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Allegory and Ascent in Neoplatonism

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Abstract

In Late Antiquity a series of ideas emerges that adds a kind of buoyancy to allegorism. Readers' impulses toward other regions of knowledge begin to flow more consistently upward, drawn by various metaphysical currents that guide and support them. A whole manner of Platonist-inspired architectures structure the cosmos in the early centuries of the Common Era, among thinkers as diverse as the well-known Origen and the mysterious Numenius. Plato's understanding of appearances had always insisted on some higher, unfallen level of reality, in which the forms dwell, and to which we have no access through our senses. This other level seems to invite allegorical aspirations. Of course, Plato himself prominently declined the invitation, and it is no small irony that his work should have become the font of such heady visions.

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Allegory and ascent in Neoplatonism

In Late Antiquity a series of ideas emerges that adds a kind of buoyancy to allegorism. Readers' impulses toward other regions of knowledge begin to flow more consistently upward, drawn by various metaphysical currents that guide and support them. A whole manner of Platonist-inspired architectures structure the cosmos in the early centuries of the Common Era, among thinkers as diverse as the well-known Origen and the mysterious Numenius. Plato's understanding of appearances had always insisted on some higher, unfallen level of reality, in which the forms dwell, and to which we have no access through our senses. This other level seems to invite allegorical aspirations. Of course, Plato himself prominently declined the invitation, and it is no small irony that his work should have become the font of such heady visions. He consistently disparages poetry's claims to any kind of truth, let alone the grandiose varieties that allegorical readers tend to ascribe to it. The distance between the sensible world and the real source of truth operates for him as a chastening agent, a message of epistemological caution echoing over a chasm. (Plato typically leaves the task of mediating it to the colorless verb *metechô* "participate.") But his later followers do not feel such stringent compunctions. They will embrace Plato's metaphysics of fallenness, but then shift their emphasis from the distance that separates us and the highest truths to the notion that the world here and now is (somehow) connected to a higher order – a position inarguably Platonic but rarely more than implicit in the master's work. To greater or lesser degrees this group of readers will transform Plato's world of mere images, always and everywhere pale imitations of the real truth, into a world of manifestations, always potentially carrying palpable traces of that higher world.

This period represents something of a departure from the earlier ages, but it is worth noting also the important continuities with earlier allegorical readers. The Neoplatonists of late antiquity carry forward the Stoic ideas that myth might be a repository of profound truth, and that the dense

language of poetry has the capacity to convey truths that exceed the grasp of plain speech. They carry forward an idea that we see in the Derveni commentator and in Stoic etymology: that language is naturally linked to its meanings and that single words might serve as discrete sites of interpretation and yield sometimes profound insights. Further, they continue and deepen a sense that allegorical ways of conveying meaning are not only capable of but particularly appropriate to discussing the divine.

Plotinus

Plotinus' (205–69/70 CE) interests in literature are not central in his corpus, but he leaves behind fascinating readings of traditional texts (especially Homer's) in articulating his philosophical system. The contemporary scholar Luc Brisson rightly points out the ease with which Plotinus engages in allegorical interpretation of myth as a mode of exposition of even his core philosophical ideas.¹ Myth gives Plotinus a means by which he can express synchronic realities in a diachronic narrative form. In the context of Plotinus' work, this is not the simple idea that a story might capture an abstract idea – since at the heart of his corpus Plotinus struggles with the idea of translating the utter transcendence on which his world centers into the discursive, sequential logic of language.²

Despite this attention to poetry in explicating his philosophy, Plotinus produces no discrete theorizing or criticism of poetry. He produces statements on aesthetics, in *On Beauty* and *On Intelligible Beauty*, which are notable especially for displacing proportion, which had been the centerpiece of classical aesthetics, in favor of the idea that beauty emerges from the radiance of the divine in a single point.³ More important for the history of allegory, and in fact of central importance, are the positions he develops in metaphysics. While it may be too strong to say that Plotinus is responsible for the shape of the world in late antiquity, it is only a little too strong. He inherited from the Middle Platonic ferment that preceded him a few critical notions upon which he put a distinctive stamp, one that bore authority as a touchstone for centuries to come. In so doing he set out a universe that gave

1 Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology*, Catherine Tihanyi, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

2 The best summary treatment of Plotinian metaphysics remains A. H. Armstrong, "Plotinus," in the *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 195–270.

