

Thunder Perfect Mind – or How Nonsense Makes Sense

Thunder Perfect Mind (NHC VI,2) is one of the strangest and most mysterious texts in the Nag Hammadi corpus. As a mind-baffling exercise in paradoxes and non-Aristotelian logic¹ amounting to nonsense it has duly been an object for both curiosity and fascination.² It is an aretalogy composed almost exclusively of antithetical affirmations in a combination of three different styles of speaking: self-proclamations in the 'I am'-style,³ exhortations to the audience, and reproaches for failures and misunderstandings. Because the speaking subject is the same throughout the text there is a great cohesion which counter-balances the paradoxical style.

The most characteristic feature of *Thunder* is, doubtlessly, the radically kataphatic character where affirmations are brought to such an extreme that the text becomes utterly paradoxical. Behind this paradoxical style there seems to be a mutual identification of Wisdom and Folly in the Proverbs, perhaps even the Marys in the New Testament.

When reading *Thunder* as sequences of statements it is utterly meaningless, since it constantly undoes its own claims. The result is a flickering image of the divine entity, where the text constantly lures its reader into an illusion of having the right understanding of her, only to tear this illusion apart

the very next moment. Now you have her, now you don't! In spite of being overtly informative the primary way of conveying meaning cannot be informative when this information is constantly undone or corrected. Let the following serve as an illustrative example of the antithetical style of the text:⁴

For (γάρ) I am the first and the last.

I am honoured and despised.

I am the whore (πόρνη) and the chaste one (σεμνή).

I am the wife and the virgin (παρθένος).

(Thunder 13.15–20; 27–32.)⁵

[– –]

I am the bride and the bride groom,

and it is my husband who gave birth to me.

I am the mother of my father, and the sister of my husband,
and he is my offspring.⁶

By perpetually affirming opposite qualities, it is established that the divinity is beyond all such categories and yet manifests or permeates them completely. From these short passages it is not quite clear, though, whether these propositions are to be understood as referring to different modulations of her being within a mythological narrative, as the parallels in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC

II,4.89.11–17) and the *Origin of the World* (NHC II,5.114.4–15) suggest, or as a *coincidentia oppositorum*. As for the latter, this would invalidate the rule of non-contradiction and, as will be shown below, it is this reading which the text demands. Notably, this does not necessarily mean that the author did not know about this Aristotelian rule, only that it does not have any relevance to this very entity. For the moment it suffices to say that the smallest semantic unit seems to be the double proposition "Y is A and not-A," meaning being situated neither in the first statement nor in its counterstatement but in the undoing of the first statement in the next.⁷ This means that the antithetical affirmation or kataphatic theology of *Thunder* is a functional equivalent to apophatic theology, it being characterised by the way it perpetually destabilises, defers or destructs meaning.

Thunder also shares certain characteristics with the classical riddle.⁸ The riddle-style is most definitely an invitation to the reader to search for the female revealer, but it might also be a misleading temptation, a delusion, as any such intension presupposes dualistic structures. In the following passage, the cultural designations, Greek and Barbarian, may be associated with two different modes of discourse and of thinking; one which is logical and syllogistic and one which is apocalyptic or mysterious, following subtle lines of thoughts and associations. Also, it may serve as an illustrative example of how the divinity defies any attempt to define her:

Why then have you hated me, you Greeks?
Because I am a Barbarian among Barbarians?
(*Thunder* 16.1–3.)⁹

The expression "a Barbarian among Barbarians" is rather puzzling. It might either mean that she is a barbarian as other barbarians, or that she is a barbarian even to the barbarians, which could mean that she is either even more barbarian than the barbarians, a double exclusion from Greekness, or that she is Greek. This is a typical example of how *Thunder* never leaves any statement undisputable, but perpetually destabilises meaning revealing the inadequacy of human discourse and categorisation.

More importantly, it is an example of how the relationship between divine and human is anything but symmetrical. When the code Greek-Barbarian is transposed to it, the divinity slips away as neither Greek, nor Barbarian, and yet perhaps both.

