

# MYSTERY RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY IN PROCLUS

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## 1. Ritual, myth and philosophy

We owe the development of a pagan rational theology to Proclus (412-485). Traditional Greek religion had undergone various transformations, both because it had assimilated religious rites from other cultures over the course of the centuries, and because of the pressure from the Empire once it had adopted Christianity as its exclusive confessional identity. Proclus is a religious author<sup>1</sup> who took regular part in the traditional pagan worship<sup>2</sup> of the Greeks and other peoples<sup>3</sup>, and who dedicated considerable efforts to providing a philosophical grounding for the pagan religion. In a way, he represents a reply to the systematic theological frameworks that already existed in the Christianity of his day.

The concept of “mystery religions” implies a certain ambiguity<sup>4</sup>. Also, in the time of Proclus many of these cults had lost public relevance<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A. J. Festugière 1971: 577: “la religion civique de Proclus est très sincère et très profonde”.

<sup>2</sup> Marinus, *Vita Procli*, 29-33.

<sup>3</sup> Marinus, *Vita Procli*, 19, 26-30: “This most pious man was always prepared, and said that it was not right that a philosopher should be a servant (θεραπευτήν) of a single city, or of the traditional worship of a few towns, but rather he should be a hierophant (ιεροφάντην) universally for the entire world”. The term ‘hierophant’ applies to those who reveal sacred realities during mystery rituals (see Saffrey 2001: 133-4).

<sup>4</sup> Burkert 2005: 23-26. The term “mystery” in modern languages is connected to that of “secret,” a use that can be traced back to the New Testament. Secrets had certainly been characteristic of the ancient mystery religions, although not all secret cults were mysteries. In addition, it would be mistaken to associate the mysteries with what today we understand as mysticism: The term *mystikos* is used in this sense, beginning associated primarily with Pseudo Dionysius. The Latin translation of *mysteria*, *myein*, *myesis* as *initia*, *initiare*, *initiatio* better reflects the

Nevertheless, Proclus shows a special interest in Orphism<sup>6</sup>, in the *Chaldean Oracles*<sup>7</sup>, as well as in the theology of Homer and Hesiod<sup>8</sup>, even when he shares with his masters Plutarch and Syrianus the conviction that there exists a basic agreement between all religions and philosophies<sup>9</sup>.

With respect to religion, Proclus is above all a theologian. That is, his attention is not directed towards exhorting people to participate in religious practice, nor to describing the many religious rituals, nor to explaining traditional myths in a detailed manner: this is a kind of knowledge that he takes for granted in those who read his writings or listen to his oral discourses. His efforts, rather, are focused on rationally justifying both rites and myths.

Furthermore, he holds—in accordance with the Neoplatonic tradition—that religious progress demands philosophical reflection:

For we do possess, inasmuch as we rank as souls, images of the primal causes (τῶν προτίστων αἰτίων εἰκόνας), and we participate in both the whole Soul and the plane of Intellect and the divine Henad; and we must stir up the powers of those entities within us (τὰς ἐν ἡμῖν ἐκείνων δυνάμεις ἀνεγείρειν) for the comprehension of the present subject matter. Or how else are we to become nearer to the One, if we do not rouse up the One of the soul (τὸ ἐν τῷ τῆς ψυχῆς προανεγείραντες), which is in us as a kind of image of the One (οἷον εἰκὼν τοῦ ἑνός), by virtue of which the most accurate of authorities (οἱ ἀκριβέστεροι τῶν λόγων) declare that the divine possession most especially comes about? And how are we to make this One and flower of the soul (τὸ ἄνθος τῆς ψυχῆς) shine forth unless we first of all activate our intellect? For the activity of the intellect leads the soul towards a state and an activity of calm. And how are we to achieve perfect intellectual activity if we do not travel there by means of logical conceptions, using composite intellections prior to more simple ones? So then, we need demonstrative power in our preliminary assumptions, whereas we need intellectual activity in our investigations of being (for the orders of being are denied of the One), and we need inspired impulse in our consciousness of that which transcends all beings (ἐνθεαστικῆς δὲ ὁρμῆς ἐν τῇ συναισθήσει τοῦ πάντων ἐξηρημένου τῶν ὄντων). [...] Let

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meaning of the ancient mysteries, i.e. as initiation ceremonies that were optional rites within the polytheist religion as a whole.

<sup>5</sup> Burkert 2005: 138-9: Eleusis had been destroyed fifteen years before Proclus was born. In addition, pagan sacrifices were prohibited.

<sup>6</sup> Brisson 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Marinus, *Vita Procli*, 26-28.

<sup>8</sup> Festugière 1971: 576: “Il est donc clair que Marinos établit un lien entre la théurgie et la religion traditionnelle”.

<sup>9</sup> Saffrey 1992: 35-50: “Acorder entre elles les traditions théologiques: Une caractéristique du néoplatonisme athénien.

this, then, be the manner of our discourse, logical, intellectual, and inspired (λογικός, νοερός, ἐνθεαστικός)<sup>10</sup>.

In order to rise to the One, the human being needs inspiration. But in order to attain the inspiration that makes the approach to the One possible, he or she must have previously awakened the “flower of the soul” by means of philosophy. Without philosophy, without science, without intelligence, inspiration is confused, equivocal and trapped in the imagination<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, Proclus calls for a rational critique of the various religions, in order to separate what is fecund from what is sterile.

Proclus easily saw the entirety of Hellenic and foreign theology, even that which was obscured by mythical representations, and he brought it into the light for those who wanted and were able to comprehend it, interpreting everything with greater inspiration (ἐνθουσιαστικώτερον) and bringing it all into harmony. Studying all the works of the ancients, he accepted with a critical spirit (μετ’ ἐπικρίσεως) everything that was fecund in them (γόνιμον), and if he encountered anything empty (ἀνεμιαῖον), he maintained himself totally separated from it, as something worthy of disdain (ὡς μῶμον)<sup>12</sup>.