3 The most serviceable translations are A. H. Armstrong, trans., *Plotinus*, Loeb Classical Library Series (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: W. Heinemann, 1966–88).

allegorical strategies of reading a distinct resonance. I will give the whole picture first, then point out the elements of it that are most significant for allegorical interpreters.

According to Plotinus, the universe is constituted and sustained by a single, immaterial, and utterly transcendent entity, beyond even being itself, that eternally emanates pure being out from itself and so produces the entire cosmos in all its dimensions. This font of being, the One, radiates out a reality that precipitates a series of layers below itself: the tier closest to it is the realm of Mind (*nous*) in which all intellectual reality dwells, including Plato's forms; the region of the Soul (*psychê*) constitutes the third tier, and is where life emerges; last in this chain of being comes the material realm (*hulê*), a shadow world, as close to evil and pure non-being as any product of the One might become. The significance of this basic understanding for allegorical interpretation is hard to overstate. First, the tiered ontology means that any given entity here in the physical world always also has other, hidden aspects to it. Visible manifestations of objects increasingly take on the character of the tips of so many ontological icebergs. Second, the idea of emanation, claiming that the universe unfolds through an ontological flow, carries the corollary that invisible connections exist in the very being of things. Such ontological connections offer later thinkers a basis for semantic links. Such connections, which since Aristotle's time had had to settle for the thin beer of resemblance, could now rest on real ties in their very being. They constitute a new register to which those claiming hermeneutic connections will have appeal. Third, his view of the One as an entirely transcendent entity that also still (somehow) manifests itself in visible, tangible, concrete reality, sets out a paradox that is a natural incubator of allegorical thinking. It will give impetus and provide an authoritative parallel to an allegorical habit of claiming that allegorical literary constructions render the transcendent in the concrete, and use language to express what is beyond language. Finally, he produced lyrical meditations of unmatched power laying out the proper practice and purpose of human life as the pursuit of perfect union with the divine via mystical ascent. Philosophy has a mission of saving the soul, and reading and interpretation play a part in such a soteriological drama. This aspect of his thinking introduces an extraordinary development, nurturing the view in later figures that allegorical reading itself might offer a kind of pathway for this ascent, and that hermeneutic activity might lift one up through ontological layers, anagogically, toward the One. Plotinus produces a new and powerful possibility for understanding figuration according to a logic of synecdoche, as opposed to imitation. Such a possibility is not fully exploited in a literary context until two centuries later, in the work of Proclus.

Porphyry

Plotinus' literary executor leaves behind the most extended surviving allegorical commentary on a single passage from the whole of antiquity. Porphyry's (234–c. 305 CE) essay on Homer's Cave of the Nymphs in *Odyssey* 13 is a virtuoso performance, betraying a highly sophisticated literary mind, attuned to subtleties of language and sense.⁴ He writes a densely argued interpretation of Homer's sparsely articulated image, that sees it as a meditation on the births of human souls into their bodily lives. In Porphyry's case, the influence of the new metaphysical developments of Neoplatonism is most keenly felt not so much in the methods he develops and puts to use as in the contents of those interpretations. Indeed, his practice of taking a word, image, or group of images from Homer and then making a set of associations from many registers of cultural experience past and present, does not separate him much from a figure like the Stoic Cornutus. Of course, the revolutionary possibilities for re-understanding representation that Plotinus' metaphysics offers were surely not lost on him and likely influenced his views on how expansively one might interpret a particular literary image, and expansive he surely was, but we find only in later figures explicit theoretical statements in this direction.

Porphyry's commentary runs for some twenty pages of detailed exposition on a proof text eleven lines long. He mentions a debt to the earlier thinkers Numenius and Cronius, but his version of this commentary remains authoritative for the rest of antiquity and beyond. Homer uses a few lines to depict a cave into which the Phaeacians deposit Odysseus and his loot when they return him to Ithaca. The description is both bare and peppered with extraordinary features: it is sacred to naiad nymphs, contains stone mixing bowls, stone jars used by bees to store honey, stone looms where the nymphs weave purple cloth, an eternal spring, and two entrances, one for mortals and one for immortals, and an olive tree sits adjacent to it. Beginning from a premise allegorical commentators hold in common, Porphyry takes the obscurity of the passage as a signal that the scene conveys some hidden message. This position stands in rich contrast to literary criticism in the ancient rhetorical tradition, in which something unclear is thought to be a flaw of style. He signals a defensive position, offering a justification of allegorical explanation, where some critics, he worries, will see only forced reading. He dismisses the idea that Homer's cave is a simple flight of poetic fancy, and

4 The most useful translation is Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, Robert Lamberton, trans. (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1983). For the best text and commentary, see *The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey*, Arethusa Monographs 1, L. G. Westerink and Seminar 609, eds., (Buffalo, NY: State University of New York Press, 1969).

therefore not to be seriously interpreted, on the grounds that Homer after all allowed his fancy to fly in a particular direction. These oddities compel the interpreter's attention.

