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Abstract

Since early studies of allegory by Buffière and Pépin, and J. Coulter's groundbreaking work on the Neoplatonists, a number of important studies have been published on Neoplatonic literary theory, including those by A. Sheppard, R. Lambertson, and J. Whitman.¹ Oiva Kuisma has produced a further contribution to this growing area of study.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Classical Literature and Philology | Classics | Cultural History

Aëtius. This choice was made complicated not only by the gross differences between the intellectually complex style of Theophrastus and the telegraphic reports characteristic of Diels' Aëtius, but more mundanely by the fact that Aëtius had a lot to say about philosophy in the first two centuries after Theophrastus' death. And so Diels postulated an intermediate source for Aëtius, the *Vetusta Placita*, which incorporated much material on Hellenistic philosophy. In the present volume M. and R. have little to say about Aëtius' predecessors, and in their stemma (p. 328) they refer only to the "anterior tradition." But what they do say and what they have said elsewhere indicates that they will give us a much richer account than Diels offered, one in which Aristotle, and perhaps Hippias of Elis and Plato, will play a much more prominent role than they did in the prolegomena, and the intellectual point of collecting opinions will be much more stressed. It is not clear at this point whether the third volume will try to do for Aëtius what this one tried to do for his "successors" and "neighbors," namely construct a stemma. I, for one, hope not. Much work remains to be done on the doxographical tradition and its intellectual impact, but this book leaves me with the feeling that it will not be done best by focusing on the necessarily hypothetical reconstruction of a lost work or lost works. The focus seems to me better placed on the works we do have, including collections of fragments, their place and time, and, where reasonably clear, their interrelationships. M. and R. have provided a rich supply of information and suggestions for undertakings of this kind. But, although they criticize a number of post-*Dox. Graec.* editors for uncritical acceptance of Diels' Aëtius, they also criticize the two twentieth-century editors of the Plutarchan epitome for producing a text based almost exclusively on the manuscript tradition and failing to "diligently record all significant variants of the entire tradition, both direct and indirect, so that P's [the epitome's] tradition is at least present in the edition, even if it is impossible to place it all in the text" (p. 181). No doubt such an enormous undertaking would be a very useful tool for research, but my inclination is to think that the proper starting point for reconstructing the doxographical tradition is sound editions of individual texts based on the manuscripts for those texts and produced independently of elaborate theories of derivation, interpolation, and authorial or scribal error.

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Proclus' Defense of Homer. By OIVA KUISMA. *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum*, 109. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1996. Pp. 157.

Since early studies of allegory by Buffière and Pépin, and J. Coulter's groundbreaking work on the Neoplatonists, a number of important studies have been published on Neoplatonic literary theory, including those by A. Sheppard, R. Lambertson, and J. Whitman.¹ Oiva Kuisma has produced a further contribution to this growing area of study.

1. F. Buffière, *Les Mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque* (Paris, 1956); J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie* (Paris, 1958); J. A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists*, *Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition*, vol. 2 (Leiden, 1976); A. D. R. Sheppard, *Essays on the 5th and 6th Books of Proclus' "Commentary on the Republic," Hypomnemata 61* (Göttingen, 1980); R. Lambertson, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley, 1986); J. Whitman, *Allegory: the Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge, MA, 1987).