Nevertheless, religious cult precedes philosophy chronologically. Rituals and myths exist before philosophy begins its quest for a rational explanation of them. Moreover, the first thing is the rite, ritual action, with myth appearing later, as a narrative representation of the force of the ritual<sup>13</sup>; philosophy only begins once rituals and myths have been developed.

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<sup>10</sup> *In Prm.* VI. 1071.15-1072.13.

<sup>11</sup> Saffrey and Westerink 2003: LXXI-LXXII: “Ainsi, dans la mesure où la théologie comme science a supplanté la théologie symbolique ou mythologique, qui était la théologie traditionnelle depuis les origines de la pensée grecque, on peut dire que cette nouvelle théologie scientifique a opéré une sorte de «démythologisation». Mais il est évident que cette «démythologisation» atteint son achèvement complet, lorsque les dieux du panthéon olympien sont devenus les hénades divines. Lorsque Proclus nous dit que la propriété qui définit la déesse Hestia, c’est «être en soi-même», et celle qui définit la déesse Héra, c’est «être en autre», nous sommes devant un cas de «démythologisation» complète. Mais, parce que Proclus était un génie, il savait garder conjoints l’ordre de la théologie scientifique et celui de la piété populaire qui n’est autre que la dévotion du cœur.”

<sup>12</sup> Marinus, *Vita Procli*, XXII, 16-27.

<sup>13</sup> Trouillard 1977: 23: “Entre mythe et théurgie le rapport est étroit. Le rite est premier, il est le mythe en acte. Quand le mythe s’écarte du rite et devient conscient comme tel, il transforme en représentation une partie de sa force primitive.”

The priority of ritual action is justified, according to Proclus, because the gods have filled the universe with divine symbols, symbols that demonstrate their efficacy in ritual action<sup>14</sup>. Thus, the strongly rationalist character of Proclus's philosophy has clearly-delimited frontiers: prior to philosophy there comes ritual and myth; and where philosophy ends there is, once again, ritual and myth.

## 2. Initiation myths and educational myths

Perhaps one of the greatest surprises on reading Proclus—as opposed to Plato—is his view of the importance of Homer and Hesiod. The reader will be even more surprised when Proclus presents this philosophical rehabilitation as being the true intention of Plato. It is hard to believe that this exegesis of Plato could be correct; I will not, however, enter into this question here. In any case, the 6th dissertation of Proclus's *Commentary on the Republic* represents a systematic attempt to reinterpret Plato's doctrine concerning poets.

Proclus establishes a distinction that is at the centre of his entire exegesis. The Platonic myths, he notes, are of two types: initiatory and educational:

We must distinguish between the two, classifying myths as more philosophical (φιλοσοφωτέρους) and the other sort as more fitting for hieratic customs (τοις ιερατικοις θεσμοις), the former as appropriate for the young to hear, but Homer is appropriate for those who have been correctly guided through, so to speak, the whole of the required education<sup>15</sup>.

That is, according to Proclus, Plato criticized the poets only to the degree that they present myths that are inappropriate for the education of the young, who lack sufficient instruction to understand the hidden message of these myths. The Platonic proposal, then, would consist of creating myths that are “more philosophical,” more rational, which have educational benefit, and which can thus be understood correctly by the youth. The myths of Homer and Hesiod, on the other hand, although they derive from divine inspiration, are nonetheless inappropriate for the education of the young, just as Plato indicated. This is why, according to

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<sup>14</sup> Trouillard 1977: 22: “Cette doctrine implique que, sous certains conditions, l'action va plus loin que la pensée. Proclus l'accueille dans son propre contexte. Puisque la divinité emplit le monde de ses signes et symboles, puisque chacun de ces chiffres est un charge de puissance, leur mise en oeuvre investit le fidèle d'un pouvoir divin, qui doit avant tout le transfigurer lui-même.”

<sup>15</sup> *In R.* VI, 79.13-16.

Proclus, Plato normally expresses his theology in a scientific way, and always uses myths which have an educational character. He only occasionally has recourse to initiation myths, which he recounts in a veiled and enigmatic fashion:

Let us distinguish the modes according to which Plato explains the concepts found in the myths (τά μυστικά νοήματα) concerning divine reality. For it is clear that he does not always teach the divine realities in an identical fashion, but instead will sometimes teach them in a divinely inspired manner (ένθεαστικῶς), while at other times he will develop his teachings about the truth of these realities dialectically (διαλεκτικῶς ἀνελίπτων); again, at times he will teach in a symbolic fashion (συμβολικῶς) about their innately unsayable character (τάς ἀρρήτους αὐτῶν ιδιότητας), yet at other times teaching on the basis of images (ἀπὸ τῶν εἰκόνων) in order to climb towards these divine realities, and discovering in them the primary active causes of the universe<sup>16</sup>.

In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Socrates, possessed by a divine delirium, presents various secret doctrines (ἀπόρρητα δόγματα) concerning the gods, while in the *Sophist* and in the *Parmenides* he speaks in dialectical terms about the One, which transcends all other beings. In the *Symposium* and in the *Protagoras*, on the other hand, he uses a symbolic method (τόν συμβολικόν τρόπον); in this way he only reveals the ineffable divine realities via mere allusions (ψιλλῆς ένδειξεως). Finally, in the *Timaeus* and in the *Statesman* he teaches about the gods by way of images (διὰ τῶν εἰκόνων), that is, through the similarity (δι' ὁμοιότητος) that our world has with the divine realm: for example, the politician is compared to the celestial demiurge, and the divisions of the human soul correspond to the order of the gods, etc<sup>17</sup>. Discourse by way of images is also only allusive (δι' ένδειξεως), as opposed to inspired and scientific discourses, which reveal divine realities openly (ἀπαρακαλύπτως)<sup>18</sup>.