Porphyry's goal is to reconstruct the senses which "the ancients" (*hoi palaioi*) might have attached to the cave and the elements inside it. This indicates a historical sense on his part. To understand the meaning of Homer's poem one needs to reconstruct what it may have meant during Homer's time. In method, Porphyry has a catholic approach to evidence. He is ready to argue from parallels within Homer's text (25–27) and from etymology (28–29), but his method is especially characterized by a broad exploration of whatever he is able to collect about caves from their many ancient cultural associations (Greek and non-Greek). He will then typically endorse the cultural associations he sees as most relevant with his own phenomenological arguments. He especially surveys religious and philosophical traditions surrounding caves. There are many examples. He enlists common treatments of the cave as a microcosm of the sensible cosmos (Mithraism, Plato, Empedocles) with its mutability and inscrutability, and then endorses this association by claiming that caves, as phenomena of nature, are indeed made of earthly matter and surrounded by a single mass whose outside border is functionally limitless, and whose dark interiors render them difficult to understand. Water, he says, is especially associated with the birth of souls and so this cave is populated by naiad nymphs. He adduces the opening of the Book of Genesis here, as well as Egyptian associations of gods with water, and Heraclitus' views, which he then endorses by pointing out the critical importance of fluids like water, blood, and sperm to living things. This double mode of argumentation – appeal to cultural associations and then approval of those senses with his own natural observations – produces a powerful ground of linkage, which marries the authority of the ancient ways of doing things and the evidentiary appeal of the natural sciences. Each of the components within the cave – honey, stone bowls and jars, stone looms and purple cloth, the ways for mortals and immortals – is then read in similar tandem fashion, with each piece adding to an overall picture that the cave represents a kind of birthing station where souls assume bodies and enter the material world.

As has been shown by Glenn Most above, among some Stoic readers, this wisdom conveyed by the poet may be due to his or her own intention or it may not. Porphyry shows some nuances on this question also. An urge to recover the author's intention (*boulêsis*) animates his hermeneutics, to be sure, but at one point he is willing to leave open just whose intention he is recovering. He is both curious about and willing to remain entirely agnostic on the question of the facticity of the cave (4, 21). Either Homer created a fictive cave with a hidden message, or some unknown ancient

cave-makers produced a real cave with these strange characteristics, and Homer described it. Either way we have a readable cave, and either way the greatness of Homer's poetry is enhanced by it. This indifference illustrates a common allegorical sense that tends not to exclusively venerate the *technê* of poetic language or construction, but instead values the conveying of profound wisdom, through placement of potent symbols, coiled nodes of uncanny insight, waiting for an attentive reader to release the catch. At the close of the commentary he makes clear that, whoever made the cave, Homer should receive the credit for having placed it in the poem. Praising Homer's intelligence and excellence, he shows how precisely the cave fits into the poem's overall message. Having been stripped of all material possessions at this point in the story, his material self withered, Odysseus will now take Athena's counsel and turn to wisdom, in order to eliminate the soul's treacherous appetites (the suitors). This is a turn away from the material world and toward the intellectual world. His final task, to plant an oar for Poseidon so far inland that it could be mistaken for a winnowing fan, is read as an effort to move as far as possible from the world of corrupting material and change, for which the sea is said to stand. Finally, the cave lies in a harbor named after Phorcys, the cyclops Polyphemus' grandfather, as Homer tells us. It positions his turn to Athena after landing in the cave as a second try at escaping the material world, with his attempt to blind the concupiscent monster as a first, unsuccessful one. It is unsuccessful because it is a violent attempt to escape from matter – which only leaves one still enmeshed in the material world. Only a long and hard discipline, where one resists and beguiles the pleasures of the flesh one at a time (Odysseus' labors), will lead away from the body and to wisdom, which will allow for true and lasting liberation from the corporeal world. Porphyry sees Odysseus' story as a tale of a man passing through the stages of genesis, descending to the material body, and then returning to wisdom.

