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## Confusion (*Ekplêxis*) and Sympathy (*Sympatheia*): The Neoplatonist Proclus on the Aesthetics of Epiphany and Theurgic Union

*Robbert M. van den Berg*

One of the most intriguing works of late Antiquity is a book about the lives and times of the pagan Neoplatonists in late ancient Alexandria and Athens by Damascius, the last head of the Neoplatonic Academy in Athens. The book, which survives only in fragments, was entitled either *The Life of Isidore* or *The Philosophical History*. It is a rich source of information about the spirituality and religious practices of these last pagan philosophers, as the following fragment illustrates. It describes the impact that a certain statue of Aphrodite made on Damascius:

T.1 *The author says he saw a statue of Aphrodite dedicated by Herodes the sophist. Upon seeing it, I fell into a sweat because of amazement (thambos) and confusion (ekplêxis) and my soul was filled with such joy that I was quite unable to go back home. I went away several times only to return to that sight again. The sculptor has blended into it so much beauty – nothing sweet or sensual, but something dignified and virile: clad in armour and as if just returning from a victory, with an expression of joy. (Dam. Isid. Fr. 63A; ed./transl. Athanassiadi 1999, 171–173 slightly adapted)*<sup>1</sup>

From Damascius' description, we may deduce that he believed to have encountered an animated statue and hence experienced an epiphany. As already Henk Versnel noted in a seminal article on this topic, the ancient Greeks regarded any form of divine presence (*parousia*, παρουσία) as an epi-

1 Dam. *Isid. Fr.* 63A: ὅτι φησὶν ὁ συγγραφεὺς ἄγαλμα τῆς Ἀφροδίτης ἰδεῖν ἰδρυμένον Ἡρώδου τοῦ σοφιστοῦ ἀνάθημα. τοῦτο οὖν, φησί, θεασάμενος ἰδρῶσα μὲν ὑπὸ θάμβους καὶ ἐκπλήξεως, οὕτω δὲ τὴν ψυχὴν διετέθην ὑπὸ τῆς εὐφροσύνης, ὥστε οὐχ οἶός τ' ἦν οἴκαδε ἐπανιέναι, πολλάκις δὲ ἀπιῶν ἐπαναστρέφειν ἐπὶ τὸ θέαμα· τοσοῦτον αὐτῷ κάλλος ἐνεκέρασεν ὁ τεχνίτης, οὐ γλυκύ τι καὶ ἀφροδίσιον, ἀλλὰ βλοσυρόν τε καὶ ἀνδρικόν, ἔνοπλον μὲν, οἶον δὲ ἀπὸ νίκης ἐπανηγμένης καὶ τὸ γεγηθὸς ἐπιφαινούσης.

phany (*epiphaneia*, ἐπιφάνεια), and hence the ancient term *epiphaneia* is applicable to a broader category of phenomena than its modern counterpart. The gods might be present in “‘their own’ human shapes, as statues or in animal forms.”<sup>2</sup> In the wake of Versnel and others, recent research has called scholarly attention to epiphany as a key element of religious life in ancient Greece.<sup>3</sup>

Damascius describes the overwhelming effects of the epiphany of Aphrodite that he experienced in terms of mental disorientation: it left him in a state of confusion (*ekpléxis*, ἔκπληξις). In this paper, I intend to explore this notion of *ekpléxis*, translated throughout as “confusion,” in late pagan Neoplatonic metaphysics, aesthetics and theurgy, i.e., the rituals by means of which the pagan Neoplatonists sought to enter into contact with the gods. I will do so by analysing the occurrence of the term in the most voluminous of all late Neoplatonic authors, Proclus (412–485 CE), Damascius’ famous predecessor as head of the Athenian Neoplatonic Academy. I will argue that Proclus holds that the confusion (*ekpléxis*) that results from encounters with perceptible manifestations of divine Beauty, i.e., epiphanies, prepares a human soul for spiritual union with the divine.