Orpheus, on the other hand, has preferred the use of a symbolic mode (διὰ τῶν συμβόλων), as those who have written myths about the gods have also done. The writer of myths makes use of the symbol in order to express what is unsayable in a narrative modality. Pythagoras, for his part, made use of images, showing how numbers and geometric figures correspond with divine realities. The inspired mode (ένθεαστικῶς) is preferred by those who enjoy the highest rank in the celebration of the mysteries (παρὰ τοῖς ἀκροτάτοις τῶν τελεστῶν); this is especially true

<sup>16</sup> See *Theol. Plat.* 1-4.17.16-24.

<sup>17</sup> See *Theol. Plat.* 1-4.17.25-19.22.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.* 20.2-3.

among the Chaldean theurgists. Finally, the scientific mode (κατ' ἐπιστήμην) is characteristic of the philosophy of Plato<sup>19</sup>.

Platonic attacks on the poets should be understood in this philosophical and educational context. Plato rejected the entirety of the dramaturgy of mythological fictions because he wanted to show, philosophically, how everything in reality—including the gods—is oriented to the good and the beautiful (τοῦ καλοῦ στοχάζεται καὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ), and therefore he rejected everything that distracted or led away from this approach, both the immoral actions attributed to the gods and the images and sensible appearances that seek to represent some kind of similarity with the divine realm. And for the same reason, Plato created certain myths which were in agreement with the habit of philosophy (φιλόσοφον ἕξιτιν οἰκειότερον), redirecting the criminality, irrationality and disorderliness characteristic of the mythical towards order and definition, towards the good and the beautiful<sup>20</sup>.

The imagination plays the role of a nexus between the inspiration received from the gods, on the one hand, and human knowledge, on the other<sup>21</sup>.

There is nothing strange in seeing incorporeal beings bearing a corporeal aspect (τὰ ἀσώματα σωματοειδῆ θεωρεῖν), or to see what is beyond any place as existing in a particular place (ἐν τόπῳ) and having spatial extension (διαστήματι), and to grasp what is beyond movement by means of a movement (διὰ κινήσεως). From time immemorial the theurgists (πάλαι καὶ τῶν θεουργῶν) have taught us that in their self-revelations (τὰς αὐτοφανείας) the gods without form reveal themselves as gifted with form (μεμορφωμένας) and the gods without any figure or shape self-present as having shape and figure (ἔσχηματισμένας), since the simple and immobile apparitions of the god are received by the soul in accordance with its own nature, in a divided way (μεριστῶς); on this basis, and employing imagination (μετὰ φαντασίας), the soul inserts figure and form (σχῆμα καὶ μορφήν) into these spectacles<sup>22</sup>.

The inspired poets receive revelations from the gods and, by way of the imagination, they translate these inspirations into a figurative language. The author of myths communicates these revelations through a temporal and plastic narration. In general, one and the same reality can

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<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.* 20.6-25.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.* 21.3-22.7.

<sup>21</sup> See Trouillard 1977: 40-51.

<sup>22</sup> *In R.* II 241.19-27.

present itself in a different way according to the type of knowledge in question.

Let us rather think that the manner of knowing (τῆς γνώσεως ὁ τρόπος) differs according to the diversity of the knowers. For the very same object is known by God unitarily (ἡνωμένως), by intellect holistically (ὀλικῶς), by reason (λόγος) universally (καθολικῶς), by imagination figuratively (μορφωτικῶς) and by sense-perception passively (παθητικῶς)<sup>23</sup>.

The inspired poet receives the divine inspiration in his imagination, perhaps without understanding its meaning, and may represent his inspirations in the form of myths. The philosopher, via dialectical reason, understands the meaning of the myths in an abstract way, and is able to express them by way of systematic logic: he thus translates the myths, first into opinion and later into rational explanation.<sup>24</sup> The wise man grasps, via intellectual intuition, the unity that structures the divine realities. Finally, only the gods themselves are able know themselves as they are in themselves.

### 3. Myth and the natural order

Nevertheless, as Proclus reminds us, in the *Phaedrus*<sup>25</sup> Plato teaches that one should never mix or confuse myths with physical explanations (τὰς φυσικὰς ἀποδόσεις), since the divine transcends all nature (τὸ θεῖον ἐξήρηται τῆς ὅλης φύσεως). “As a consequence, it is, without a doubt, proper that theological discourses be entirely purified from all issues related to nature (οὕτω δήπου καὶ τοὺς περὶ θεῶν λόγους καθαρεύειν πάντη προσήκει τῆς περὶ τὴν φύσιν πραγματείας)”<sup>26</sup>.

That is to say, although the divine possesses some kind of similarity with the physical world—inasmuch as it is the cause of the latter—, nevertheless there is always something in the divine realities that is beyond the natural order, and which lacks any similarity with the natural order. Thus, in the mythological narrations there are always hidden meanings that are holier (σεμνοτέρας) than the superficial meaning<sup>27</sup>. In part, the divine has a certain similitude with the order of our natural world, and in part it is completely foreign to that natural order. Therefore the

<sup>23</sup> *In Ti.* II 352.15-19.

<sup>24</sup> See *In Cra.* 67.24-68.9.

<sup>25</sup> See Pl. *Phdr.* 229b4-230a6.

<sup>26</sup> *Theol. Plat.* I-4.22.11-17.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.* 23.1-3.

approach to the divine can be achieved in these two modalities: either showing the relation of the divine with the natural order, or else alluding to that divine realm which does not belong to the order of nature<sup>28</sup> (and which, in the eyes of the young inquirers, can appear to be irrational or even scandalous).

