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**Experiencing Beauty:
Reading the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*
in the Neoplatonic Academy of Athens¹**

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Abstract

*In both the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, Plato presents the contemplation of the Forms, and that of Beauty in particular, as a deeply emotional experience comparable to falling in love or initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries. The first part of this article explores this notion of the contemplation of the Forms as an experience in Plato and the ways in which he seeks to give the readers of his dialogues a taste of such an experience through literary means. The second part examines the reception of intelligible contemplation as an experience in the Neoplatonic Academy (Syrianus, Proclus). I will argue that these Neoplatonic readers of Plato had a keen eye for the emotive qualities of his texts, not least because their own personal experiences with theurgical rituals bred new life into Plato's comparison of the effects of the contemplation of the Forms to initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries.*

The Platonic way of life is all about the ascent of the human soul towards the intelligible realm, yet Plato himself is frustratingly vague about how we may climb upwards from the dregs of the material cosmos to the sunlit highlands of the world of the Forms. The closest he comes to a spiritual roadmap are the two dialogues about love or *erôs*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. In these dialogues, the ascent is presented not so much as the outcome of rational thinking, but first and foremost as a deeply emotional experience comparable to falling in love or initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries. Plato chooses these two analogies because he might expect them to strike a chord with his Athenian public of male aristocrats who cultivated the erotic pursuit of younger boys and who would have typically been initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries. In these dialogues, Plato not only describes the ascent in terms of profound experiences, but also tries to make his readers share in these by means of literary techniques. In the first part of this article, I will explore this notion of the

¹ It is a great pleasure to contribute these musings on Neoplatonic aesthetics and reading practices to the present issue of *Classics Ireland* that honours Andrew Smith. I have profited much from Andrew's scholarly publications on Neoplatonism, not least from those on Plotinus on beauty, and cherish fond memories of reading groups in which we both partook, both in Dublin and elsewhere. Thanks are due to Robert Vinkesteijn for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

contemplation of the Forms as an experience in Plato and the ways in which he seeks to give his readers a taste of such an experience. In the second part of the article we will fast forward to late antique Athens where the Neoplatonists read Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. In many ways, this was a very different world from that of Plato's dialogues. The world of the aristocratic symposium with its celebration of homoeroticism had given way to a textual community of ascetic minded philosophers, while the celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries had by this time come to an end. Moreover, even though these Neoplatonists claimed to be nothing but exegetes of Plato, they had fundamentally altered the map of the intelligible realm by introducing the One as the first principle and cause of the world of the Forms. As a result, the Neoplatonists no longer considered the contemplation of the Forms as the final end of the spiritual ascent, but as a stage on the way towards unification with the One. Even so, they too view the contemplation of the Forms as a supra-rational experience, which can be brought about by reading Plato's emotive texts. In the second part of this article, I will focus on how these Neoplatonist readers of Plato understand the Platonic concept of intelligible contemplation as an experience, and demonstrate that they had a keen eye for the emotive qualities of Plato's texts.

Part 1

Plato on Contemplation of the Intelligible as Experience

Spiritual Ascent Compared to the Experience of Initiation

In both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, Plato associates the spiritual process that leads to the contemplation of the intelligible realm both with the powers of love (*erôs*) and with initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries. In the *Symposium* Diotima, the woman who instructs Socrates about love-matters, divides her instruction into two phases. She compares these to the two subsequent stages of the Eleusinian Mysteries: the preliminary, preparatory stage and the final stage (Pl. *Symp.* 209e5-210a4):

T.1 Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐρωτικά ἴσως, ὦ Σώκρατες, κἂν σὺ μυηθείης· **τὰ δὲ τέλεια καὶ ἐποπτικά**, ὧν ἕνεκα καὶ ταῦτα ἔστιν, ἂν τις ὀρθῶς μετή, οὐκ οἶδ' εἰ οἷός τ' ἂν εἴη. ἐρῶ μὲν οὖν, ἔφη, ἐγὼ καὶ προθυμίας οὐδὲν ἀπολείψω· πειρῶ δὲ ἔπεσθαι, ἂν οἷός τε ᾦς.

*Even you, Socrates, could probably come to be initiated into these rites of love. But as for the purpose of these rites when they are done correctly – **that is the final and highest mystery** – I don't know if you are capable of it. I myself will tell you,' she said, 'and I won't stint any effort. And you must try to follow if you can.'²*

The first, preliminary initiations of Love which, Diotima feels, are within Socrates' reach may be found in the theological exposition about the nature of Eros that precedes the above-quoted passage. Eros, thus Diotima, is not a god, but a daimonic creature between men and gods which allows for communication between men and gods. Diotima is quite confident that Socrates will be able to be initiated into these mysteries, presumably because her theological exposition is rational in nature: Socrates is subjected to a critical examination (*elenchus*) of his own belief that Eros is a god and, once refuted, accepts that Eros is a daimonic being on the force of Diotima's argumentation (Pl. *Symp.* 201e2-7):

T.2 σχεδὸν γάρ τι καὶ ἐγὼ πρὸς αὐτὴν ἕτερα τοιαῦτα ἔλεγον οἷάπερ νῦν πρὸς ἐμὲ Ἀγάθων, ὡς εἶη ὁ Ἔρως μέγας θεός, εἶη δὲ τῶν καλῶν · ἤλεγχε δὴ με τοῦτοις τοῖς λόγοις οἷσπερ ἐγὼ τοῦτον, ὡς οὔτε καλὸς εἶη κατὰ τὸν ἐμὸν λόγον οὔτε ἀγαθός.