This paper falls into two parts. The first part examines the metaphysics of *ekpléxis* and its corresponding role in theurgic ritual. It starts with a brief perusal the Platonic source texts that inform the Neoplatonic concept of *ekpléxis*. Plato, both in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, associates *ekpléxis* with the unsettling experience of falling in love with a beautiful person. Plato explains the effect that the beautiful beloved has on the lover from the fact that physical beauty allows us catch first glance of the Form of Beauty, to which the philosophically minded couple of lovers will ultimately ascend. Falling in love is hence presented as analogous to the first stage of the Eleusinian mysteries, which prepared the initiands for the revelations that constituted the second stage. The two subsequent sections take a closer look at Proclus’ interpretation of these Platonic passages both in metaphysical and theurgic terms. For Proclus, the contemplation of Beauty prepares the way for union with the divine Good, and hence the former now corresponds to the first stage of the mystery rites and the latter to the second stage. Moreover, Plato’s comparison of the

2 Versnel (1987) 51.

3 See, for example, the recent exhaustive study by Petridou (2015); for epiphany in relation to the artistic representations of the divine (one of the themes of this paper), cf. the recent monograph by Platt (2011), who does not, however, deal with late antiquity; for an instructive discussion of epiphany in relation to the religious thought of the Neoplatonist Iamblichus and the emperor Julian, see Tanaseanu-Döbler (2017).

ascent to the intelligible to the initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries gains new significance for Proclus, since he takes these mysteries to be fore-runners of his own theurgic practices. In the actual celebration of the Eleusinian mysteries and other theurgic rites, according to Proclus, the confusion (*ekplêxis*) brought about by epiphanies of beautiful *daimonic* beings brings about a bond of theurgic sympathy (*sympatheia*) with the gods proper that allow human beings to partake in the good gifts that they bestow on us.

In the second half of this paper, I shall turn to the aesthetics of epiphany. In Greek aesthetical theory *ekplêxis* is associated with the power of great works of art to move their public emotionally. Proclus ascribes this effect to a divine presence, as will appear from two examples, one taken from the visual arts, that of statues of the gods, and one from the domain of literature, that of Plato's sublime myths. In these cases too, *ekplêxis* turns us around towards and unites us with the divine. Once again, Proclus talks about this confusing effect of works of art in theurgic terms. In fact, for him animated statues in particular are a prime example of actual theurgical practices.

## 1 *Ekplêxis*, Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Theurgic Union

### 1.1 *Ekplêxis*, Platonic Love and Eleusinian Mysteries

Neoplatonic descriptions of *ekplêxis* are informed first and foremost by Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. In these two dialogues that celebrate the power of love, Plato describes how the confusing experience of seeing a beautiful person and falling in love with him may set in motion a process of spiritual movement away from physical beauty to the intelligible Platonic Forms and to that of Beauty itself in particular. In both dialogues Plato compares the gradual progress of the Platonic philosopher towards the contemplation of the Forms to the proceedings of the Eleusinian mysteries, and in particular to the distinction between an initial, preparatory stage and a second one during which sacred objects were revealed to the initiands. This preparatory stage of the Eleusinian mysteries sought to recreate the state of emotional confusion associated with divine epiphany. It apparently consisted of terrifying experiences that were intended to disorientate the initiands and thus make them more receptive to the revelations of the subsequent stage.

The *Phaedrus* (251a) describes the unsettling experience of falling in love in graphic detail: the lover will first shiver and then break out in a sweat and be hot. He would sacrifice to the beloved as he would to the statue of a god, had the fear of appearing mad not prevented him from doing so. Plato's description, in its turn, takes its inspiration from that great poetess of love, Sappho.

In a famous poem (31 ed. Vogt), she describes how she is unable to look at her beloved. Doing so causes her to experience all sorts of strong physical reactions, including, once again, breaking into a sweat.<sup>4</sup> One example of a person who falls into a state of confusion because of love is Alcibiades. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades describes how the words of Socrates move him unlike those of any acclaimed orator:

T.2 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 (i.e., Socrates, RMvdB) or even a poor account of what you say – and we are all confused (*ekpeplegmenoi*) and completely possessed. (Pl. *Smp.* 215d1–6; transl. Nehamas and Woodruff 1997, 497)<sup>5</sup>

Listening to Socrates, Alcibiades continues, brings him to tears and makes his heart leap (Plato, *Symposium* 215e1–3). He ascribes the mesmerizing effect of Socrates' words to the fact that they are divine. In this respect they are similar to the melodies of the mythical fluteplayer Marsyas, which have "in themselves the power to possess and so reveal those people who are ready for the god and his mysteries" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 215c4–6). Thus, Plato here identifies *ekpléxis* with a state of ecstasy caused by the fact that the divine is present in Socrates' words.<sup>6</sup>