It must be kept in mind that, according to Proclus, in any principle (and therefore, in all the gods) there is something that is absolutely impossible to participate in. That is, the being of the cause—insofar as it does indeed cause anything—is in its effects; but there is something of the being of the cause—insofar as it is not a cause—that exists independently of causal activity. To put it another way, the cause does not pour all of its being into its effects, but rather only its being *qua* cause. In this sense Proclus always distinguishes three different aspects of a principle: in itself the principle cannot be shared (τὸ ἀμέθεκτον), that is, there is something of the principle that is not open to participation; second, there is something in the principle which is open to participation (τὸ μετεχόμενον) by all those individuals who participate in it; third, there is the participant (τὸ μετέχον), who participates in a particular manner (different in each individual) in the process of participation<sup>29</sup>.

When this doctrine is applied to the gods, it implies that there is something in the gods that cannot be shared and which will always remain beyond the physical world and the human order. We humans can elevate ourselves—thanks to philosophy—towards the universal that is participated in by the entire natural world. But in order to refer to that aspect of the gods that cannot be participated in, we must abandon the similarities that always exist between cause and effect, and instead we must have recourse to theurgy.

More concretely, any reference to the One in itself—insofar as it something in which participation is not possible—implies not only abandoning the order of nature, but also the intelligible order, since there are aspects of the One that cannot be reduced to intelligibility. It is not only that human intelligence is limited and unable to achieve the understanding of the One (which is certain), but in addition there is the fact that the One in itself includes characteristics that are distinct from intelligibility, which can appear to human eyes as either absurd or illogical.

This is evident when we turn to Matter, which is caused directly by the One. That is, the One is not only the cause of intelligibility; rather, it is also the cause of Matter, which in itself is not intelligible. Matter presents

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<sup>28</sup> See Trouillard 1982: 119-142.

<sup>29</sup> See *Inst.* 24.

certain irrational and disordered traits, which are also caused by the One. The One is more than intelligibility. And in a similar manner, Intelligence is not the cause of the beings of the mineral and plant kingdom, nor of the kingdom of irrational animals, to the degree that they are neither intelligible nor intelligent, but rather they depend directly on the causality of the One. Speaking paradoxically, in the One there is something of matter, of stone, of plants and of irrational animal life, which is irreducible to intelligence.

In this way, Proclus justifies the fact that in the stories about the gods scandalous behaviour may appear, these being contrary to the natural order and rationality of virtue. The issue is not that Proclus approves of such behaviour, but rather that he believes that—in a way which is clearly opposed to virtue and reason—one can come to glimpse the transcendence of the gods with regard to the order of human nature.

#### 4. One, Night and Time

The philosophy of Proclus connects directly with mystery religions, insofar as his entire doctrine culminates in a One that is hidden, unknowable and ineffable, and which can only be approached by means of a certain initiation process.

Not every class of gods, however, is nameable. For Parmenides too had reminded us that He who is beyond the things as a whole is ineffable. Indeed, there are neither names of him, he says, nor any speech (Parm. 142A2). Of the intelligible gods the foremost genera, which are both united to the One itself and are called occult, have a high degree of unknowability and ineffability<sup>30</sup>.

Therefore—and in accordance with the tradition inaugurated by Iamblichus—access to the One and to the gods requires an initiation process. Proclus himself

had received these teachings, had learned the invocations and their various uses (τὰς ἐκφωνήσεις καὶ τὴν ἄλλην χρῆσιν) from Asclepigenia, the daughter of Plutarch; for in her, and only in her, were conserved—handed down from the epoch of the great Nestorius—the mysteries and the entire theurgic doctrine (ὄργια καὶ ἡ σύμπασα θεουργικὴ ἀγωγή) that were transmitted to her thanks to the mediation of her father<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup>*In Cra.* 32.18-23.

<sup>31</sup>Marinus, *Vita Procli*, 28.10-15.

The Orphic Night<sup>32</sup> represents this concealment of the One.<sup>33</sup> And it represents the One insofar as it precedes thought. From the Night there proceeds both the intelligible world of the gods and the irrationality of Matter. The origin is not clarity of thought but rather the darkness of the Night. Matter, *per se*, is not intelligible, and has as its single cause the multiplicative infinitude of the One. The infinity of number in the material world reveals the incommensurability of the infinitude of the One<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> See Bernabé 2003. Two ancient traditions about the coming to be of the cosmos can be distinguished in Orphism: “La primera es una tradición cosmogónica que presenta en el origen a la Noche y en la que el origen de las cosas se sitúa en una suerte de disociación de lo uno originario seguida de una segunda fase de reproducción sexual de las parejas divinas primordiales. No se recurre al modelo del huevo como origen del cosmos ni interviene en ellas el Tiempo. Las denominaremos convencionalmente «cosmogonías de la Noche». [...] La segunda es una tradición caracterizada porque uno de sus episodios más importantes es la configuración de un huevo del que surge un ser que da origen a los demás. [...] También aparece como ser primordial el Tiempo, bien por influjo de Ferécides, bien de las cosmologías iránias. Las *Rapsodias*, al extremo de esta tradición, representan un esfuerzo por vertebrar en un solo relato ambas tradiciones” (23-24). In any case, there are three Nights in the *Rhapsodies*, the first of which is that which corresponds to the One: “Hay tres noches distintas en las *Rapsodias*, una primera, la Noche cósmica [...], una segunda, hija de Fanes, y una tercera, nacida en la recreación del mundo por parte de Zeus” (*ibid.* p.123). “La calificación de «nodriza de los dioses» aplicada a la Noche se debe a que de ella proceden todas las demás divinidades y porque será luego quien alimente a algunos de los primeros dioses” (*ibid.* p.118). In addition, “la Noche es profética porque, como divinidad primordial, tiene conocimiento de todo cuanto ha de venir” (*ibid.* p.118). “Parece que a esa especie de materia indefinida primordial el poema la llamaba poéticamente, «Tinieblas», «Niebla tenebrosa» y «Noche», insistiendo en su carácter oscuro e indefinido” (*ibid.* pp.113-114). A synthesis of the argument of the *Rhapsodies* can be found in Bernabé 2008: 312-322.