DOUBLE PROPOSITIONS AND TEXTUAL PERFORMANCE

In *Thunder*, each double proposition works as an unsaying which elevates the female revealer beyond reference and yet categorically affirms the possibility of reference. There are, however, also larger clusters of double propositions that work together as an

- 1 Cf. Buckley 1980, 259: "At first glance, the utterances give the reader the impression of a mind-boggling exercise in non-Aristotelian logic."
- 2 See, e.g., Ridley and Jordan Scott's funky Prada-commercial from 2005.
- 3 Scholars have paid special attention to the "I am" proclamations due to the parallels in John 6:35; 8:12; 8:28; 8:58; 10:7; 11:25; 14:6. See, e.g., Giversen 1975; MacRae 1977, 111–122. In connection to *Thunder*, the Isis-aretalogies are often mentioned, see, e.g., Quispel 1975, 82–122; MacRae 1977, 115–116; Poirier 1995, 98. In the Isis-aretalogies, however, affirmation is not carried out in paradoxes. Striking parallels are found in the "Hymn of Jesus" in the second century *Acta Johannis* 94–96 which, like *Thunder*, consists of antithetically paired self-proclamations; MacRae 1977, 118; Poirier 1995, 98. Further, parallels between *Thunder* and *Ginza* have been mentioned suggesting a Mandaean connection; Buckley 1980; Quispel 1975.
- 4 The translation is based on the critical edition in Poirier 1995, unless anything else is mentioned.
- 5 $\alpha\lambda\omicron\kappa \gamma\alpha\rho \tau\epsilon \tau' \omega\upsilon\rho\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\tau' \lambda\gamma\omega \theta\alpha\tilde{\iota}\nu$
 $\alpha\lambda\omicron\kappa \tau\epsilon \tau\epsilon < \tau > \tau\alpha\epsilon\iota\alpha\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\tau' \lambda\gamma\omega \tau\epsilon\tau' \omega\tilde{\iota}\nu\varsigma$
 $\alpha\lambda\omicron\kappa \tau\epsilon \tau\tau\omicron\rho\eta\eta \lambda\gamma\omega \tau\varsigma\epsilon\mu\eta\eta$
 $\alpha\lambda\omicron\kappa \tau\epsilon \tau\epsilon\varsigma\tau\iota\mu\epsilon \lambda\gamma\omega \tau\tau\alpha\rho\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$
- 6 $\alpha\lambda\omicron\kappa \tau\epsilon \tau\omega\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\epsilon\tau' \lambda\gamma\omega \rho\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\omega\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\epsilon\tau'$
 $\lambda\gamma\omega \rho\alpha\rho\omicron\upsilon\gamma\tau' \rho\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\tau\alpha\upsilon \chi\pi\omicron\epsilon\iota$
 $\alpha\lambda\omicron\kappa \tau\epsilon \tau\eta\alpha\delta\gamma \tilde{\iota}\tau\epsilon \rho\alpha\epsilon\iota\omega\tau' \lambda\gamma\omega \tau\varsigma\omega\tilde{\iota}\nu\epsilon \tilde{\iota}\rho\alpha\rho\omicron\upsilon\gamma\tau'$
 $\lambda\gamma\omega \tilde{\iota}\tau\omicron\upsilon\upsilon \rho\epsilon \rho\alpha\chi\pi\omicron$
- 7 On this linguistic phenomena and its performative function in Plotinus, see Sells 1994, 19–22.
- 8 This affinity with Greek riddles was first suggested by Layton 1986. I acknowledge that the riddle-like style invites the reader to search for the true nature of the female revealer but I find it a central part of the irony of *Thunder* that searching or rationalistic intentionality needs to be replaced by non-intentionality before the presence of the female revealer may be fully realised.
- 9 $\epsilon\tau\tilde{\iota}\nu\epsilon \omicron\upsilon \theta\epsilon \alpha\tau\epsilon\tau\tilde{\iota}\mu\epsilon\tau\omega\epsilon\tilde{\iota} \tilde{\iota}\tilde{\rho}[\epsilon\lambda]\lambda\eta\tilde{\iota}\nu\eta\tilde{\iota}\nu$
 $\chi\epsilon \alpha\lambda\omicron\kappa \omicron\upsilon\gamma\tilde{\iota}\nu\alpha\rho\tilde{\iota}\nu\alpha\rho\tilde{\iota}\nu \tilde{\iota}\tilde{\rho}[\eta]\tilde{\iota}\nu[\epsilon]\tilde{\iota}\nu\alpha\rho\tilde{\iota}\nu\alpha\rho\tilde{\iota}\nu$