Seeing a beautiful person will not affect everybody in the same way. In the case of most people, it will simply arouse a desire for sexual intercourse. In a minority of philosophically-minded people, however, it will rekindle recollections of the Form of Beauty, which we contemplated before birth when we were pure souls. Plato describes this contemplation of Beauty and the other Forms in some detail in the famous great myth of the *Phaedrus*. According to this myth, the Olympian gods tour the heavens in their chariots while contemplating the Forms, for example those of Justice, Self-Control and Beauty. The contemplation of the latter in particular makes a lasting impact:

4 Sapph. *Fr.* 31, 13: μ' ἴδρωσ κααχέεται.

5 Pl. *Smp.* 215d1–6: ἡμεῖς γοῦν ὅταν μὲν τοῦ ἄλλου ἀκούωμεν λέγοντος καὶ πάνυ ἀγαθοῦ ῥήτορος ἄλλους λόγους, οὐδὲν μέλει ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν οὐδενί· ἐπειδὴν δὲ σοῦ τις ἀκούη ἢ τῶν σῶν λόγων ἄλλου λέγοντος, κἂν πάνυ φαύλος ἦ ὁ λέγων, ἐάντε γυνὴ ἀκούη ἐάντε ἀνὴρ ἐάντε μειράκιον, ἐκπεπληγμένοι ἐσμέν καὶ κατεχόμεθα.

6 Cf. ps. Pl. *Clit.* 407a5–8: Clitophon has often been confused when listening to Socrates (πολλάκις ἐξεπληττόμην ἀκούων), when he told people off "like a god in a tragedy hanging from a crane" (ὥσπερ ἐπὶ μηχανῆς τραγικῆς θέος). Hence the impact of Socrates on his audience is here compared to a theatrical imitation of a divine epiphany.

T.3 But Beauty was radiant to see at that time, when the souls, along with the glorious chorus – we [philosophers] were with Zeus, while others followed other gods – saw the 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 time to come, and we gazed in rapture at sacred revealed objects that were perfect. (Pl. *Phdr.* 250b5–c2; transl. Nehamas and Woodruff 1997, 527–528)<sup>7</sup>

Plato here compares the contemplation of the Form of Beauty to the final stage of the initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries, that of the revelation of the sacred objects. The idea, then, is that seeing a beautiful person causes such an emotional shock that it makes you start looking for the metaphysical source of that beauty, with the result that you will end up contemplating the Form of Beauty itself.

### 1.2 *Proclus on the Metaphysics of Divine Beauty*

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*, 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 discusses briefly the *Phaedrus*. According to Proclus, the *Phaedrus* teaches us about a set of three attributes of the gods: goodness (*agathon*), wisdom (*sophia*), and beauty (*kallon*). The gods in this context are the so-called Henads, i.e., manifestation 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*

7 Pl. *Phdr.* 250b5–c2: κάλλος δὲ τότε ἦν ἰδεῖν λαμπρόν, ὅτε σὺν εὐδαίμονι χορῶ 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 ὀλόκληροι μὲν αὐτοὶ ὄντες καὶ ἀπαθεῖς κακῶν ὅσα ἡμᾶς ἐν ὑστέρῳ χρόνῳ ὑπέμενεν ...

and of the so-called *daimons*, inferior divine beings who act as a go-between between for the gods and men. The three divine attributes of the Henads stand in a hierarchical relation to one another. Goodness is superior to the other two attributes since it is most like the One itself.<sup>8</sup> Second in rank comes wisdom, since wisdom “is already in labour” with regard to “the intelligible light and the very first forms.”

T.4 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 Morningstar 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' ekplêxeôs ekphainomenon*). (Procl. *Theol.Plat.* I.24.108.23–109.2)<sup>9</sup>

“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” (cf. T.3). Note, however, that whereas the *Phaedrus* suggests that the vision of Beauty constitutes the final phase of the initiation, Proclus here presents the 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.”<sup>10</sup> It is because of its luminous nature that Beauty throws the soul into confusion (*ekplêxis*) 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*:

T.5 For the radiance and energy of it (Beauty itself) shoots straight through the entire soul and turns (*epistrephei*) it 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 (*ekplêttei*) among the view-

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

9 Procl. *Theol.Plat.* I.24.108.23–109.2: τὸ δὲ αὖ κάλλος ἐπ' ἄκροις ἴδρυται τοῖς εἶδεσι καὶ προλάμπει τὸ θεῖον φῶς καὶ τοῖς ἀνιοῦσι πρῶτον ἐκφαίνεται, παντὸς φωσφόρου στυλιπνότερον καὶ ἐρασμιώτερον ἰδεῖν καὶ περιπτύξασθαι καὶ μετ' ἐκπλήξεως ἐκφαινόμενον λαβεῖν.