*You see, I had told her almost the same things Agathon told me just now: that Love is a great god and that he belongs to beautiful things. And **she used the very same arguments against me** that I had used against Agathon; she showed how, according to my very own speech, Love is neither beautiful nor good.³*

The initiation into the final mysteries, by contrast, does not rely on philosophical argumentation. This stage, which consists of Diotima's famous ladder of love, starts from the experience of falling in love with the body of a beautiful person. After the gradual recognition of the different manifestations of beauty, for example beauty in the domain of literature, ethics and philosophy, the initiate may finally experience something like a sudden epiphany of Beauty itself (Pl. *Symp.* 210e2-6):

² Trans. Nehamas & Woodruff (1997) 492, adapted.

³ Trans. Nehamas & Woodruff (1997) 484.

T.3 ὃς γὰρ ἂν μέχρι ἐνταῦθα πρὸς τὰ ἐρωτικά παιδαγωγηθῇ, θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὰ καλὰ, πρὸς τέλος ἤδη ἰὼν τῶν ἐρωτικῶν **ἐξαίφνης κατόψεται τι θαυμαστὸν** τὴν φύσιν καλόν, τοῦτο ἐκεῖνο, ὃ Σώκρατες, οὐδὲ ἕνεκεν καὶ οἱ ἔμπροσθεν πάντες πόνοι ἦσαν, ...

*You see, the man who has been thus far guided in matters of Love, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly, is now coming to the goal of Loving: **all of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully** beautiful in its nature; that Socrates, is the reason for all his earlier labours, ...⁴*

Note that, in keeping with the designation of these final mysteries as ἐποπτικά (epoptic), the ultimate experience of the initiation is described as a vision of Beauty itself, and as something wonderful (*ti thaumaston*).

In a similar fashion, Socrates in the *Phaedrus* in the so-called Great Speech, i.e. the myth of the winged charioteer, compares the contemplation of the Forms, and of that of Beauty in particular, to initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries (Pl. *Phdr.* 250b5-c2):

T.4 κάλλος δὲ τότε ἦν ἰδεῖν λαμπρόν, ὅτε σὺν εὐδαίμονι χορῷ μακαρίαν ὄψιν τε καὶ θέαν, ἐπόμενοι μετὰ μὲν Διὸς ἡμεῖς, ἄλλοι δὲ μετ' ἄλλου θεῶν, εἰδόν τε καὶ ἐτελοῦντο τῶν τελετῶν ἦν θέμις λέγειν μακαριωτάτην, ἣν ὠργιάζομεν ὁλόκληροι μὲν αὐτοὶ ὄντες καὶ ἀπαθεῖς κακῶν ὅσα ἡμᾶς ἐν ὑστέρω χρόνῳ ὑπέμενεν, ὁλόκληρα δὲ (...).

But beauty was radiant to see at that time, when the souls, along with the glorious chorus (we were with Zeus, while others followed other gods), saw that blessed and spectacular vision and were ushered into the mystery that we may rightly call the most blessed of all. And we, who celebrated it were wholly perfect and free of all the troubles that awaited us in the time to come, ...⁵

Students of ancient religion refer to this passage, as well the one from the *Symposium* that we have discussed above, as important testimonies to the central role of experience in the Eleusinian Mysteries. See, by way of illustration, the following quote from the famous study of the Eleusinian Mysteries by the great scholar of Greek religion, Walter Burkert:

⁴ Trans. Nehamas & Woodruff (1997) 493.

⁵ Trans. Nehamas & Woodruff (1997) 527-8.

That participation in mysteries was a special form of experience, a *pathos* in the soul or psyche of the candidate, is clearly stated in several ancient texts; given the underdeveloped state of introspection in the ancient world, as seen from a modern vantage point this is remarkable. Aristotle is said to have used the pointed antithesis that at the stage of the mysteries there should be no more “learning” (*mathein*) but “experiencing” (*pathein*) and a change in the state of mind (*diatethenai*). ... By far the most influential text about the experience of mysteries is in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. ... The revelation of true Being brought about by Eros had already been described in the language of mysteries in the *Symposium*, where the distinction between “preliminary initiation” (*myein*) and “perfect and epoptic mysteries” clearly refers to Eleusis. The *Phaedrus* adds the unforgettable image of the soul’s chariot ascending to the sky in the wake of the gods, up to the highest summit where a glance beyond heaven is possible.⁶

Plato, both in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, tries not only to describe the experience of the contemplation of the Forms, but also to give his audience a taste of it by literary means. In the *Symposium*, he does so through his portrayal of Socrates, in the *Phaedrus* through the myth of the winged chariot to which Burkert refers.

Experiencing Contemplation, Experiencing the Platonic Dialogue

Socrates as a Visible Manifestation of Divine Beauty

Let us first take a closer look at the portrayal of Socrates in the *Symposium*. Even though Diotima seems to have harboured some doubts whether Socrates would be able to complete the final stage of the initiation, Plato suggests that he had in fact done so when, after Socrates has finished his account of the lessons that he learned from Diotima, Alcibiades enters the stage and extols the strangeness (*atopia*) of Socrates. The strangeness of Socrates consists in the fact that he remains completely unmoved by all sorts of bodily experiences. He is for example indifferent to the effects of wine, lack of food, freezing temperatures or sexual temptation, because he appears to be in love with something transcending the material world (cf. *Symp.* 211d). It is not just that Socrates has apparently seen intelligible Beauty, he actually resembles it:

⁶ Burkert (1987) 89, 92.