The importance of Neoplatonic thought has been well established for over a generation. Plotinus' stunning remaking of the ancient thought-world has been granted the prominent place it deserves in general treatments of classical philosophy.² We can only hope that general surveys of classical literary commentary will likewise take account of the findings made in the last twenty years by the likes of Coulter, Sheppard, Lamberton, and now K., and accord the Neoplatonists their place as pivotal thinkers in the history of reading. A few stumbling blocks remain in the way of such a development. First, the most important Neoplatonic literary thinking is not done by Plotinus. It is done rather by his followers, especially Proclus, whose work is oftentimes dry and "scholastic" and occupied with numbingly fine questions of ontology. Their work is not as widely translated or studied as that of Plotinus (who certainly deserves the lion's share of the generalist's attention).³ Second, and perhaps more important, there is a resistance, sometimes a strong resistance, to considering the kind of reading that the Neoplatonists do (allegorical commentary) alongside the other approaches to ancient reading that are customarily treated under the heading of literary criticism. The Neoplatonists, along with the other allegorists, are sometimes seen as only "using" poetry to pursue their own agendas in philosophy or religion.⁴ While it is surely the case that the Neoplatonists approach a literary text with philosophical issues and agendas in mind, it seems odd to remove them on these grounds from our most general considerations of ancient approaches to the task of reading imaginative literature. By the same rule we might exclude Dionysius of Halicarnassus or Quintilian as only "using" the poets to elucidate their primary interest, rhetoric. This view also neglects the many allegorists, including Crates, Heraclitus the allegorist, Pseudo-Plutarch, and many anonymous scholiasts, who belong to no identifiable "school" of philosophical or religious thought, and apparently have no particular philosophical or religious ax to grind. Nevertheless, one hopes that historians of criticism need not select their material on the basis of whether an ancient reader reads according to some modern definition of accuracy. Finally, following on the previous point, the Neoplatonists are sometimes said not to be interested in the literary text as a specifically *literary* text. This may be true if one defines "literariness" in the way, say, Aristotle did. But readers have never reached general agreement over how one should define such a thing; if they had, we would not have competing schools of literary theory. Surprisingly, considering the pervasiveness of the opposing view, many (one could even say most) of the allegorists give genuine

2. The work of A. H. Armstrong is most important in this regard. See, for example, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (New York, 1967), 195–269, where Plotinus is the only individual figure accorded a full "part" in the eight-part volume on the period.

3. Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic*, which contains the most thorough surviving statements of Neoplatonic literary theory, awaits a published translation. Porphyry's short essay *On the Cave of the Nymphs* is an exception to the rule, and has been widely disseminated, with a few breaks, since the Renaissance. The most recent translation was produced by Lamberton (Barrytown, NY, 1983).

4. This view is pervasive. See, for example, G. Kennedy, *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, *Classical Criticism* (New York, 1989), 86, where allegory is cast as a "tool" of philosophical and religious rhetoric; D. A. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1981), 42, where the Stoic allegorists are said to "use" poetry as a propaedeutic for philosophy, and 95, where allegory is said to "have to do more with the history of religion and ethics than with that of literary criticism"; G. M. A. Grube, *The Greek and Roman Critics* (Cambridge, 1968), 55–56, where the allegorists are said to "use" the poets as authorities "for their own ideas"; and finally, M. B. Trapp, "Allegory," *OCD*³ (1997), 64.

care and attention to what (by their own lights) are the unique properties of fictive literature.⁵

If we broaden our most general accounts of the history of criticism to include the Neoplatonists and earlier allegorists like the Derveni commentator, Chrysippus, Cornutus, Heraclitus, and Pseudo-Plutarch, we would disprove certain truisms that still linger around the field, such as that classical readers are interested primarily in analyzing the effect of a poem on an audience, emphasize formalist and stylistic approaches, produce a criticism that focuses on composition, and generally use tools and methods that were developed for the analysis of public speeches.⁶ Such a move would balance the Aristotelian and rhetorical emphases that have guided the important work done in the field in the last few decades.⁷ The Neoplatonists, and earlier allegorists, show us that not only rhetoric but also other areas of knowledge, like philosophy, divination, theology, and magic, informed ancient approaches to the task of reading a literary text. Until such time as their work is situated in the broader contexts of classical literary commentary, the Neoplatonists will remain something of an exotic curiosity, and K. situates the material this way.

Proclus (410/12–485 C.E.), the last of the great Neoplatonists, produced the school's most detailed and ambitious theories and interpretations of poetry. In the course of his literary thinking, he entered the nettlesome problem of Plato's charges against Homer and, like a number of critics before and after him, he tried to reconcile the two. K. chooses this as the point of entry into a wider consideration of Proclus' contributions to ancient criticism.