<sup>33</sup> See Trouillard 1977: 12: “Si la Nuit reçoit des demeures diverses dans les diverses théogonies, chez Proclus elle prend une importance décisive, puisqu’elle est la puissance conseillère (κατὰ τῆς ὑποθήκας τῆς Νυκτός) (*In Ti.* I.314.25; 315.12-13) qui donne aux dieux supérieurs les normes de leur causalité cachée ou encore la puissance maternelle qui permet à l’intelligible d’engendrer les ordres subordonnés. Elle est comparable au cratère dont use le Demiurge pour la formation de l’Univers (*In Ti.* III.168.15-170.13). Elle est dite «la nourrice immortelle des dieux (θεῶν τροφὸς ἀμβροσίη)» (*In Crat.* 92.11).” Cf. also *ibid.* p.14: “La théologie de Proclus est intégralement nocturne. Elle s’écarte des doctrines qui accueillent la voie négative pour corriger l’insuffisance de la pensée humaine ou finie, mais non de la pensée comme telle”.

<sup>34</sup> Trouillard 1977: 13.

The disorder and chaos that reveal themselves in Matter also have their origin in the One:

Hesiod honours many subjects with silence and does not name the First Principle at all. But that which comes after the First proceeded from something else, he shows in these words: ‘Then verily first of all Chaos was generated’ (*Theogony* 116) - it is impossible, after all, for anything to have generation without a cause. He does not say, however, who is the Institutor of Chaos (ὁ ὑποστάτης τοῦ Χάους), and is silent about both Fathers of the Intelligibles—the transcendent as well as the coordinate one (τὸν τε ἐξηρημενον καὶ τὸν συντεταγμένον)—for they are entirely ineffable<sup>35</sup>.

It is not possible for intelligence to recognize the origin of chaos and infinity. Only through instruction in the mysteries do we become able to approach the One, which is the cause both of the infinity of chaos as well as of the limit of the intelligible.

Socrates now (*Crat.* 396c) thinks fit to mention that Hesiod has by-passed the entities prior to Uranus as being ineffable. Indeed, even the [Chaldean] Oracles (τὰ λόγια) made mention of these entities as being ineffable (fr. 191), and added the words ‘hold your peace, initiate’ (σῆγ’ ἔχε, μύστα) (fr. 132). Moreover, in the *Phaedrus* (250c) Plato has himself termed the contemplation of those entities ‘initiation’ (μύησιν) and ‘revelation’ (ἐποπτεῖαν), the entities in whom much and nearly all the work is ineffable and unknowable<sup>36</sup>.

In the *Rhapsodies*—in contrast with other Orphic theogonies—Time (Χρόνος) appears as the first cause. Proclus holds that the priority of time is justified by the narrative character of the myths. Mythic narration recounts in a temporal form that which in itself is not temporal. The genealogical succession of the gods is the mythic means for presenting those causal links that are independent of time. To the degree that time precedes all narration, it is, to that same degree, ineffable from within the narration.

Orpheus (fr. 68) has taken much advantage of the licence allowed to myths (τῆς τῶν μύθων ἐξουσίας) and has assigned names to all the entities prior to Heaven all the way up to the First Cause. That which is ineffable itself and has proceeded forth from the intelligible henads (τῶν νοητῶν ἐνάδων ἐκβεβηκός) he calls ‘Time’ (Χρόνον), either because it is a pre-existing cause of all generations or [because] he is portraying the things that really

<sup>35</sup> *In Cra.* 67.7-14.

<sup>36</sup> *In Cra.* 67.17-23.

exist as being generated in order to show their organization and the primacy of the more universal entities in relation to the more particular, and so that temporal succession should be identified with causal succession (ἵνα ἢ ταῦτόν τὸ κατὰ χρόνον τῷ κατ'αἰτίαν), just as generation is identified with ordered procession<sup>37</sup>.

## 5. Opposition and Unification

The One manifests itself as Limit and as Infinity. From the One there proceeds both the clarity of the Limit as well as the darkness of Infinity:

But even as regards the successions of the two corresponding orders (ἐν τοῖς ἐφεξῆς τῶν δύο συστοιχιῶν), Hesiod transmits without comment (σιωπῆ) those corresponding with the One, and reveals by genealogy only those corresponding with the Indefinite Dyad (τὰ δὲ τῆ ἀορίστῳ δυάδι μόνα)<sup>38</sup>.

Limit and Infinity are the two principles that primarily manifest the One.

In the first place there is God (ὁ θεός), which manifests the two principles (ὁ τὰς δύο ἐκφαίνων ἀρχάς); after God, there are two principles, the Limit and the Infinite (τὸ πέρασ καὶ ἄπειρον); and in fourth place there is the Mixed (τὸ μικτόν)<sup>39</sup>.

This primal opposition between Limit and Infinite is present in all the real.

If beings are constituted by limit and infinitude, it is evident that these principles exist (ὑφεστήκασι) before beings; for if beings participate (μετείληφεν) in these principles as mixed, then these principles pre-exist (προὑπαρχουσιν) without mixture prior to all beings<sup>40</sup>.

All reality—including the gods—is composed of both opposed principles.

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<sup>37</sup> *In Cra.* 66.28-67.7.

<sup>38</sup> *In Cra.* 67.14-17.

<sup>39</sup> *Theol. Plat.* III-9.36.26-28. Cf. *Phlb.* 23c-d.