As many commentators have observed, Socrates actually resembles the Form of Beauty in a number of ways. Like the Form he shows up “suddenly” (213c1; 210e4). He convinces Alcibiades that his present life is not “livable” – recalling the summit of the ascent (211d1-3) – and that he should spend the rest of his life in his company (216a) as a successful lover does with the Form (cf. 211e4).⁷

Just as the vision of Beauty itself triggers strong and unsettling emotions in those who contemplate it (T.3: ‘he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature’), comparable to falling in love with a beautiful person, Socrates also has a confusing effect on others (Pl. *Symp.* 215d1-6):

T.5 ἡμεῖς γοῦν ὅταν μὲν τοῦ ἄλλου ἀκούωμεν λέγοντος καὶ πάνυ ἀγαθοῦ ῥήτορος ἄλλους λόγους, οὐδὲν μέλει ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν οὐδενί· ἐπειδὴ δὲ σοῦ τις ἀκούῃ ἢ τῶν σῶν λόγων ἄλλου λέγοντος, καὶ πάνυ φαῦλος ἢ ὁ λέγων, ἕαντε γυνὴ ἀκούῃ ἕαντε ἀνὴρ ἕαντε μειράκιον, **ἐκπεπληγμένοι ἐσμέν** καὶ κατεχόμεθα.

*You know, people hardly ever take a speaker seriously, even if he is the greatest orator; but let anyone – man, woman, or child – listen to you or even to a poor account of what you say – and we are **thrown into confusion** and completely possessed.*⁸

Below, I will return to the experience of confusion (*ekplexis*) that Beauty causes. For the moment, let us note that Plato wants us, readers, to share in the amazement and confusion that besets Alcibiades and, to do this, he offers vivid descriptions of Socrates’ *atopia* / strangeness, both here and in other dialogues. Plato thus presents Socrates as a daimonic figure, comparable to Eros, in between the human and divine worlds. The unsettling experience of encountering Socrates, even if it is only in Plato’s dialogues (‘a poor account of what you say’), moves us to seek initiation in the supreme mysteries of Eros ourselves.

The Myth of the Winged Charioteer as a Specimen of Soul-Moving Rhetoric

Plato tries to make his readers experience something of the *erōs*, the desire for intelligible contemplation, not just by means of the portrayal of Socrates in the *Symposium*, but also by means of the moving myth of the winged charioteer in the *Phaedrus*, to which Burkert refers in the above-quoted passage. As is well known, Socrates, in his so-

⁷ Blondell (2006) 157.

⁸ Trans. Nehamas & Woodruff (1997) 497, adapted.

called Great Speech in the *Phaedrus*, compares the human soul to a team of horses and a charioteer that has lost its wings, and hence the ability to fly that it once had. The experience of falling in love with a beautiful person may prompt the charioteer to seek true Beauty. As a result, the soul will now start to sprout wings that will allow it to travel upwards to the rim of heavens and join the gods who travel these heavenly regions on their chariots in order to contemplate the Forms and that of Beauty in particular.

It should be pointed out that the Great Speech not just bears testimony of the emotional nature of the Eleusinian Mysteries, as Burkert aptly points out, but that the Great Speech by itself is also intended to evoke similar emotions on the part of the audience. As is well-known, the twin themes of the *Phaedrus* are love (*erôs*) and rhetoric. The Great Speech is Socrates' reply to one by the famous rhetorician Lysias. Socrates' speech is not just intended as a correction of the content of Lysias' speech (love as a businesslike exchange of bodily beauty and sexual gratification for other goods), but also as criticism of his rhetorical skills. In the *Phaedrus* and elsewhere in Plato, rhetoric is often portrayed as the opposite of philosophy. Whereas philosophy is about demonstration by means of argumentation, rhetoric is about persuasion. Rhetoric, according to Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, is a matter of *psychagôgia*, of 'moving the soul'. In the case of the Great Speech this is done not by argumentation, but by evoking strong emotions on the part of the public. As Harvey Yunis, a student of ancient rhetoric, has put it:

Rather than giving the auditor sufficient, better, or even overwhelming reason to seek divine eros, Socrates aims to make the auditor feel the attractions of divine eros so intensely that he will desire that eros himself and move towards it on his own. ... The Great Speech, a mimesis in prose, portrays the pursuit of knowledge as an intense erotic experience, triggered and driven by the sight of beauty – the sight of being itself and the parallel sight of the beauty of the beloved (251a-252b). The portrayal is so vivid and the narrative tension so intense that the auditor himself acquires a desire for the very experience that is portrayed. Eros so vividly portrayed, arouses eros. This psychagogic, or soul-moving, phenomenon, which is the hallmark of erotic art, was familiar to Plato and his contemporaries through the profusion of erotic art produced in Athens and Greece generally.⁹

⁹ Yunis (2005) 111-12.

Thus, we have found so far that Plato compares contemplation of the intelligible realm, which is characterized by Beauty, to initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries. His reason for doing so is that the contemplation of the intelligible is, to him, first and foremost an experience. The vivid portrayal of the eccentric Socrates and the evocative imagery of the winged charioteer are both intended to convey something of the confusing experience of the contemplation of the lustre of the intelligible. I will now turn to the reception of these ideas by Proclus and the Neoplatonic Athenian school.

Part Two

Proclus on Contemplation of Intelligible Beauty as a Preparatory Experience

The Place and Function of Beauty in Proclean Metaphysics

Plato is rather noncommittal about the structure of the intelligible. In particular, he does not discuss the precise relation between Beauty itself, which, to judge from the above-quoted passage from the *Phaedrus* (T.4), apparently holds a position of prominence within the realm of Forms and the Idea of the Good, which in the *Republic* is presented as an entity that transcends Being and hence the other Forms. The Neoplatonists, as part of their efforts to systematize Plato's teachings, try to clear up this confusion. This urge to systematize Plato finds its fullest expression in Proclus' *Platonic Theology*, an elaborate account of the divine world in which Proclus traces the emanation of the divine from the top (the One) down to the material cosmos. In the first book of this *summa* of late Neoplatonic theology, Proclus briefly discusses the *Phaedrus*. According to Proclus (*Platonic Theology* 1.22-24), the *Phaedrus* teaches us about a set of three attributes of the Gods: goodness (*agathon*), wisdom (*sophia*), and beauty (*kalon*). The Gods in this context are the so-called Henads, i.e. manifestations of the highest principle, the One (*to Hen*), that act as the ultimate causes of all other entities that populate the Neoplatonic metaphysical universe. These Henads, i.e. the Gods properly speaking, are in particular the causes of all lower divine beings, such as the gods mentioned in the myth of the *Phaedrus* and of the so-called *daimones*, inferior divine beings who act as a go-between for the gods and men. The three divine attributes of the Henads stand in a hierarchical relationship to one another. Goodness is superior to the other two