intense and dynamic discursive performance. The following is an excellent example of how meaning is established only to be destabilised, revealing in the end the inappropriateness of logic:

I am substance (οὐσία) and she who has no substance (οὐσία).
Those who exist from my συνουσία are ignorant of me.
And those who exist in my substance (οὐσία) (are) those who know me.
Those who are within me have been ignorant of me.
And those who are far away from me, they have known me.
On the day when I am close [to you, you are] far away from [me].
And] on the day when I am [far away] from you, [I am] [close] to you.¹⁰
(*Thunder* 18.27–19.4.)

In the first double proposition (18.27–28), the female revealer says that she is substance (οὐσία), and the one who has no substance (< ἀνούσιος). Following the logic of the other antitheses she must be something even more supreme or even more original than substance and non-substance, though again, a principle which is not only all-encompassing, but also all-pervading. But the passage does cause some problems.

First of all, non-substantiality may refer to matter. This interpretation may be supported by lines 19.18–20: "I am the desire of (outward) sight and the interior self-control exists within me"¹¹ – if the desire for sight is to be associated with the Aristotelian *appetites materiae*. Aristotle describes this as a natural longing of matter for actuality and form, "as the female [longs] for the male and the base for beautiful" (ὥσπερ ἄν εἰ θῆλυ ἄρρενος καὶ αἰσχροῦ καλοῦ) which may occasionally manifest its innate lack or evil tendency.¹² Plutarch combines Aristotle's yearning matter with the Platonic conception of space as the "mother of becoming" and portrays it as the Egyptian goddess Isis.¹³ Because *Thunder* on several occasions draws on Isis under some Hellenised form this interpretation is possible.

But as convenient as it is, this interpretation is perhaps not correct. In late Hellenistic philosophy,

it is not unlikely to link non-substantiality to the divine principle. Thus, in *Corpus Hermeticum* II.5, god is called ἀνούσιαστον.¹⁴ The *locus classicus* behind this notion is, of course, Plato's *Republic* VI 509b.¹⁵ In late Neo-Platonic thinking, the notion that the divine principle is neither being nor non-being becomes standard.¹⁶ And in the Platonising Sethian treatises the abstract principle, ὑπαρξίς, may be termed both "substantial" in its manifest form, and "non-substantial" in its state of being not yet manifest.¹⁷

This leaves two completely different but equally possible interpretations of the double proposition "I am substance and she who does not have substance." Though it is quite clear that the statement that the female revealer both has and has not οὐσία is just another way of expressing that she is everything, the meaning of the τετε μῆτεc τacγνογcια is as unstable as in the expression "a Barbarian among Barbarians."

The correct understanding of ἀνούσιος becomes increasingly important when reading the next double proposition (18.28–31). This passage articulates an antithesis between being εβολ εἴη τacγνογcια, which is equated with being ignorant of her, and being εἴη τacγνογcια, which is equated with knowing her. As συνουσία has connotations to sexual intercourse, the double proposition might awaken the impression that when stemming from the sexual debauchery of the supposedly fallen Sophia, one is caught in ignorance and oblivion.¹⁸ But συνουσία may also refer to the attendance to or conversation with a teacher, or simply mean co-presence. Groping for meaning, the most immediate interpretation is to see ignorance associated with being εβολ εἴη τacγνογcια as negative, and knowledge associated with being εἴη τacγνογcια as positive.