Interlude

Certain currents of pre-Plotinian Platonism, in which neither Plotinus nor Porphyry showed determinative interest, become central again for later figures, and so deserve some special mention before we move on. Before the third century CE a group of texts emerges, including the Hermetic corpus, Gnostic texts, and the works of Numenius, which draws from the same pool of Middle Platonic sensibilities. These writers set about elaborating medial layers of reality and installing within them choirs of exotic divine and quasi-divine figures like the demiurge, Hecate, the *junges*, Sophia, and the noetic father, ontological genealogies that succeeding generations of

philosophers became more and more confident describing in proliferating detail. They rushed in where the more circumspect Plotinus and Porphyry feared to tread. Succeeding generations of Neoplatonists could eventually trace individual chains of being down through the heavens to their endpoints at particular points of the material realm. In this group, a text particularly important for the present purposes, known as the *Chaldean Oracles*, emerges in the second century. The later Neoplatonists make this collection of enigmatic sayings, which survives only in fragments, into a kind of wisdom text, rivaling the authority of Plato and Homer. A man named Julian claimed to have extracted the oracles via his son, also named Julian, after the son fell into a mediumistic trance. The father carried the fuller designation “the Chaldean.” It is possible that the elder Julian could have actually been from Chaldea, a name the Greeks used for the region around ancient Babylonia, since Trajan’s expeditions facilitated contact with the area. But because the text carries little that is verifiably Chaldean, and quite a bit that is identifiably Platonist, more likely the lineage emerges from the legendary aura of that region, which, since late classical times, the Greeks had associated with mystical insight. This lineage is of a piece with certain Egyptomaniacal currents that also ebb and flow through Greek philosophy during this period. These later figures looked to these exotic cultures, of which their knowledge was limited, as repositories of an ancient wisdom extractable via allegorical reading.

The *Chaldean Oracles* are elliptical statements on cosmogony (the origins of the cosmos), cosmology (its arrangement), anthropology, and theology.⁵ Similar collections of dubious lineage had circulated since the earliest days of known writing in Greek, prominently including the *Sibylline Oracles*, and collections handed down under such names as Bacis and Orpheus – a phenomenon discussed by Dirk Obbink above. The prominence of these collections is proportional to their capacity to provoke allegorical interpretation. Iamblichus, Proclus, and many others produce allegorical commentaries on the work of the Chaldeans. These texts’ status as oracles is often insufficiently emphasized. It reminds us of the connection between allegorical reading and divinatory interpretation, which is attested since at least the time of the Derveni Papyrus. In both practices, one finds dense and opaque texts and exuberant interpretive practices in a mutually reinforcing relationship.

Such a connection between divination and allegorism is also apparent in the extant Greco-Roman dream books. Artemidorus finds two kinds of

⁵ See Hans Lewy, *The Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic, and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire*, 2nd edn., ed. Michele Tardieu (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1978).

dreams.⁶ There are the straightforward ones, which require no interpretation, and the interpretable ones, which are the focus of his work, and are named, precisely, “allegorical” (*allêgorikoi*). The statements of method he makes for interpreting them are all but indistinguishable from statements of allegorical hermeneutics in a literary dimension. Macrobius’ *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* shows this elision even more starkly, since his introduction lays out, entirely paratactically, a statement of allegorical literary theory next to a theory of allegorical dreams (heavily indebted to Artemidorus).⁷ Macrobius proceeds with his commentary without ever feeling the need to clarify whether he considers himself doing literary allegory or divinatory dream interpretation, an omission which could only be made in a case where the traditions were very close indeed. This elision in Macrobius will prove tremendously influential in the Middle Ages, where dream narrative is the field *par excellence* of allegorical poetics and interpretation. Macrobius is the key Latin figure in transmitting a distillation of the Greek traditions of allegorical reading and divination to the Western Middle Ages. Macrobius’ effacing of difference between literary allegory and divination was precisely what authorized the medieval idea that poetic myth (*fabula*) contains a philosophical truth waiting to be divined by the attentive and wise reader (for more on this, see Whitman’s essay below).