attributes since it is most like the One itself.¹⁰ Second in rank comes wisdom, since wisdom ‘is already in labour’ with regard to ‘the intelligible light and the very first forms’.

T.6 Proclus *Platonic Theology* 1.24, p. 108.23-109.2 τὸ δὲ αὐτὸ κάλλος ἐπ’ ἅκροις ἵδρυται τοῖς εἶδεσι καὶ προλάμπει τὸ θεῖον φῶς καὶ τοῖς ἀνιοῦσι πρῶτον **ἐκφαίνεται**, παντὸς φωσφόρου στιλπνότερον καὶ ἐρασμιώτερον ἰδεῖν καὶ περιπτύσσασθαι καὶ **μετ’ ἐκπλήξεως ἐκφαινόμενον** λαβεῖν

*Beauty, finally, is seated on top of the Forms and shines forth the divine light and is the first to shine out (ekphaineitai) to those who go up, outshining even the Morning Star in brightness, even more lovely for them to see and to embrace and to take hold of in a state of confusion when it appears (met’ ekpléxeōs ekphainomenon).*¹¹

‘Those who go up’ are those souls who, according to the *Phaedrus*, follow Zeus and the other Olympian gods and who are initiated into ‘the mystery that we may rightly call the most blessed of all’ (T.4). Note, however, that whereas the *Phaedrus* suggests that the vision of Beauty constitutes the final phase of initiation, Proclus here presents a vision of Beauty as a *first* manifestation (*ekphainon*) of the divine Henads. Beauty, Proclus says, ‘heralds the secret of the (divine) goodness, for which reason it is called ‘the radiant one, and bright one, the one that shines out’.¹² It is because of its luminous nature that Beauty throws the soul into confusion (*ekpléxis*) when it appears. Proclus elaborates on the preparatory function of the vision of Beauty in the following passage from Book Three of the *Platonic Theology* (3.18, p. 64.2-12):

T.7 Τὸ γὰρ ἐκλάμπον αὐτοῦ καὶ δραστήριον ὁξέως διὰ πάσης χωρεῖ τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ πᾶσαν **ἐπιστρέφει** θεωμένην τὸ καλὸν ὡς τῷ ἀγαθῷ πάντων ὁμοιότατον. (...) Καὶ ὥσπερ ἐν ταῖς ἀγιοτάταις τελεταῖς πρὸ τῶν μυστικῶν θεαμάτων **ἐκπληξίς** τῶν μουμένων, οὕτω δὴ καὶ τοῖς νοητοῖς πρὸ τῆς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ μετουσίας τὸ κάλλος προφαινόμενον **ἐκπλήττει** τοὺς ὁρώντας καὶ **ἐπιστρέφει** τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ δείκνυσιν ἐν τοῖς προθύροις ἱδρυμένον οἷόν ἐστιν ἄρα τὸ ἐν τοῖς ἀδύτοις καὶ τὸ κρύφιον ἀγαθόν.

¹⁰ As will be explained below, in Neoplatonic metaphysics the One coincides with the Good itself.

¹¹ Unless noted, subsequent translations are by the author.

¹² Proclus *Platonic Theology* 1.24, p. 108, 19-20.

*For the radiance and energy of it (Beauty itself) shoots straight through the entire soul and **turns it** (epistrephei) in its entirety towards the vision of Beauty as that which of all things resembles the Good most closely. [...] And just as in the most holy of mysteries **the confusion** (ekplêxis) of the initiates precedes the visions of mystic objects, in the same way in the intelligible realm, before the communion with the Good, Beauty appears and **causes confusion** (ekplêtei) among the viewers and **turns the soul** (epistrephei) and, being seated in the porch, shows what the One, hidden inside the sanctuary, is like.*

Beauty is here presented as the perceptible manifestation (if only to the soul's eye) of the One or the Good that remains 'hidden inside the sanctuary'. Thus, the vision of Beauty precedes and prepares us for the 'communion with the One', i.e. Beauty brings us into contact with the One or the Good by turning us around (*epistrephein*). Proclus here uses a Neoplatonic technical term, *epistrophê*, which describes the spiritual movement of the soul back to the origin of all things (the One) and hence its ultimate destination (thus the One doubles as the ultimate Good to which everything aspires). This turning around is associated with the violent experience of confusion (*ekplêxis*) that was part of the Eleusinian Mysteries. In fact, scholars of the Eleusinian Mysteries have quoted this particular passage to illustrate the importance of confusion (*ekplêxis*) in the celebration of mystery-cults.¹³

Proclus thus appears to understand the emotional experience of the final stage of initiation in a different way from Plato. For Plato the strong emotions signal the end of the spiritual journey, the response of the soul to the epiphany of Beauty. For Proclus the epiphany of Beauty and the corresponding experience are not the end of the journey. Rather, they prepare the soul for unification with the Good, the ultimate principle. Note, however, that the soul which is about to experience Neoplatonic Beauty has already completely transcended its bodily existence, so all talk about shocking experiences, mystery rites and seeing mystic objects is merely intended as a comparison to give the reader an impression of what such an extraordinary experience is like. In a much earlier stage of the ascent of the soul, which involves actual initiations and strong emotions, however, we find the same pattern. Shocking experiences of perceptible forms of beauty are manifestations, or epiphanies, of the divine which serve to bring us in closer contact with divine goodness.