The next double proposition (18.32–35) is parallel to this, but with two significant changes. The expressions εβολ εἴη τacγνογcια and εἴη τacγνογcια, which seem to refer to the quality or nature of existence, are replaced by the (semi)spatial terms of presence and absence. Moreover, instead of operating with ignorant and knowing ones, the text talks about those who have been ignorant of her and those who have known her, the former being

within her, and the latter far away from her. Clearly, being ignorant and having been ignorant is not necessarily the same, and thus the text invites the reader to establish the equations "presence is having come to knowledge" and "absence is having become ignorant." In this way the earlier double propositions are further qualified and stabilised, so that the equations existing εβολ εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν = absence = ignorance = negative, and existing εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν = presence = knowledge = positive can be made.

These double propositions create some structures or guidelines for orientating oneself within the semantic field. Some people know her and they are close to her and exist in her substance. Others are not so fortunate as to know her, they exist from her συνουσία and are not worthy of her presence. Additionally, the last double proposition creates the expectation that the female revealer is spatial in some sense.

In the next following double proposition (18.35–19.4), however, these structures are, all of a sudden, destroyed, when the female revealer declares that on the day when she is close to them, they are far away from her – and on the day when she is far from them, she is close to them.¹⁹ If trying to withhold the equations established from the previous sections, the result will be that knowing is to be present is to be absent is to be ignorant. Thereby the structure of orientation is lost in bewilderment, and the insufficiency of our conclusions is brought into display. This is how the text *makes* sense. Meaning is not embedded in the text, but is created in the reader as a reaction to the obstacles the text puts forth.²⁰ The dissolution of all structures of meaning and the subsequent disorientation gives a momentary glimpse of the female revealer as ubiquitous and indefinable. Because all opposites coincide in the female revealer, binary logic which pervades discursive intellection is unsuitable and must be annulled.

10 ἀνοκ τε τοῦσιν· ἀφω τετε μήτες οὐσία
 νετ' ὄροπ' εβολ εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν· σερατ' σοοῦν ἴμοει
 ἀφω νετ' ὄροπ' εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν νετ' σοοῦν ἴμοει
 νετ' εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν ἀφω δετ' σοοῦν ἴμοει
 ἀφω νετ' οὐσιν ἴσα ἴβολ ἴμοει νετ' ἀφω σοοῦν

- εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν ἴμοει
 ἀφω εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν ἴμοει ἴβολ ἴμοει [τῆ εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν ἴμοει]
- 11 ἀνοκ τε τεπιθῆναι εἰς οὐρασις· ἀφω τετ' κρατεια
 ἴφρητ' εσαοοπ' ἴρητ'.
- 12 Aristotle, *Physics* 1.9.192a13–23; 1.9.192a22–23; cf. 1.9.192a15.
- 13 *De Iside et Osiride*. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 53b. According to Pleše (2006, 147), this is the closest parallel to the Gnostic Sophia. Quispel (1975, 82–122), arguing for affinities between *Thunder* and the Isis-aretologies, also mentions that Isis in the late Hellenistic age could be identified with earth.
- 14 *CH* II.5: "If it is divine, it is something essential; but if it is god, it comes to be even without essence." (ἐὰν μὲν οὖν ἡ θεῖον, οὐσιωδὲς ἐστίν· ἐὰν δὲ ἡ θεός, καὶ ἀνουσίαστον γίνεται.) (transl. Copenhaver).
- 15 " – the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence (οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ) but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power." (transl. Shorey). On this, see, e.g., Whitaker 1969, 91–104.
- 16 See, e.g., Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 1048A; Proclus in *Parmenides* VI 1079.27–1082.19. In *Corpus Hermeticum*, god is both being and non-being; see, e.g., *CH* V. The anonymous in *Parmenides* stresses the being of the highest principle.
- 17 On the non-substantial substance and non-substantial ὑπαρξίς in the Platonising Sethian tradition, see *Allogenes* NHC XI, 3.53.31–32; 62.23–24; 65.33–34; *Zostrianos* NHC VIII, 1.20.19–20; 68.5–6; 78.4–5; 79.5–6.
- 18 Cf. Layton's translation of σύνουσια as "sexual intercourse" (Layton 1986). This translation is possible but it is not preferable as it refuses to take the dual meaning of the word into consideration. Other translations are "commerce" (Poirier), "union" (Meyer), "presence" (Taussig, Calaway, Kotrosits, Lasser and Lillie), whereas MacGuire leaves the word untranslated. For a brief summary of ancient usages of the word, see Poirier 1995, 299. For an in-depth discussion on συνουσία in Plotinus' *Enneads*, see Schroeder 1987, 677–699.
- 19 MacRae's restoration is preferred here. Poirier restores εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν ἴμοει [ἴμοει ἀφω εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν ἴμοει] ἴβολ ἴμοει [τῆ εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν εἰς τὰς γνοῦσιν ἴμοει], i.e. "On the day when I am close [to you, I am] far away from [you. And] on the day when I am [far away] from you, [I am] [close to] you." MacRae's restoration lacks the perfect chiasmic mirroring which Poirier's captures. Poirier's, however, is less bewildering because it blatantly denies that spatiality pertains to the female revealer. MacRae's restoration defers this conclusion to the second part of the double proposition. In this way, it enhances bewilderment by jeopardising the reader's conceptions of presence and absence in the first part, while in the second part denying any relevance of spatiality at all. Moreover, it pays respect to the notion that while the divine is present alike to all things, all things are not present alike to the divine, cf. Proclus *Stoicheiosis Theologike*, prop. 142.
- 20 Cf. Fish 1980, 2–4; 25.

In this way the text makes sense by perpetually establishing frames of interpretation and expectations in the reader only to destabilise or deconstruct them the next moment. In spite of the density of data in this text its way of conveying meaning is not informative, but performative. Meaning comes into expression in the dissolution of one proposition in its counter-proposition and between one double proposition and the next. This apophaticism neither reveals nor conceals what true *gnosis* is. It only signifies it, gives hints at it by displaying how far from acquiring it the reader is. The distance to the attainment of true *gnosis* can be measured by the degree to which the expectations were disrupted.

AFFIRMATION AND DOUBLE BIND

In its antithetical play of affirmations *Thunder* draws in a wide range of concepts in order to regain strength in the new tensions created. These antithetical affirmations destabilise not only the meaning but also the valuations of the concepts.

In the following passage, the female revealer addresses herself directly to the audience with the concepts love and hate, denial and confession, truths and lies, knowledge and ignorance. Within such a semantic field the implied reader would know exactly how to orientate himself. But the horizon is lost as the female revealer commands not only those who deny her to confess her, and so forth, but also the opposite, those who confess her to deny her:

Why you who hate me do you love me
and hate those who love me?
You who deny me, confess me!
and you who confess me, deny me!
You who tell the truth about me, lie about me!
And you who have lied about me, tell the truth about me!
You who know me, be ignorant of me!
and those who do not know me, may they know me!²¹
(*Thunder* 14.15–25.)

There are several important points here. First of all, if the antithetical affirmations were formerly taken as referring to different aspects of the female revealer in a time-space-continuum, then this opportunity is now lost when the female revealer scorns her adher-

ents for being insufficient and inconsistent in their approach to her. This reproach is a strong critique of perceiving the double propositions as referring to sequential modulations, and of paying respect to only one side of her being. Even if the constituents of the antithetical oppositions refer to different aspects of her, they are to be brought into focus simultaneously in order to bring her fullness into view.