K. rightly places the category of the symbol at the center of Proclus' thinking on literature, and in the first chapter examines the background for Neoplatonic symbolism. After a brief treatment of the Pythagorean contributions to the Neoplatonists' symbol, K. finds the roots of the "symbolic" mode of thinking within Plato's philosophy. Plato's theory of ideas, his critical attitude toward written language, and his use of myths in the dialogues, K. claims, nurture a philosophy of the unseen, where one is obliged by the inadequacies of language to resort to reasoning by analogy, and where real truth lies in a realm that cannot be fully captured in mundane things, but lies always just beyond them. While it is certainly true that these features of Plato's thinking encourage a certain figurative stance toward the world by suggesting that the things we see are only reflections and shadows of hidden realities that underlie them, this leaves us a good deal short of the conception of the "symbolic" as the

5. Commentators as various in their skills, motivations, and approaches as the Derveni commentator (c. 400 B.C.E.), Cleanthes (331–233 B.C.E.), Cornutus (first century C.E.), Pseudo-Plutarch (first century C.E.), Porphyry (234–c. 305), and Proclus (410/12–485 C.E.) repeat a more or less consistent view that great literature's defining property is an extreme density of meaning, often derived from divine inspiration (at several removes in the case of Cornutus), which makes it uniquely able to convey the most profound truths the universe has to offer, about the cosmos, the gods, and the nature of human beings. They develop their diverse strategies of reading from this generally consistent theoretical starting point. In my view, this stance answers Aristotle's theory that literature is first and foremost a τέχνη, the examples of which should be measured against a set of "natural" specifications such as genre, levels of style, schemes of tropes, etc. Aristotle's great poet is a master-craftsman, while the allegorists' great poet is a master-riddler and savant. This opposition between poet as craftsman and poet as inspired savant is already fully operative in Plato's *Ion*. (See P. Murray, introduction to *Plato On Poetry*, ed. P. Murray [New York, 1996], 6–12.)

6. See, for example, D. A. Russell, "Literary Criticism in Antiquity," *OCD*³(1997), 869–71.

7. G. Kennedy has done the most to illuminate this tradition of ancient criticism. See, for example, G. A. Kennedy, *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, *Classical Criticism* (New York, 1989).

later Neoplatonists envision it. The symbol carries a heady ontological resonance, which K. elsewhere acknowledges, that Plato would have found hardly serious enough for a sincere rebuttal. Proclus' symbol not only represents its referent, but it actually reproduces it, in an arcane and mysterious way. Like a voodoo doll, it carries an actual ontological trace of the thing to which it refers, and becomes a *pars pro toto*.⁸ Perhaps it is better to say that Plato's role in producing the symbol is limited to establishing the conditions of epistemological and ontological gap, or even rupture, which the Neoplatonic symbol is meant to overcome.

A second chapter introduces some welcome consideration of Proclus' life, for which our only source is the legendary account of his devoted student Marinus. K. rightly relies on Marinus' hagiographic account to establish the sense among the later Neoplatonists that they lived in a cosmos saturated with hidden correspondences and arcane meanings. Events never just "happened." They had a tale to tell, since everything in the Neoplatonic world was connected by means of divine sympathy and providence to every other thing. One only needed to learn the great code that underlay all visible things. Dreams, omens, and oracles abounded and begged for interpretation, which the diligent philosopher provided.

The third chapter is K.'s strongest, providing a synthetic accounting of the ontological and semiotic dimensions of Proclus' world. After Plotinus, the Neoplatonists understood the universe to be a great emanation or outpouring from the One, the utterly transcendent source of all that is. Everything that exists carries some trace, however faint, of its transcendent source. As K. explains, this ontology provided uniquely fertile ground for semiotics. The material things we see are not just the shadowy appearances that, according to Plato, always threaten to mislead us. For the good Neoplatonist, material objects always have the potential to be manifestations, revelations of the whole ontic superstructure of which they are only the basest indication, like the tips of so many icebergs of being. By the time of Proclus, the Neoplatonists had achieved a somewhat detailed picture of the way the universe was arranged. Like rays from the sun, chains of being stretched out from the One and penetrated down through the various strata of the cosmic hierarchy. At the upper levels of being, right below the One itself, a ray manifested itself as an Olympian god. This very same beam manifested different things as it shone through the levels of the divine Mind, the divine Soul, and the encosmic levels that housed the daemons, heroes, humans, animals, plants, and matter. The basest material things, then, have hard links in their very being to higher-order daemonic, psychical, intellectual, and even divine entities. Proclus usually reserves the term "symbolic" to label the kinds of semiotic connections that exist along these pathways of emanation.