¹³ See, e.g., Roussel (1934) 833-4; Clinton (1974) 56.

Neoplatonic Theurgy and Spiritual Experience

Even though Proclus (T.7) refers to the Eleusinian Mysteries as something of which he has first-hand experience, their celebration had in fact come to an end some fifteen years before he was born. Walter Burkert speculates that Proclus knew about the Mysteries from his close connections with the family of the last Eleusinian hierophant, one Nestorius. Be that as it may, this does not as such fully explain why Proclus puts stress on the emotional nature of the celebration of the Mysteries. He had not, after all, gone through these experiences himself. The answer must be sought in the role that theurgy plays in the spiritual life of the later Neoplatonists. The celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries was understood by the Platonists as yet another example of the theurgic ritual that they practiced with zeal. Take the context of the famous remark by Aristotle that the Eleusinian Mysteries were all about experience, rather than instruction, to which Burkert alludes in the above-quoted passage. The remark has been transmitted by the Christian Neoplatonist Synesius. He quotes Aristotle as follows (Aristotle Fr. 15 ed. Rose = Synesius *Dio* 10):

T.8 (...) καθάπερ Ἀριστοτέλης ἀξιοῖ τοὺς τελουμένους οὐ **μαθεῖν** τί δεῖν, ἀλλὰ **παθεῖν** καὶ διατεθῆναι, δηλονότι γενομένους **ἐπιτηδείους**·

(...) *just as Aristotle is of the opinion that the initiates need not **learn** (mathein) anything, but must undergo **experiences** (pathein) and be brought into a certain condition, i.e. they have become **fit** (epitêdeios, i.e. for revelation).*

The remark that the initiates should be ‘rendered fit’ for revelation reads as a gloss that was added by Synesius to clarify the quotation from Aristotle to his contemporary readership. Fitness (*epitêdeiotês*; ἐπιτηδειότης) is a key-concept in Neoplatonic theurgy. According to the Neoplatonists, the divine, being itself immaterial, is not bound by physical boundaries. Hence the divine is omni-present. The problem, however, is that not all material things are equally fit to partake in and hence profit from this divine presence. Hence, the theurgist, when he wishes to call forth the divine powers, may construct a statue that is more fit (*epitêdeios*) than others to receive the divine power. He does so by combining all sorts of materials (i.e. parts of animals, plants and stones) that are congenial to the relevant divine power. These

materials are called symbols (*symbola*) or pass-words (*sunthémata*).¹⁴ Whereas each symbol by itself might be too weak to receive the divine, a combination of these may achieve the desired effect. The statue is now fit to receive the divine presence and is responsive, or, as the Neoplatonists would argue, sympathetic to the divine. Thus, Synesius' point seems to have been that just as the theurgist renders statues fit for the reception of the divine presence, in a similar way the emotional experience of an epiphany may change us in such a way that we become sympathetic to the divine.

We find further corroboration of this theurgic interpretation of the confusing experience associated with the mysteries in Proclus's above-mentioned discussion of the function of myths in his *Commentary on the Republic*. Walter Burkert quotes this passage as yet another witness of the deep emotional impact of initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries, even though, as we have pointed out, the celebration of these Mysteries must have come to an end well before Proclus wrote this passage. It reads as follows (*In R.* 2.108.17-32):

T.9 Ὅτι δὲ καὶ εἰς τοὺς πολλοὺς δρώσιν οἱ μῦθοι, δηλοῦσιν αἱ τελεταί. καὶ γὰρ αὐταὶ χρώμεναι τοῖς μύθοις, ἵνα τὴν περὶ θεῶν ἀλήθειαν ἄρρητον κατακλείωσιν, **συμπαθείας** εἰσὶν αἵτιαι ταῖς ψυχαῖς περὶ τὰ δρώμενα τρόπον ἄγνωστον ἡμῖν καὶ θεῖον· ὥς τοὺς μὲν τῶν τελουμένων **καταπλήττεσθαι δειμάτων θείων πλήρεις γιγνομένους**, τοὺς δὲ συνδιατίθεσθαι τοῖς ἱεροῖς συμβόλοις καὶ ἑαυτῶν ἐκστάντας ὅλους ἐνιδρῶσθαι τοῖς θεοῖς καὶ ἐνθεάζειν· πάντως που καὶ τῶν ἐπομένων αὐτοῖς κρειττόνων ἡμῶν γενῶν διὰ τὴν πρὸς τὰ τοιαῦτα συνθήματα φιλίαν ἀνεγειρόντων ἡμᾶς εἰς τὴν πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς δι' αὐτῶν **συμπάθειαν**. ἢ πῶς μετ' ἐκείνων μὲν πᾶς ὁ περὶ γῆν τόπος μεστός ἦν παντοίων ἀγαθῶν, ὧν θεοὶ προζενοῦσιν ἀνθρώποις, ἄνευ δὲ ἐκείνων ἄπνοα πάντα καὶ ἄμοιρα τῆς τῶν θεῶν ἐστὶν ἐπιλάμφεως; Ἀλλὰ τῶν μὲν μύθων τὰς αἰτίας καὶ ἐν τοῖς Περι τῶν μυθικῶν συμβόλων ἐξεργάσμεθα.