Secondly, ignorance is usually defined in relation to knowledge as its deviant, knowledge being the defining term or Archimedean point. But when ignorance and knowledge are equally bad – or equally good, for that matter – they can with equal right take the place at the centre of the semantic system. When the centre of the system, the defining term, is exchangeable this opens up for an endless play of reversal and revaluation which makes the semantic system extremely fluid, as every signification and valuation can and must be drawn into suspicion.²² One soon gets the impression that ignorance, for instance, is not necessarily to be valued as something negative and associated with the oblivion of the phenomenal world. Since the oppositional pair of knowledge and ignorance is repeated elsewhere in the text (14.26–27, 16.27–29 and 18.28–35) this is apparently of importance for the author as well as for our understanding of the text.

Thirdly, whatever the adherents do, they obviously fail. When the antithetical affirmation is reformulated as an antithetical commandment an insoluble dilemma or double bind²³ occurs, because one cannot obey one commandment without, by the same token, neglecting the other. Such double binds are not an unknown phenomenon within the history of religions. Thus, in the *Zen koans*, double binds are used as devices for achieving enlightenment, as when, e.g., the Zen master holds a stick over the disciple's head and says: "If you say this stick is real, I will strike you with it. If you say it is not real, I will strike you with it. If you don't say anything, I will strike you with it."²⁴ Generally speaking, there are two options. Either one can accept and endure the double bind as an existential condition, or one can transcend it by undoing its principle.

Now, a *koan* may indicate its own solution, and this may count for *Thunder* also. The double binds

of *Thunder* circle around the four core approaches to the divine: confession, emotion, cognition, and discourse. As long as the adherents signify anything – and signification is here to be understood in the widest possible sense – they do wrong, because by doing this they are inescapably caught in bipolarity and partiality because of the inadequacy of the human language and cognition in relation to the female revealer as *coincidentia oppositorum*. Because the nature of the female revealer violates the rule of non-contradiction, any reference or signification which implies some kind of delimitation is in need of correction. Or in other words, whatever truths one can tell about the divinity, these will also be lies. One can perhaps accept and endure this double bind as an existential condition. Thereby one would fling oneself into an infinite semiosis where each saying may present the female revealer momentarily before the mind fixes itself to it and is restrained by it, and an unsaying is needed, this also having only momentary value.

Alternatively, one may annul the principle of the double bind by abstaining from the game completely. When love and hate, ignorance and knowledge, truthfulness and lying, confession and denial are equally wrong and equally right, a possible solution to the dilemma is to transcend signification as such. And in doing this one sets oneself free from all binding, all emotions, confessions and cognitions, thereby attaining a state of dispassionate passion, learned ignorance and ineffable silence. When all distinctions are annihilated the self is as if it had not yet come forth from its original source. However, to be honest to the text, it must be admitted that no hints are given as to any evaluation between these two options.

HOW NONSENSE MAKES SENSE

The paradoxical style of *Thunder* amounts to mere nonsense, but this is not necessarily a hindrance for a modern scholarly approach. Instead of seeing the antithetical play of affirmations as an obstacle for understanding, I suggest reading *Thunder* with a focus on the textual performance as a process which involves the reader much more directly. As soon as one realises that the text, in spite of its heavy

overload of data, works to convey meaning not in an informative way, but in a performative one by perpetually deferring, defying, disrupting and de-structuring meaning, and forcing the reader into insoluble dilemmas, it becomes obvious how the text makes sense.

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21 εἴθε οὐκ ἦν ἐστὶν ἄντιθεσις τῶν ἀποφαινεῖται
 ἀπὸ τῆς ἀποφαινεῖται ἀποφαινεῖται
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22 Cf. Buckley 1980, 265: "– one seeks in vain for any hint of choice between the opposites. No evaluation of the dichotomies emerges – there is no appeal to ethics in order to avoid the "negative" side of the oppositional pair. Nor does any resolution of antithetical principles occur."

23 "Double bind situation" is a concept first coined by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (Bateson et al. 1956, reprinted in Bateson 1972, 201–227).

24 Bateson 2000, 208. Similar examples are ample. See also Staal 1980, 44. Bateson's proposal that zen *koans* may be analysed as double binds has since been broadly accepted. See, e.g., Kasulis 1981, 117–118 and Watts 1999, 154ff.

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