<sup>40</sup> *Theol. Plat.* III-8.30.23-26. Cf. also III-10.42.5-8 and 13-18.

Every order of gods (πᾶσα τάξις θεῶν) is derived from the two initial principles, Limit and Infinity (πέρατος καὶ ἀπειρία); but some manifest predominantly the causality of Limit, others that of Infinity<sup>41</sup>.

The entirety of reality proceeds from the One through divisions and oppositions, which express this primal opposition between Limit and Infinitude. The myth expresses such oppositions via conflict, war, betrayal, etc. All the orders of gods proceed from these two principles, and—according to Proclus—Plato has taken on the Greek theological tradition, in particular Orphism and Pythagorism<sup>42</sup>. The origin of all things in the Ether and in Chaos, as well as the opposition between the Olympic gods and the Titans, corresponds to the division into two columns, characteristic of the Pythagorean tradition, and to the indications of Philolaus and of the *Philebus* concerning the Limit and the Unlimited<sup>43</sup>. One can interpret in the same way the confrontation between the Athenians and the inhabitants of Atlantis<sup>44</sup>.

The imagination anthropomorphizes and temporalizes the essential opposition in all reality, including the divine realities. In turn, the opposition internal to everything is unified, and exists precisely as a being, with its own unity. This unification of opposition is incarnated first by Athena, who is simultaneously the god of science and of war. And myth also alludes to this via sexual union, dialogue, pacts, etc. The myth makes palatable to the mind the divine realities that completely transcend its capacity. The god, who is outside time and lacks any figure, thus appears wrapped in complex and dramatic narrations. Similarly, the genealogy of the gods reproduces—in the manner of a human history—the causal procession from the One and from the henads.

The human being—the human soul, in particular—has a special capacity for discovering and presenting the totality of the real from the One to Matter, because it occupies a middle place within the totality of the real, and because it integrates—in human fashion—the diverse levels of the real. Certainly “all things are in all things, but in each according to its proper nature”<sup>45</sup>, because the human being integrates and is able to receive the totality of the real in a special manner. I have already indicated how Intelligence is the cause of rational beings alone, and not the beings that lack reason. In a similarly way, Life is the cause of that which has life, but

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<sup>41</sup> *Inst.* 159.

<sup>42</sup> See *Theol. Plat.* III-8.15-18.

<sup>43</sup> See *In Ti.* I.174.12-22 and 176.10-177.2.

<sup>44</sup> See *In Ti.* 171.25ff. Cf. H.D. Saffrey and Westerink 2003: 120, note 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Inst.* 103.

not of the inert. And not even Being is the cause of all that is real; Matter in fact—*qua* non-being—remains outside of the causality of Being. Nevertheless, human beings include within themselves all the grades of the real, such that they can refer to all of them, as opposed to other degrees of being, including those which are superior.

As is often repeated in the Platonic tradition, the human being is a microcosmos; and can reproduce—in human fashion—all of the links that exist between the gods and the material world. The human being is able to establish links between the most extreme oppositions. That is, he or she can formulate some kind of link even between the One and Matter, as well as between the gods and material realities. Everything is connected with everything, even when it is very difficult for the human person to indicate what the relationships between some realities and others are. Therefore, it is understandable that the inspired poets and the authors of myths would characterize the gods and their relationships by way of anthropomorphic, emotional and material representations, at times even including descriptions of monsters, brutality, violence and scandalous behaviour. The most extreme antitheses have a heuristic value, because they represent, in some sense, the highest by means of the lowest. In this way, that which exceeds intelligibility, and which the reason is unable to comprehend, is made accessible by myth.

## 6. Henads and series

After the One, the first realities or divinities are the henads, which Proclus defines as the first determinations of unity, that is, as the first plurality of unities. “If a plurality of gods (πλήθος θεῶν) exist they must have the character of unity. But it is evident that such a plurality exists, inasmuch as every originating cause introduces its proper manifold (οἰκείου πλήθους)”<sup>46</sup>. These are close to the One, but already constitute the first existing plurality. The henads are gods: “Every god is a self-complete henad or unit (πᾶς θεὸς ἑνὰς ἐστὶν αὐτοτελής), and every self-complete henad is a god”<sup>47</sup>.

The henads or gods are above intelligible beings. That is, the gods share in the transcendence of the One: “Every god is above Being, above Life, and above Intelligence”<sup>48</sup>, although they differ from the One by being something in which it is possible to participate, whereas this is

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<sup>46</sup> *Inst.* 113.

<sup>47</sup> *Inst.* 114.

<sup>48</sup> *Inst.* 115.

absolutely not the case with the One<sup>49</sup>. To participate in a god means to be measured by that god: “every manifold of existent things is measured by the divine henads”<sup>50</sup>.

The activity that is proper to the gods is their providence (πρόνοια) concerning all beings, that is, giving them goodness and unity. The providence of the gods is prior to intelligence. It is not the case that the gods first understand and only later distribute good things, but rather the complete opposite: first they distribute goods and later they understand. “Providence resides primitively in the gods. For indeed, where should an activity prior to Intelligence be found, if not in the principles above Being? And providence, as its name (πρόνοια) shows, is an activity (ἐνέργεια) prior to Intelligence (πρὸ νοῦ)”<sup>51</sup>.

The gods, in any case, are linked to each other with especially strong links, because the union of their plurality results in a unity that is very close to the unity of the One. This unity of order among the gods is articulated via middle terms that establish the continuity and dependency between certain gods and others: “All orders of gods are bound together by mean terms”<sup>52</sup>. On the basis of the first genera of gods there arise other realities that are also divinized: “The sequence of principles which participate the divine henads extends from Being to the bodily nature, since Being is the first and the body (inasmuch as we speak of heavenly or divine bodies) the last participant”<sup>53</sup>. That is, Being, Life, the various intelligible and intellective orders, the divine souls and even divine bodies all participate—to greater or lesser degree—in the properties of the gods *qua* gods.