*That myths also have an effect on the many is apparent from the initiation rites. For these too cause the souls to be **sympathetic** (sympatheia) with*

¹⁴ See, e.g., Proclus *Commentary on the Cratylus* § 51, p. 19.12-15: '[t]he art of "telestic" consecration through certain symbols and ineffable passwords fashions the statues which are in this way like the gods and makes these statues fit (ἐπιτήδεια) for the reception of divine illumination' (trans. Duvick (2007) 28 adapted); for this theurgic sense of ἐπιτηδεύτης, see further, for example, Procl. *In Ti.* 1.162.8; 2.231.18 with Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013) 348.

*the proceedings in a manner that is both unknowable to us and divine by making use of myths in order to box off the unspeakable truth concerning the gods, and the result is that some of the initiates become **terrified** (kata-plêttesthai) and are **filled with fear for the divine** (deimatôn theiôn), while others are sympathetically affected together with the holy symbols and in a state of ecstasy establish themselves completely among the gods and are inspired by them. For at any rate, to my mind at least, those sorts of beings that are superior to us and that follow the gods, because of their affection towards such passwords, awake in us a **sympathy** (sympatheia) towards the gods through these. For how else could it be that with such passwords the entire earth is full of all sorts of good things that the gods grant to human beings, but that without these everything is bereft of divine inspiration and illumination? But we have already provided an exhaustive treatment of the causes of myths in *On Mythical Symbols*.*

In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades observes that not everybody is affected by the mystery rites in the same way. Only people ready for it will succumb to a state of ecstasy. In this text, we see something similar: some people will just be frightened out of their wits, but others will be truly inspired and receive the divine goods.¹⁵ Note the role of intermediaries in the process. Before entering into contact with the gods and the good things that they confer upon us, the initiates must first be rendered sympathetic, in the theurgic sense of the word, to the gods. This is the role of the ‘sorts of beings that are superior to us and that follow the gods’. The phrase recalls the myth of the *Phaedrus*, according to which the Olympian gods, when driving their chariots around the rim of heavens in contemplation of the Forms, are followed by lesser divine beings, i.e. *daimones*, as well as human souls. These *daimones*, since they belong to the same causal series as the god that stands at the head of such a series, are attracted to the material symbols that belong to this causal series. In the mystery rites, according to Proclus’ interpretation, the priests summon forth these *daimonic* powers in order to render the initiates sympathetic to the divine.

The close connection between the confusing experiences associated with initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries and *daimonic* forces also comes to the fore in Proclus’ *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, when he discusses the overwhelming impression that Alcibiades claims Socrates made on him. At the very beginning of the *Alcibiades* (103a1), Socrates observes that Alcibiades seems amazed (*thaumazein*) that he, Socrates, his oldest lover, has not given up on him, unlike the

¹⁵ On these different responses, cf. Burkert (1987) 114.

others.¹⁶ Socrates claims that there is a supra-human, i.e. *daimonic*, cause for his perseverance. He thus suggests that his persistent amorous pursuit of Alcibiades is not prompted by some base desire, but by a god-given command to try to save Alcibiades from a life of unlimited, and therefore pointless, worldly ambition by converting him to philosophy. Proclus comments (*Commentary on the Alcibiades* 61.8-62.2):

T.10 δέικνυται οὖν ἤδη καὶ **δαιμόνιός τις** ὁ Σωκράτης μείζονα **τὴν ἔκπληξιν** ἀνεγείρων ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ πολλαπλασιάζων τὸ **θαῦμα** τὸ περὶ φιλοσοφίαν. καὶ τοῦτο εἰκότως ὁ Σωκράτης ποιεῖ· πολλαχού γὰρ αἱ τοιαῦται **ἐκπλήξεις** εἰς τὴν περὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἡμᾶς ἐπισπῶνται **συμπάθειαν**. ὥσπερ οὖν ἐν ταῖς ἀγιωτάταις τῶν τελετῶν προηγούνται τῶν δρωμένων **καταπλήξεις** τινές, αἱ μὲν διὰ τῶν λεγομένων, αἱ δὲ διὰ τῶν δεικνυμένων ὑποκατακλίνουσαι τῷ θεῷ τὴν ψυχὴν, οὕτω δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς τῆς φιλοσοφίας προθύροις ἀνεγείρει **θαῦμα** τῷ νεανίσκῳ καὶ **ἐκπληξιν** περὶ ἑαυτὸν ὁ καθηγούμενος, ἵνα δράσωσιν εἰς αὐτὸν οἱ λόγοι προϊόντες καὶ ἐκκαλέσωνται πρὸς τὴν φιλόσοφον ζωὴν.

Socrates thus already appears to be some sort of daimonic creature, since he creates an even greater mental confusion (ekpléxis) in him [i.e. Alcibiades] and increases further his amazement (thauma) about philosophy. And it is reasonable that Socrates does this. For in many cases such confusing experiences (ekpléxeis) make us sympathetic (sympatheia) towards the good. Thus, just as in the most holy initiations certain disturbing experiences (katapléxeis) precede the performances of the mysteries, some of which subject the soul to the divine by what is said, others by what is shown, in the same manner also, while they [i.e. Socrates and Alcibiades] stand in the porch of philosophy, his guide creates amazement (thauma) and confusion (ekpléxis) in the young man about himself [i.e. Socrates] in order that the arguments that are put forward will have an effect on him and will call him to the philosophical life.

It is telling that Proclus here equates Alcibiades' amazement about Socrates' loyalty with the overwhelming experience of *ekpléxis* during the initiatory state of the initiation. Nothing in the Platonic text justifies this assumption, but we may perhaps assume that Proclus reads this with the above-discussed passage from the *Symposium* in mind. Socrates' position as a *daimonic* force that stands in the porch

¹⁶ I will comment on Proclus' theurgic understanding of amazement (*thauma*) in greater detail below.

of philosophy and which converts Alcibiades towards philosophy is analogous to the position of Beauty itself which ‘seated in the porch, shows what the One ... is like’ (T.7) and turns (*epistrephei*) the soul towards the Good. Both the *daimonic* Socrates and Beauty in turn are analogous to the confusing preparatory stage of the Eleusinian mysteries that prepares the participants for communion with the divine.