K. mentions, but without sufficient emphasis, that the notion of symbolic connection is reinforced for Proclus by his religious practices, which K. is readier to label magic than is Proclus himself. In the major theoretical statements of his notion of the symbol, Proclus explicitly ties the literary "symbol" to another sort of thing that the Neoplatonists called a "symbol"—a ritual token used to bring the full presence of a god into a devotional statue.⁹ Proclus and all the Neoplatonists after Iamblichus, believed in a liturgical component to their spiritual exercises. They intended it as a

8. On theurgy in Proclus, see A. Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy," *CQ* 32, 1 (1982): 212–24.

9. E.g., at *In R.* 1.78–79, 1.109–14, 2.241–42; *Plat. Theol.* 1.29; *In Cra.* 51, 71.

supplement to Plotinus' strategy of pure contemplation. In the theurgic rite, the celebrant invokes the actual presence of the divinity by means of a material token, usually called the *σύμβολον* or *σύνθημα*. This token, which was a rock, gem, plant, or herb, was thought to exist at the end of a long ontological chain, which was linked through various levels of reality to a divine being at the other end. After a proper ritual, the actual divine presence entered the token and the statue into which it was inserted.¹⁰ K. mentions, once more without sufficient emphasis, Proclus' reliance on this hieratic paradigm in constructing his theories of the poetic "symbol." K. revisits this point near the end of chapter 5, but again, all too briefly.

K. is stronger in chapter 3, on the category of myth. K. brings in evidence from Sallustius, a figure somewhat less studied than his colleagues, and Plotinus, who is sometimes overlooked in studies of the later figures, to attest that the Neoplatonists view the material cosmos as, in a strong sense, a myth. The opposite observation was made by Coulter, who pointed out that a poetic myth in Neoplatonic understanding is in some sense a whole microcosm. K. shows that the Neoplatonists from Plotinus forward believed the reverse to be true too. Just as a divine myth presents simple, atemporal, and transcendent truths in multiform, temporal, and mundane forms, so too the cosmos unfolds from transcendent principles into the material world we see around us. This side of the myth-cosmos axis emphasizes nicely the readability of the visible world and the deep implication of semiotic values into material things. K. adds the fine observation that the act of interpretation, not only of myths but also of the cosmos itself, is at root a movement from the temporal to the atemporal, from the mundane to the divine. This is a welcome observation since it clarifies the uniquely spiritual and anagogic power that the Neoplatonists attributed to the act of interpretation.

In the third chapter, K. also includes some useful consideration of terminology. K. does not use the term "allegorical" in describing Proclus' interpretations, since Proclus himself seems to prefer the term "symbolic." This is fair enough, given the special religious and ontological valences of the term for Proclus. But in counting pure frequency of usage, the term *αἰνύγμα* and its derivatives cannot be far behind "symbol" in Proclus' literary interpretations. (Interestingly, as is the case for all the allegorists, except Heraclitus, the terms *ἀλληγορία* and *ὕπόνοια* are not the central features of Proclus' "allegorical" vocabulary.)

K.'s fourth chapter covers Proclus' theory of poetry in the fifth essay of the *Commentary on the Republic*, a task which Anne Sheppard has undertaken in more detail.¹¹ K. emphasizes more strongly a psychological dimension to Proclus' theory of poetry, where the main aims and effects of poetry concern the human soul. The great poet does not simply entertain. In fact, pleasurable or delightful poetry is apt to be frivolous, and lead a soul astray. Great poetry instead aims to raise the soul toward a greater understanding of the Good and the One.