Iamblichus

An intense family squabble among Plotinus’ heirs comes to light after the great man’s death. The second of his two most prominent followers, Iamblichus (c. 245–c. 325 CE), disagreed seriously with Porphyry over a practice that Porphyry called magic (*goêteia*) and Iamblichus himself called “theurgy,” coining a term from *theos* + *ergos* (meaning divine action) on analogy to “*theologia*” (meaning divine discourse). Iamblichus uses the new term to advance his advocacy of a set of ritual activities meant to aid in contemplation and bring devotees closer to Plotinus’ goal of union with the divine. Porphyry strongly objects, opting for a pure contemplationist position, and produces a broadside attack. He writes with an expansive, scathing criticism, ridiculing in detail not only exotic practices – including standing on secret divine signs and calling down divinities – but also highly traditional religious acts, like sacrifice, set at the core of ancient religion. In short, he objects that *any* action we might perform in the physical world

6 Artemidorus, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Robert J. White, trans. (Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press, 1975).

7 Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, William Harris Stahl, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

could affect the divine in any way. This position might be seen to maintain the Platonic penchant to see the phenomenal world as utterly separate from the source of real truth.

Porphyry's attack, preserved as the *Letter to Anebo*, provokes Iamblichus to his lengthy answer, the most important surviving philosophical treatment of ritual from antiquity, a tract known since Ficino's day by the title *De mysteriis*.⁸ Interestingly, in a mystery which no scholar has conclusively unraveled, their entire debate is an act of ventriloquism. Porphyry writes his attack in the form of a letter to an Egyptian priest, and Iamblichus writes his defense of rituals in the voice of Anebo's supposed master, Abamon. While not focused on allegorical reading, their debate, which Iamblichus decisively wins according to their followers, has profound consequences for it. Taking the opposite side from Porphyry, Iamblichus' defense of rituals might be seen as a defense of the relevance of the physical world to the higher orders and the source of real truth. He advocates the rituals as a supplement to contemplation, and as an aid to upward-leading, anagogic ascent toward the One. He predicates their efficacy on the notion that the material world is connected to the divine, at least for those who know the secrets. He articulates his most important general principle concisely in book 5:

The primary beings illuminate even the lowest levels, and the immaterial ones are present immaterially to the material. And let there be no astonishment if in this connection we speak of a pure and divine form of matter; for matter also issues from the father and creator of all, and thus gains its perfection, which is suitable to the reception of gods. . . . Observing this the theurgic art in exactly this way discovers receptacles fitted to the properties of each of the gods, and in many cases links together stones, plants, animals, aromatic substances, and other such things that are sacred, perfect and godlike, and then from all these composes an integrated and pure receptacle. (V.23)

This defense of cult objects in rituals, by far the most fully articulated in antiquity, will come to the aid of later interpreters of poetry trying to explain how material poetic images might be linked to transcendent truths.

Two final components of Iamblichus' work deserve special mention. First, he carries forward an idea he finds in the *Chaldean Oracles*, that the divine sprinkles seeds of itself throughout the cosmos in the form of "symbols" (*symbola*). These scintillas of the divine are thought to be hiding in plain sight among us. They are precisely the pieces of stone, herbs, etc., that

8 The first scholarly English translation of this pivotal text only recently became available. Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell, trans., *Writings from the Greco-Roman World*, 4 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003). The translators include an improved text, and very helpful introductions and notes.

he mentions above, and are special intersections at which the divine tends to manifest itself more vibrantly than in the rest of the material world. Collectively they constitute an esoteric code, a metaphysical topography by which various rays of the divine are rendered materially. The theurgic art harnesses these points of radiance in ritual implements, and uses them to open up avenues of communication between this world and that one. Iamblichus' use of the term symbol, to mean a representational device that exceeds simple imitation and operates instead by synecdoche, borrows from two ancient contexts: the symbol as a magic talisman (such as is widely attested in the surviving magical papyri), and as a passport to higher states of being in the mystery religions and Pythagorean cult, a use which dates back to the classical period. As we will see, this provides a gateway to a crucial allegorical path, though it will not be until the work of Proclus, who is the first to import this idea into literary theory, that the path is actually taken. In conjunction and finally, Iamblichus forwards a theory of language that builds on this use of the idea of the symbol. He justifies the use of special divine names for the gods, to which Porphyry objects on the grounds that if language is a human creation gods would not care what they are called. Iamblichus replies that certain language is *not* in fact a human creation, but is itself of the character of his material symbols. This symbolic language is not a mere *representation* of the gods, as a human-invented name would be, but is a shard from the higher orders sewn into our world, and carries an actual ontological trace of the divine in its material sounds and the letters that represent them.