The Neoplatonic Textual Community: Reading Texts as a Mystical Experience

The Neoplatonic Teacher as an Amazing Spectacle

In the final part of this article, I will now try to show how in the Neoplatonic textual community of Athens reading Platonic texts, in particular Platonic myths such as the Great Speech from the *Phaedrus*, was intended as an alternative to the Eleusinian Mysteries that had now ceased to be performed.¹⁷ Above, we have already seen how Proclus interprets Plato’s description of Socrates as a manifestation of divine Beauty that throws Alcibiades into a state of confusion in terms of his own Neoplatonic metaphysics (Beauty as a manifestation of the Neoplatonic Good) and theurgy (Socrates renders Alcibiades fit, i.e. makes him sympathetic, to receive the gifts of divine illumination and goodness). In the Athenian Neoplatonic community, spiritual leaders such as Syrianus, i.e. Proclus’ teacher, and Proclus himself, were assigned a similar function. In words that echo the distinction between the preliminary and final mysteries from the *Symposium* (T.1 above), Marinus, in his biography of Proclus, describes Syrianus as ‘taking Proclus through the mystagogy of Plato by reading Plato’s dialogues, until they reached the *epoptia* (vision) of the final, truly divine mysteries’.¹⁸ Proclus himself describes Syrianus’ class on the *Phaedrus* as follows (*Platonic Theology* 4.23, p. 69, 8-12):

¹⁷ I derive the idea of the Neoplatonic school of Athens as a textual community from Baltzly (2017) 268-70. In Baltzly’s own words: ‘Proclus believed that parties to his readings of canonical texts within the school were physically transformed for the better through the act of reading and interpreting the texts of Plato with a master’ (o.c. p. 268). He next illustrates his thesis by means of a helpful example drawn from Proclus’ *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, although Baltzly does not link the transformative powers that the Athenian Neoplatonists ascribed to the communal reading of those texts to their theurgical practices and the daimonic status of the teacher in the way I do in this article.

¹⁸ Marinus §13.4-10.

T.11 Τί γάρ δεῖ λέγειν τὸν ἡμέτερον καθηγεμόνα τὸν ὡς ἀληθῶς Βάκχον, ὃς περὶ τὸν Πλάτωνα διαφερόντως ἐνθεάζων καὶ μέχρις ἡμῶν τὸ **θαῦμα** καὶ τὴν **ἐκπληξιν** τῆς Πλατωνικῆς θεωρίας ἐξέλαμψεν;

*For why should we talk about our guide, that true Bacchant, who was superbly inspired when it came to Plato and who radiated to us **amazement** (thauma) and **confusion** (ekpléxis) about the Platonic spectacle?*

The ‘Platonic spectacle’ refers to the myth of the winged charioteer and the image that it paints of the celestial world of the Forms. Syrianus is said to ‘radiate’ confusion and amazement, as if he were a manifestation of divine Beauty, of which we are told (**T.7**) that its ‘radiance and energy [...] shoots straight through the entire soul and turns (*epistrephei*) it in its entirety towards the vision of Beauty’, causing ‘confusion’ when it appears.

The radiation of ‘amazement and confusion’ calls to mind Porphyry’s description of Plotinus. According to Porphyry, Plotinus was on such occasions visibly divinely inspired.

When Proclus writes that Syrianus radiated amazement and confusion, we should probably think of a visual sign. Already in his biography of Plotinus, Porphyry describes how Plotinus, when he lectured about the intelligible showed visible signs of being in a very special spiritual state. Whereas in the case of Plotinus this amounts to no more than sweating gently, in Proclus’ case these visible signs were far more spectacular, if we are to believe Proclus’ biographer, Marinus (*Proclus* or *On Happiness* 23):

T.12 οὐ γὰρ ἄνευ θείας ἐπιπνοίας ἐφαίνετο διαλέγεσθαι καὶ τὰ ταῖς νιφάδεσσιν ὄντως ἑοικότα ῥήματα προχεῖν τοῦ σωφρονούντος ἐκείνου στόματος. μαρμαρυγῆς γάρ τινος ἐδόκει τὰ ὄμματα αὐτοῦ πληροῦσθαι καὶ τὸ ἄλλο πρόσωπον ἐλλάμψεως θείας μετεῖχεν. ποτὲ γοῦν τις αὐτῷ παραγενόμενος ἐξηγουμένῳ ἀνὴρ τῶν ἐπιφανῶν ἐν τῇ πολιτείᾳ, ἀφευδῆς καὶ ἄλλως αἰδοῖος (Ῥουφίνος αὐτῷ ὄνομα), φῶς εἶδε περιθέον τὴν αὐτοῦ κεφαλὴν. ὥς δὲ πέρας ἐπέθηκε τῇ αὐτοῦ ἐξηγήσει, ἀναστὰς ὁ Ῥουφίνος προσεκύνησέ τε αὐτὸν καὶ τὰ τῆς θείας ἐκείνης ὄψεως ὁμνὸς ἀπήγγελλεν.