This leads into K.'s longest chapter, concerning the theory and practice of interpretation in the sixth essay of the *Republic* commentary. K.'s arrangement of the material is solid and clear with some remarks on Proclus' methods of interpretation near the front, followed by an admirably detailed classification and explication of Proclus'

10. On this whole topic, see Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude."

11. Sheppard, *Essays*.

strategies for reading sixteen cases from Homer that Proclus treats, including the theomachy, the two urns, Agamemnon's dream, and the binding of Ares and Aphrodite. This is the standard fare of ancient allegorical reading—places in the text where Homer attributes apparently inappropriate behavior or qualities to gods or heroes.¹²

K. evaluates Proclus' readings along the axis of the literal versus the symbolic, and claims that Proclus is more often literal than has previously been assumed. There is a good point at the root of this approach, but it is obfuscated by a certain confusion of terminology, to which I will turn in a moment. K. divides Proclus' interpretations into three basic categories, those based on "cognitive relativity," those that serve a pedagogic function, and those that are symbolic. The first category, despite the awkward name, works well after the careful reconstruction of Neoplatonic ontology that K. has undertaken in chapter 3. "Cognitive relativity" is K.'s shorthand for the Neoplatonic belief that the same thing appears differently at different levels of existence. As we saw above, a chain of being emanating from the One manifests itself differently in each level it penetrates, even though it remains, ontologically, the "same" thing. So a divine ray that might be Apollo at the highest levels of reality manifests itself as the sun at a lower level in the chain. Below that, this same chain manifests Apollo's semi-corporeal demonic avatar, then the Apis bull, heliotropic flowers, and the metal gold.¹³ K. gathers several of Proclus' readings of difficult scenes in Homer within this group, including tales of the gods' appearing in human form. According to K., Proclus claims that Homer is providing a realistic depiction of the way in which they are seen by human observers, who only see lower-order apparitions at their own level.

K. claims that Proclus has a second strategy of explanation. Here, Proclus attributes pedagogical motivations to Homer's seemingly excessive portrayals of certain heroic behaviors, like lust, greed, irreverence toward the gods and toward fellow humans. In these instances, K. demonstrates convincingly, Proclus uses arguments from historical context, as well as parallel references in Homer's own poems, to show that Homer's characters were doing nothing shameful according to the standard of their time. K. is right to point out that such strategies—historical relativity, Aristarchan explication according to the maxim of "Homer from Homer," and philological commentary—did play a role in Proclus' strategies of reading. While modern scholars sometimes betray the view that an allegorist who makes aggressive interpretive claims cannot, almost by definition, have had any interest in Homer's text or historical context, Proclus and other allegorists, like Cornutus, Pseudo-Plutarch, and especially Porphyry, present strong counterevidence.

Proclus' third type of interpretation, according to K., is the symbolic. Proclus is likely to resort to the symbolic, in K.'s view, when the gods are depicted as being involved, among themselves, in anthropomorphic or even shameful acts. The category of the symbol, and its great referential power, is alone capable of transporting us from such a base surface to the transcendent heights of divine meaning to which Homer, in Proclus' view, soars. Here we get interpretations of the binding of Ares

12. On these *topoi* among many others, see F. Buffière, introduction to *Héraclite, "Allégories D'Homère,"* ed. F. Buffière (Paris, 1962), xxxi.

13. Proclus rarely lays out the features of an entire chain systematically. The example of the sun chain was reconstructed from the commentaries on the *Timaeus*, *Republic*, and *Parmenides*.

and Aphrodite as the demiurge's (Hephaisto's) combining the unifying and the separating forces of love and strife in the cosmos, and of the Olympians' provocations in war as the manifestations of divine providence.