10 Procl. *Theol.Plat.* I.24.108.19–20.

ers and turns the soul (*epistrephei*) and, being seated in the porch, shows what the One, hidden inside the sanctuary, is like. (Procl. *Theol.Plat.* III.18.64.2–12)<sup>11</sup>

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 uses here a Neoplatonic technical term, *epistrophê*, which indicates the movement of the soul back to the origin of all things (the One) and hence its ultimate destination (hence 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.<sup>12</sup> Note, however, that soul which is about to experience Neoplatonic Beauty has already completely transcended its bodily existence, so all talk about shocking experiences, mystery rites<sup>13</sup> and seeing mystic objects is merely meant as a comparison intended 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, i.e., epiphanies, of the divine which serve to bring us in closer contact with divine goodness. It is in this context of actual mystery rites that the practise of Neoplatonic theurgy becomes relevant.

### 1.3 *The Eleusinian Mysteries as Neoplatonic Theurgy*

We know frustratingly little about what went on during the Eleusinian mysteries that inform Plato's description of the ascent of the soul towards the

11 Procl. *Theol.Plat.* III.18.64.2–12: Τὸ γὰρ ἐκλάμπων αὐτοῦ καὶ δραστήριον ὀξέως διὰ πάσης χωρεῖ τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ πᾶσαν ἐπιστρέφει θεωμένην τὸ καλὸν ὡς τῷ ἀγαθῷ πάντων ὁμοίωτατον ... Καὶ ὡσπερ ἐν ταῖς ἀγνωτάταις τελεταῖς πρὸ τῶν μυστικῶν θεαμάτων ἐκπλήξις τῶν μουσμένων, οὕτω δὴ καὶ τοῖς νοητοῖς πρὸ τῆς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ μετουσίας τὸ κάλλος προφαινόμενον ἐκπλήττει τοὺς ὀρώντας καὶ ἐπιστρέφει τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ δείκνυσιν ἐν τοῖς προθύροις ἰδρυμένον οἶον ἔστιν ἄρα τὸ ἐν τοῖς ἀδύτοις καὶ τὸ κρύφιον ἀγαθόν.

12 See Roussel (1934) 833–834 and Clinton (1974) 56.

13 On Platonic notions of mystic union-initiation see Chpt. 8, sect. 3.2 and n. 10; on Egyptian mystic union see Chpt. 3 and nn. 8, 18, 30. On theurgic union and symbols see Chpt. 11, sect. 2 and n. 1, sect. 3.

intelligible realm and Beauty itself. One of the few snippets available is the following:

T.6 ... just as Aristotle is of the opinion that the initiates need not learn (*mathein*) anything, but undergo experiences (*pathein*) and be brought into a certain condition, i.e., they have become fit (*epitédeios*, i.e., for the revelation). (Arist. *Fr.* 15; ed. Rose = Synesius *Dio* 10)<sup>14</sup>

This passage provides another illustration of the strong emotions involved with the initiations into the Eleusinian mysteries. In the context of this paper, I shall not touch upon the issue of the precise role of these emotions in the celebration of the mysteries in the classical period.<sup>15</sup> From what we have seen so far, however, it has emerged that Proclus assigns a preparatory function to such experiences. They may bring about a ‘road to Damascus’-moment and covert the soul away from the material realm, towards the intelligible divine world. For all the importance, though, that Proclus attaches to this experience of *ekpléxis*, it seemingly sits ill with his Neoplatonic psychology. According to the Neoplatonists, soul taken by itself is impassive (*apathês*), i.e., it is an active principle that does not undergo or experience anything. However, according to Proclus, the soul, once it descends from the immaterial realm into the domain of matter, loses much of its activity and becomes increasingly passive, and hence liable to experiences or emotions (*pathê*).<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the soul develops a need for images. Discussing the function of mythological stories which provides graphical accounts about the gods, Proclus writes:

14 Arist. *Fr.* 15: ... καθάπερ Ἀριστοτέλης ἀξιοῖ τοὺς τελουμένους οὐ μαθεῖν τί δεῖν, ἀλλὰ παθεῖν καὶ διατεθῆναι, δηλονότι γενομένους ἐπιτηδείους. On this phrase see Burkert (1987) 69, 89–90 on the participation in the mysteries as a special form of experience; on the same topic see Bremmer (2014) 13–14.