For it seemed that he spoke under divine inspiration, and that the words truly fell like snow from that wise man’s mouth. For his eyes seemed to be filled with some sort of brilliance, and the rest of his visage had a share of divine illumination. Once in the course of his exposition, a man called Rufinus, one

*of the most conspicuous figures in politics, a truthful person and otherwise worthy of respect, saw a light playing around his head. And when he reached the end of his exposition, Rufinus stood up, made an obeisance and testified an oath to the divine vision.*¹⁹

Proclus, like Socrates, has gone through a process of spiritual transformation. Proclus has become fit to receive divine illumination. This divine illumination manifests itself both through the inspired content of his speeches and through the visible light which he emits. In other words, we are dealing with an epiphany. Rufinus recognised a god when he encountered one and acted correspondingly. One may think of Rufinus as a late antique version of Alcibiades. They are both politicians. Moreover, their respective accounts are trustworthy. In the case of Alcibiades because, by his own admittance, he is too drunk to lie, in the case of Rufinus because he is truthful by nature. The difference is that while Socrates in the end failed to convert Alcibiades to a more virtuous lifestyle, Rufinus became a dedicated follower of Proclus.

The Neoplatonic Myth as an Example of Theurgic Rhetoric

Above, we have seen that a modern scholar like Harvey Yunis stresses the rhetoric nature of the myth of the winged charioteer. Its meaning, for Yunis, is to persuade its audience of the Platonic worldview, not to argue for it. We will now see that the Athenian Neoplatonists had already arrived at a similar conclusion, although, unlike Yunis, they connect the persuasive nature of Plato's myths to their theurgical practices. At the start of the *Platonic Theology*, Proclus imagines that someone may accuse Plato of being no better than the tragic poets when he interrupts serious philosophical discourse for a 'solemn and impressive spectacle' (ἡ τοιαύτη θεωρία σεμνή και ὑπερφύης) that does not encourage philosophical investigation.²⁰ Of course, Proclus does not agree. According to him, Plato combines his philosophical discourses with myths because philosophical demonstration addresses the rational part of our soul, whereas myths appeal to its divine part. In doing so, he takes his inspiration from the ancient

¹⁹ Trans. Edwards (2000) 94.

²⁰ Proclus *Platonic Theology* 1.6, p. 30.11-17; cf. Porter (2010) 78 n. 7. Another example of a sublime Platonic passage is the (beginning of the) speech of the Demiurge (cf. *Pl. Ti.* 41a), which Proclus (*In Ti.* 3.199.29-200.3) describes, among other things, as 'solemn' (σεμνός) and 'striking' (καταπληκτικός; **T.9**). Anne Sheppard (2017) 278 rightly observes that Proclus, when commenting on this Platonic passage, combines the 'jargon' of literary criticism with that of Platonic philosophy.

authors, such as the divinely inspired poet Homer (Proclus *Platonic Theology* 1.6, p. 29, ll.14-17):

T.13 Οὐ γὰρ ἀποδεικτικὸν τὸ τοιοῦτον εἶδος τῶν λόγων, ἀλλ' ἐνθεαστικόν, οὐδὲ ἀνάγκης ἀλλὰ πειθοῦς ἕνεκα τοῖς παλαιοῖς μεμηχανημένον, οὐδὲ μαθήσεως φιλῆς ἀλλὰ τῆς πρὸς τὰ πράγματα συμπαθείας στοχαζόμενον.

For this sort of discourse is not demonstrative, but inspired, invented by the ancients not as a tool of coercion, but rather as one of persuasion, which aims not at bare instruction (mathêsis psilê), but at sympathy (sympatheia) with the subject-matter [i.e. the gods] at hand.

Philosophical demonstration has the power of logical necessity: one cannot but accept the outcome of a logically sound argument, even if one is unwilling to do so. This is different in the case of myths: they persuade us to accept them willingly.²¹ The opposition between the bare instruction, offered by philosophical argument, and the non-rational sympathy offered by myths, recalls Aristotle's remark, quoted by the Neoplatonist Synesius (T.8), that initiates need not learn (*mathein*) anything, but are made fit, i.e. are rendered sympathetic to the divine.

This text (T.13) should be understood in conjunction with T.9. I have quoted it above as a source of valuable information about the celebration of the Eleusinian mysteries. It deserves mentioning, however, that this passage is not primarily concerned with the celebration of these mysteries, but with the question of how texts may unify us to the divine. Just as theurgic statues that offer visual representations of invisible divine powers may attract the presence of these very divine powers by means of theurgic symbols or passwords, in the same way texts which depict the divine in words may attract their presence through literary symbolism. In T.9, Proclus refers his readers back to his now lost work *On Mythical Symbols* for further elaboration on this point. An elaborate discussion of the symbolism in Homer's poems elsewhere in the *Commentary on the Republic* gives us a good impression of what may have been the gist of this treatise.²² Proclus believes that Homer's poems were symbolic in a double sense. In reply to Plato's complaint about Homer's blasphemous depiction of the gods,

²¹ Note that this sort of persuasion is of a different kind than that which Longinus deems inferior to the ecstasy produced by sublime literature. For Proclus, the persuasion brought about by the Platonic myths is not the opposite of ecstasy but more or less identical with it.

²² I have discussed this type of symbolism in Van den Berg (2001) 91-101.

Proclus argues that these should be understood symbolically. All those stories that Plato in the *Republic* found offensive because the behaviour of the gods is all too human should not be taken at face-value, but instead as referring to Neoplatonic metaphysics. However, symbolic literature also functions in the theurgic manner described above. The divine was believed to be present in inspired texts and this divine presence could in turn inspire the reader and connect him to the divine. This Proclean theory of literary symbolism in regard to the poems of Homer has received its fair share of scholarly attention. Note, however, that in this context, Proclus is talking primarily about Plato's myths, not those of Homer. We may thus conclude, both from T.9 and T.13, that for Proclus Plato's myths hold the same theurgic powers as those of Homer. Those who have prepared themselves sufficiently will be brought to a state of ecstasy in which they will actually experience for themselves the divine world in an intuitive, supra-rational fashion. Plato moves his readers in a mysterious way indeed.

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