [2] that certain passages allow the consideration of the possibility of generation by the soul of something that one is tempted to identify with matter, next to other passages evoking a different higher, and in a way marginal origin of matter. The essential difference resides in the fact that in my essay of 1993, I had not identified the exogenic character—in fact Gnostic—of the text of 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54, which consequently brought to an end an unexpected support to the thesis of the psychic origin of matter, a novelty which had to be considered even if it meant to have to overcome some difficulties which could come from this option (as being *caused by its own effect*), and to assume a sudden change in Plotinus' position in relation to Treatise 33 *Against Gnostics*. But the picture, as we have observed, takes a completely different appearance when the artificial character of the passage, which, besides, is contradictory in itself, is finally recognized. Plotinus becomes consistent with himself once again, and the psychic origin of matter, of which the bases had never been solid, disappears like a horizon's mirage.

44. Several questions evidently still remain in suspense, that of knowing if matter is finally non-generated, or if it comes from the prior principles (even if it is otherwise than directly through the soul); that of knowing also how must one articulate with one another the soul's eventual weakness with matter's corruptive action. Very briefly, and before returning to these difficult questions in the continuation of this study, I would advance on the first point, that it is necessary indeed to consider a different origin for sensible matter, which is evoked in some treatises, and which, all things considered, represents for Plotinus the best solution, since this appearance of matter would be then a function, not of a positive and in a way 'official' soul's gesture, but of a kind of 'collateral damage' or 'marginal flight' in relation to the system (on this, see the suggestion already made in *Plotin. Traité 25* [Paris, Cerf, 1998], 122–36, see also the suggestions in this direction by K. Corrigan, "Is There More Than One Generation of Matter in the Enneads," *Phronesis* 31 (1986): 167–81; on the second point, that the assertion according to which matter is the cause of all evil, including the *soul's weakness*, which collides with a major difficulty insofar as it conduces to level all souls and to release them from responsibility, can in lack of a better solution find a partial's one in the distinction between a *general causality* of a let's say *cosmic* scale, and a *particular causality*. Talking from a *cosmic* point of view, matter would be the cause of the fact that there is, in general, weakness in souls situated here-below; whereas from an individual point of view, it comes back to each soul to adopt a less compromising and less degrading way for itself to stay in the sensible. In these conditions, matter would remain the cause of the soul's weakness, in general, but each one's particular degree of weakness would remain nevertheless imputable to each one.