Proclus

In the work of Proclus (410 or 412–85 CE), Neoplatonic allegorism comes into full flower. He brings synecdochic signification, made possible in Plotinus' metaphysics and elaborated by Iamblichus to justify theurgy, directly to bear on the power of allegorical literary constructions. He was extraordinarily prolific, and fortunately his works survive in abundance. As is typical of the time, he concentrates on commentary on the Platonic corpus, writing thousands of pages of interpretation covering even the most minute details, showing no less interest in Plato's dramatic staging and his use of story and myth than in his more straightforward moments of argumentation. In so doing, allegorical reading is his most powerful critical tool. Proclus also turns his attention to the poets, making extended readings of Homer and Hesiod. But unlike any of his predecessors and of most consequence, he produces detailed statements of theory, which stand out as the most fully elaborated theory of allegory to survive from antiquity.

Any serious student of Plato (as Proclus surely is) faces difficulty in producing a poetics. In the *Republic*, Plato is unsparing in his criticism of poetry's claims to truth. In a famous move, he maps it onto his ontological scheme, and states that just as the material world is a pale imitation of the real truth, poetry is a further imitation of the imitation, and so stands at a third remove from the real reality. It is through engagement with this problematic of imitation (*mimêsis*) that Proclus makes his most profound contribution. In a long excursus in the *Republic* commentary, he lays out a multi-layered analysis of poetry, claiming that only the lowest layer of it is mimetic.⁹ Mimetic poetry attempts to produce images of the world around us and is what Plato was talking about (Proclus says) in his critique in the *Republic*. But there are other forms of poetry too. Above the mimetic is didactic poetry, which teaches the audience of intellectual and moral excellences through correct opinion. The very highest form of poetry is an inspired kind that indicates truths about the divine. It makes use of material representations but in this mode material things are not imitations of what they represent, but symbols of it. Such literary symbols signify their meanings not according to any economy of imitation (*mimêsis*), for how could any merely human representation resemble the divine and transcendent truth? Another, symbolic language is necessary.

When explaining how this language works, Proclus makes explicit reference to theories Iamblichus uses to justify the theurgic rites. Proclus, like all important Neoplatonists after Iamblichus, had been convinced by his arguments against Porphyry in the *De Mysteriis*, and vigorously deepened and extended his justifications of theurgy. Particularly interesting here, Proclus leaves behind more testimony than Iamblichus did on one theurgic practice, the animation of statues, that has a particular relevance to his literary theory. In it the theurgist constructs a material representation of a divinity, and then invokes the real presence of the god into it via a material token, a stone, plant, bone, or herb, called the *symbolon*, which like Iamblichus' symbol is the material node on which the real presence of the divine manifests itself. Just as they were for Iamblichus, these symbols are of a different ontological order from the rest of the material world. They are shards of the divine presence among us. When the theurgist inserts the symbolic token into the imitative statue, the statue no longer merely *resembles* the god, but actually *becomes* the god. Proclus claims that symbolic literary language works

9 The most succinct discussion comes at Proclus, *Commentary on the Republic*, I 192–93 (Standard pagination for this text refers to the edition by Wilhelm Kroll, ed., *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Rem Publicam commentarii* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1899–1901)). The best modern translation and notes are in French, *Commentaire sur la République*, A. J. Festugière, ed. and trans. (Paris: Vrin, 1970).

precisely the same way. When the inspired poet situates symbols in the material constructions of his language, he invokes the divinity's true presence via the pathways of being that descend from the heavens. Since these symbols carry a connection in their very being to the divinities they invoke, they escape the difficulties Plato had with mimesis. Just as the theurgist uses symbols to animate his representations of the divine, so also,

the fathers of these myths . . . wanting to relate the myths to the entire chain [of being] issuing from each god, conceived the surface which the myths project, with its images, by analogy to the lowest classes that preside over the lowest level of experience, rooted in the material world, but the secret of the inaccessible transcendent essence of the gods, which is hidden from the masses of men and beyond their comprehension, they translated into perceptible form for those who aspire to such visions.