Nevertheless, the power of the gods extends to the ultimate material reality. Nothing remains beyond divine causality and providence. “All the powers of the gods, taking their origin above and proceeding through the appropriate intermediaries, descend even to the last existents and the terrestrial regions”<sup>54</sup>; “The gods are present alike to all things”<sup>55</sup>. In this way, the gods are in part knowable and in part not. “All those henads which illuminate true Being are secret and intelligible: secret as conjoined with the One, intelligible as participated by Being”<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> See *Inst.* 116.

<sup>50</sup> *Inst.* 117.

<sup>51</sup> *Inst.* 120.

<sup>52</sup> *Inst.* 132.

<sup>53</sup> *Inst.* 139.

<sup>54</sup> *Inst.* 140.

<sup>55</sup> *Inst.* 142.

<sup>56</sup> *Inst.* 162.

Beginning with each one of these first gods there arises a series or chain (σειρά)<sup>57</sup>: “Every order (τάξις) has its beginning in a monad and proceeds to a manifold co-ordinate therewith; and the manifold in any order may be carried back to a single monad”<sup>58</sup>. All that is real is structured into series that proceed from the first unities. Each series, therefore, constitutes a unity, insofar as all the beings of the chain are united to the henad.

The entire chain or series is marked by the imprint of the corresponding god. “The originative cause of each series communicates its distinctive property (τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ιδιότητος) to the entire series”<sup>59</sup>. That is, each being, each stone, each animal, each individual, each region of the cosmos... belongs to one of these series and brings with it the character of that god. Their properties, their power, depend on the character and strength of the god, and, in the final analysis, on the One<sup>60</sup>.

Thus, all things are full of gods: Things on earth are full of heavenly gods; things in heaven are full of supercelestials; and each chain continues abounding as far as its final members (πρόεισιν ἐκάστη πληθυομένη σειρά μέχρι τῶν ἐσχάτων). For what is in the One-before-all makes its appearance in all, in which are also found communications between souls set beneath one god or another<sup>61</sup>.

## 7. Symbols

Any given reality can be considered in very diverse ways: as the effect of a cause, as participation in a paradigm, as the image of a model, as the manifestation of a hidden principle, etc. But it can also be considered as a symbol (σύμβολον), a sign (σύνημα), which represents that which it signifies. The effect, in a manner of speaking, signifies and symbolizes the cause. Concretely, every reality is a symbol of a god: an indicator, a sign of the god.

The symbols are indicators that are given—presented, donated—by a god to each being of the series that is ruled by that god. And in the final analysis, they are signs that the One presents to every reality. Proclus emphasizes that the imprint of god in every reality—the symbol—is not something that is added to a being, but rather that it is the very ground of

<sup>57</sup> Proclus states that he himself belongs to the chain of Hermes: see Marinus, *Vita Procli* 28.34-35.

<sup>58</sup> *Inst.* 21.

<sup>59</sup> *Inst.* 97.

<sup>60</sup> See *Inst.* 100.

<sup>61</sup> *De sacrificio* 40-43.

its reality. It is not the case that something is real and, in addition, signifies; rather, it is real insofar as it signifies: it is real insofar as it is a divine symbol. And in particular, it is real to the degree that it is a symbol of a god and of the One, i.e. to the degree to which the god is causing that reality. The symbolic character of something is its reality.

The divine symbols are not merely names or merely intelligible meanings, but rather they are the force or power corresponding rightly to each thing. This potency corresponding to the symbol depends on nothing other than the god, and therefore it does not act through human volition but by its own divine reality<sup>62</sup>. The unintelligibility or intelligibility of the symbols is irrelevant. Its efficacy does not depend on whether we understand or whether we give consent.

Among the many symbols, one case of particular importance for the theurgist is that of the names of the gods, to the degree that these names are employed in sacred actions (invocations, consecrations...). In commenting on Plato's *Cratylus*, Proclus says that the position of Socrates is intermediate between that of Cratylus and Hermogenes. That is to say, Proclus holds that the names are in part conventional (θέσει) and in part by nature (φύσει). But it is of interest to Proclus to emphasize that there are names that belong by nature to each god. And when we humans do not know these divine names, we turn to convention. The gods have revealed, and continue to reveal, their names, but to recognize them is a difficult task, one for which the theurgists are responsible. As with all symbols, there is a force and an efficacy imprinted on the materiality of each natural name. The power of each divine name can even be transmitted to material realities, for example, to a consecrated statue or to stones and plants. This would explain why specific objects can perform miraculous actions, such as curing illnesses.

Proclus distinguishes the symbol from the copy. The symbol does not express analogies between the divine and the material. The notion of symbol remains very distant from the Platonic notions of image, copy and imitation, etc.

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, II.1.96.13-97.2: "It is not the act of thinking (ἡ ἔννοια) which unites the theurgists to the gods. For what would impede those who philosophize in a theoretical manner from attaining theurgic union with the gods? Rather, the truth is different: it is the performance of ineffable actions (τῶν ἔργων τῶν ἀρρήτων) that go beyond all intellection, and exercised in a manner that is appropriate to the gods (θεοπρεπῶς), as well as the power of mute symbols (συμβόλων ἀφθέκτων), understood only by the gods, that make the theurgic union become a reality".

For symbols (σύμβολα) are not imitations (μιμήματα) of those things they symbolize. Things could never be imitations of their opposites (good imitating bad, natural imitating unnatural), but the symbolic mode (ἡ δὲ συμβολικὴ θεωρία) indicates the nature of things even by means of their complete opposites (διὰ τῶν ἐναντιωτάτων). Therefore, if a poet is inspired and reveals to us through symbols (διὰ τῶν συνθημάτων) the truth about the things that are, or if he uses systematic knowledge to reveal to us the order of things, this poet is not an imitator and cannot be found wanting by the arguments we are discussing<sup>63</sup>.