While K.'s typology is useful in its identification of varieties of interpretive strategies based on the subject matter being interpreted, it is compromised by an odd insistence on maintaining the literal versus the symbolic axis of the analysis, even though K. is well aware that such categories become extremely complicated when we operate within an ontological scheme as different from our own as that of the Neoplatonists. For example, when Proclus claims that the judgment of Paris indicates his choice of the erotic life, how can we agree with K. that, "with the exception of divine names," this interpretation is literal. Should we really classify as "literal" Proclus' interpretation that Achilles' argument with Apollo is really an argument with the demonic manifestation of Apollo? or as "practically literal" his reading of the theomachy not as a battle of gods, but as a proof that lower avatars of the gods are in providential contact with human combatants? Literal in what sense? When supported by the architectonic ontology of Proclus, where the divinities and lower order entities are different manifestations on the same rays of being, one might suggest a certain "literalism" in the sense that the relationship of sign to referent is an ontological and not a figurative one. But this type of link is precisely what Proclus tends to label "symbolic." K. is well aware of this, as we have noted. Nevertheless the analysis returns repeatedly to this admittedly compromised opposition. Some more explicit questioning of the usefulness of these very distinctions in Proclus would have been most welcome. Just raising these issues is a useful contribution to the field, but the final status of K.'s main argument—that Proclus is more literal than we have appreciated up until now—will remain in doubt until such questions are answered definitively; and we are some distance away from that point.

Why these counterintuitive claims toward literalism? K.'s larger argument is part of a strategy to exonerate Proclus from the charge that he is prone to making excessive interpretive leaps. In showing that Proclus has a "predilection for literal interpretation," K. hopes to shield Proclus from the dismissive treatment he has sometimes received, based on the charge that his interpretations are absurd. Under this rubric, the designations literal and symbolic acquire a normative valence, the former being faithful, the latter being unfaithful, to Homer's text. While the thrust of the argument—that Proclus' interpretations merit our close attention—is admirable, this particular method of justifying them is somewhat troublesome. Need we claim that Proclus' interpretations are justifiable by our own standards in order to justify studying them? One hopes that this is not the case, but some such concern seems close to the surface here.

K.'s penultimate chapter restates Proclus' fourfold schematization of the types of poetry, perhaps the best-known feature of Proclus' literary theory. This is material covered in more detail by Sheppard, though K. pays more explicit attention, again, to Proclean psychology and ends with the welcome observation that Proclus' vision of the symbol veers toward negative theology. This universe saturated in semantic resonances tends, ironically, to nurture a semiotics of "antirepresentation." When ontological connection replaces "likeness" as the criterion by which signs are read, then things that are very "unlike" a referent can still carry some arcane connection to it. Though K. does not make the link, the connection to Pseudo-Dionysius, and there-

fore to the whole history of negative theology in Christian mystical traditions, is not far afield here.¹⁴

K. closes with an apology for Proclus against a characterization of him, hardly still credible, as little more than a mystagogue. In this context, K. betrays a certain defensiveness in justifying the negative theology toward which Proclus' symbolism tends, saying that it is no mere irrationalism. K. neglects to enlist the supporting evidence of the long and ongoing importance of just such thinking in Christian theology—from Pseudo-Dionysius (who appropriated the bulk of Proclus' thought c. 500 C.E.) to Meister Eckhart (for whom Pseudo-Dionysius' "negative way" is central) to the contemporary thinkers Jean-Luc Marion and Thomas Carlson¹⁵—as well as in continental philosophy, from Hegel (who was an admirer of Proclus) to Heidegger and beyond. In battling against the reductive view of Proclus as a simple irrationalist, K. paints him as a rather straightforward rationalist whose religion was intellectual and not emotional. Such categories can have little serious use in describing late Neoplatonic thinking. To label Proclus as either a rationalist or an irrationalist attributes to him a strong stand on an issue that would not have presented itself to him in such terms. It is, ironically enough, to do the same thing that the allegorists' detractors attribute to them. It is to read our own philosophical concerns and interests into the work of a thinker who wrote long ago in a very different world.

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14. See B. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York, 1991), 57–61; E. R. Dodds, introduction to *Proclus' "Elements of Theology,"* ed. E. R. Dodds, 2d ed. (New York, 1963), xxvi–xxviii.

15. See, J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being*, T. A. Carlson, trans. (Chicago, 1991) and T. A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago, 1999).