(Commentary on the Republic, I 78.25–79.2)

Both the theurgist and poet reverse the process of emanation, and open up an avenue by which we might retrace the ontological movement that produced the universe back up from material to divine. An anagogical reading is now emphatically possible, and interpretation itself takes on a role in the soteriological aspirations of souls. Proclus has his answer to Plato, but of perhaps more consequence to the history of allegorism, allegory now has a theory of ontological connection between symbols and their meanings that claims for poets the power to not just represent, but to actually invoke the real presence of their subjects.

Symbol and allegory in the Neoplatonists

In closing it is important to note that this theory of the symbol is the only strictly *literary* theory attached to the term that survives from antiquity. Unlike metaphor (Greek *metaphora*), which since Aristotle was regularly theorized and argued over, ancient literary critics had little to say about “symbols” (*symbola*). In fact the term almost never appears in the work of the mainstream ancient rhetorical literary critics. When these writers discuss figuration, they do so under the heading of metaphor. By contrast “symbol” was an important part of the conceptual apparatus of allegorism from the third century BCE forward. The Stoics use it as a synonym for enigma (*aenigma*), the most powerful conceptual engine of ancient allegoresis, and Porphyry, as was also mentioned, used the symbol as his central concept of figuration in his treatise. But no literary thinkers before Proclus document their theories of it. I have emphasized the Iamblichean background, but Proclus also refers directly to the Pythagoreans, magicians, and mystery

religions that lie behind Iamblichus. In later periods, allegorical readers will begin to make rich and productive distinctions between allegory on the one hand and symbol on the other. The ancient allegorists made no such distinction, but used the terms as synonyms.

Legacies

Given its extravagance, perhaps the most striking aspect of Proclus' theory of the symbolic is its afterlife. I will outline only the most important cases here. Some time in the century after Proclus' death a corpus emerges falsely claiming to be authored by Dionysius the Areopagite, a Greek character in the book of Acts who is provoked by Paul's caution against idolatry to convert on the spot. The deep indebtedness of this author (known to modern scholars as Pseudo-Dionysius) to the work of Proclus has been well documented for over a century. Prominent among his borrowings is the literary theory of the "symbol." In works on biblical hermeneutics, the author cautions against any objections to Scripture's portraying God in corporeal forms. Those who know how to read properly will recognize such images not as imitations of the divinity, but as symbols of it, and symbols indicate the truths they do, not through resemblance, but through direct ontological connection. Pseudo-Dionysius recapitulates the particularities of Neoplatonic metaphysics, especially Proclus' variety of it, that renders this notion of the symbolic comprehensible. Despite periodic objections from Christian thinkers who were dubious of the compatibility of his doctrines with Church teachings, Pseudo-Dionysius' reputation survives and thrives. As it happens, he becomes among the most authoritative figures in medieval Christendom. He is a wellspring of various Christian mysticisms, including those of Eckhart and John Scotus Eriugena, second only to Augustine in his importance in that tradition.¹⁰ His interest in base material imagery sets him out as the authority on the Negative Way, and sets him apart from the other central ancient sources of apophatic theology. The Cappadocians had claimed that God is best described by negated terms – a rather different approach from Dionysius' Proclean claim to represent the divine in lowly matter. Thomas Aquinas cites Dionysius some 1700 times in the *Summa*, a frequency second only to Augustine, and finds him a particularly helpful guide in reading passages in the Bible where the divine is figured in the concrete.

¹⁰ See "The Dionysian Imagination," in A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, eds., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100–c. 1375: The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 165–96.

Invocationist theories of poetry percolate through many later thinkers, some of whom have familiarity with the Neoplatonists' work directly and some of whom know it through intermediaries. As Plato is periodically rediscovered in Europe, the Neoplatonists achieve the status of key interpreters to unlocking his often difficult and contradictory positions (a status against which modern philologists reacted strongly). They play this role for Ficino, and so the Florentine Renaissance knows them well. Schelling and other important Romantic figures like Coleridge find their own form of inspiration in Neoplatonic writings. Each of these cases is worthy of serious study, and filled with nuances, but in each one we find some form of an aspiration for a literary expression that transcends mere imitation and captures transcendent truths in corporeal form. Those that lay claim to ontological linkage between figurative devices and the realities to which they point, and do so via transcendental symbols, will owe some debt to the curious, but nonetheless powerful developments of Greek late antiquity.