Symbols are signs of the gods insofar as it is not possible to participate in the gods, and therefore they signify the gods in that divine reality that is similar neither to intelligible, nor to the human or to the natural.

Of the cause, however, which is ineffable and beyond the intelligible realm, everything that exists even down to the lowest region possesses a sign (σύνθημα), through which all things are attached (ἀνέρτηνται) to that cause—some further away, some closer, according to the distinctness and the obscurity of the sign (συνθήματος) in them. And this is what moves everything to the longing for the Good (τοῦτό ἐστὶν τὸ πάντα κινῶν εἰς τὸν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ πόθον) and presents beings with this desire which cannot be quenched (ἄσβεστον τὸν ἔρωτα). While the sign is unknowable (for it has come down even to those who are unable to know it), it is greater than life (for it is present even to things without souls) and does not have the power of intellect (for it is innate in objects not endowed with thinking)<sup>64</sup>.

The symbol of the One or of the henads is not something intelligible. It is prior to all logic. It is unknowable in itself, because it precedes knowledge. But it exercises its power on any reality, since it is the cause of the good and of the desire for the good in that reality. Therefore, the symbol is the cause of the conversion (ἐπιστροφή). The desire for unity and for the good that exists in everything real depends directly on the symbol of the One in each thing.

The same thing happens in the human soul: we seek to unify the diversity of our actions and representations because there is a desire for unity in us. That desire for unity—which moves dialectical reasoning, for example, to unify oppositions—proceeds from the symbol of the One in us. Human thought displays itself on the basis of the desire for unification inscribed in “the one in us,” which is precisely the symbol of the One.

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<sup>63</sup> *In R.* VI.198.15-24.

<sup>64</sup> *In Cra.* 30.19-29.

Thus, just as Nature, the demiurgic Monad, and the absolute Father who is removed from all things (πάντων ἐξηρημένος πατήρ) sowed signs of their proper identity (τῆς οικείας συνθήματα) in beings subsequent to them, and through these signs turn everything back to themselves (καὶ δι' ἐκείνων ἐπιστρέφουσι πάντα πρὸς ἑαυτούς), so too do all the gods instil in the entities produced from themselves symbols (σύμβολα) of their cause, and through these they set (ἐδράζουσι) all creatures in themselves. Therefore, the signs of the existence of the higher beings which are sown into subsequent ones (τὰ μὲν οὖν τῆς ὑπάρξεως τῶν ὑπερτέρων ἐνσπειρόμενα τοῖς δευτέροις συνθήματα) are ineffable and unknowable, and their active and kinetic force surpasses all intellection (καὶ τὸ δραστήριον αὐτῶν καὶ κινήτικὸν ὑπεραίρει πᾶσαν νόησιν)<sup>65</sup>.

All the gods provide symbols of themselves to each reality, especially to the beings that belong to their chain. And these symbols of the gods, in a way that is similar to the symbols of the One, are unknowable. These symbols are, in addition, active: on the one hand, they are the foundation of every reality, i.e. a being constitutes itself as such a being on the basis of the force of these divine symbols; on the other hand, the power of the symbol is the cause of the return (ἐπιστροφή) towards the gods and towards the One. That is to say, the force for the self-constitution of a being, as well as the strength to seek unity, resides in the divine symbols.

Such, then, are the characteristics of the light through which the gods appear to their own spring [...] and reach us in a particular and shaped mode (μεριστῶς δὲ καὶ μορφωτικῶς). [...] Such are the so-called symbols of the gods. They are uniform in the superior orders, but multiform in the inferior. Imitating these symbols, theurgy too produces them through uttered, though inarticulate, expressions<sup>66</sup>.

The human being, like any other reality, subsists on the basis of a divine symbol, which Proclus calls the “one of the soul,” the “one in us,” the “flower of the soul.” And insofar as human beings occupy an intermediate place in the totality of the real, they include within themselves the symbolic diversity of the real. The soul is all things, but not just all the intellectual forms; rather, it is also all the symbols.

The soul is constituted from intellectual reasons and divine symbols (συνέστηκε γὰρ ἡ ψυχὴ ἀπὸ τῶν ἱερῶν λόγων καὶ τῶν θεῶν συμβόλων), of which the former proceed from the intellectual species, but the latter from the divine unities: and we are images of the intellectual essences

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<sup>65</sup> *In Cra.* 30.29-31.8.

<sup>66</sup> *In Cra.* 31.8-28.

(ἐσμὲν εἰκόνες μὲν τῶν νοερῶν οὐσιῶν), but statues of the unknown symbols (ἀγάλματα δὲ τῶν ἀγνώστων συνθημάτων). And just as every soul is a fullness of forms (πλήρωμα τῶν εἰδῶν), but subsists wholly or simply according to one cause, thus also it indeed participates in all symbols (πάντων μὲν μετέχει τῶν συνθεμάτων), through which it is united to divine things (τῷ θεῷ)<sup>67</sup>.

Among men, it corresponds to the theurgists, and especially to the priestly authorities (οἱ τῆς ἱερατικῆς ἡγεμόνες)<sup>68</sup> to recognize the divine symbols in the material realities, until the priestly science is reached (τὴν ἐπιστήμην τὴν ἱερατικὴν)<sup>69</sup>, which will permit them to perform the initiations (τελεταῖς) with knowledge of the appropriate symbols (εἰς τὴν τῶν οἰκείων συμβόλων ἐπίνοιαν)<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> *Phil.Chal.* v.211.21-212.2.

<sup>68</sup> See *De sacrificio* 61.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* 4.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.* 78-84.

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