15 On this issue, and in particular on the relation between *pathein* (experience) and *mathein* (instruction), see the illuminating paper by Herrero (2018).

16 Procl. *in Ti.* III.330.8–331.2 explains how the impassive soul may undergo emotions once it has descended into a body. He compares the impassive soul to someone who standing upon a river bank sees his reflection in the water of the river undergoing all sorts of deformation. On the mistaken assumption that he himself is that reflection, the person on the river bank next believes that it is him undergoing all these things. “In the same manner the soul too, catching sight of its own image in the body being carried away upon the river of generation and being disposed in different ways at different times under the influence of both internal affections and external collisions, is itself unaffected, but its images that it is being affected in ignorance of itself; and believing that its image is itself, it is amazed (τεθοροῦβηται), confused (ἐκπέπληκται) and at a loss.” (transl. Tarrant 2017, 222 adapted).

T.7 Since ... souls have become emotional instead of impassive and inclined to give things shape instead of having no concern with shape, it is reasonable to say that using this kind of myths is an appropriate way of teaching them. (Procl. *in R.* 11.207.21–23; transl. Bychkov and Sheppard 2010, 238 slightly adapted).<sup>17</sup>

So, our need for epiphanies, i.e., visible manifestations of the gods, is related to our embodied state, as is the fact that we respond in an emotional manner to these. But how exactly does such an experience prepare us for the revelation that marks the second, final phase of the initiation?

According to T.6, the initiates should be “rendered fit” for the revelation. This remark may perhaps be read as a gloss that was added by Synesius to clarify the quotation from Aristotle to his contemporary readership, for 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 passwords (*sunthêmata*).<sup>18</sup> 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 responsive to it, or, as the Neoplatonists would, sympathetic to the divine.

We may now piece together the following picture. 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. This state of sympathy is once again

17 Procl. *in R.* 11.207.21–23: ... γενομένης ἀπαθέσι παθητικαῖς, ἀμορφώτοις μορφωτικαῖς, πρέπων ἔστιν τρόπος διδασκαλίας εἰκότως ὁ διὰ τῶν τοιῶνδε μύθων.

18 See e.g., Procl. *in Cra.* 51.19.12–15: “[t]he art of *teletic* 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” (transl. Duvick 2007, 28 adapted); for this theurgic sense of ἐπιτηδειότης, see further, for example, Procl. *in Ti.* 1.162.8 and 11.231.18 and Tanaseanu-Döbler (2017) 348. On Mesopotamian Royal symbols see Chpt. 1, sect. 4 and n. 40. On Orphic mystic union and symbols see Chpt. 7, sect. 1 and n. 5; on Platonic notions of mystic union-initiation see Chpt. 8, sect. 3.2 and n. 10; on theurgic union and symbols see Chpt. 11, sect. 2 and n. 1, and sect. 3.

associated with emotional outbursts, be it this time that these are a sign of gratitude for the good gifts that gods bestow on those to whom they have appeared. When Marinus in his biography of Proclus describes the epiphanies that had been granted to Proclus, he mentions twice that whenever Proclus recounted his experiences to his students he was reduced to tears because of his sympathy with the divine. The first case concerns a double epiphany of Asclepius, who had cured Proclus from the painful arthritic condition that he was suffering from. According to Marinus, Proclus could not talk about it “without tears, because of his sympathy (*sympatheia*; συμπαθεία) with the god” (Marin. *Vit. Procl.* 31. 1–2). The other case is that of the god that was present in the sanctuary of Adratta (Lycia, the region from which Proclus’ family hailed). When Proclus visited the shrine, this deity appeared to him in a dream praising Proclus as “the glory of the city.” Once again, Marinus reports that Proclus, “because of his great sympathy with the god, was completely reduced to tears, whenever he recalled to us, not just the visions that he had seen, but also the words of praise that the god had spoken to him” (Marin. *Vit. Procl.* 32. 38–42). In both these cases, the tears are those of gratefulness. Asclepius had cured Proclus of a detrimental illness and the god of Adratta had honored him. In a similar way, those initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries expected to benefit from the experience. In other words, the *pathos* (emotional experience) associated with the first stage of the mysteries produces a state of *sympatheia* (theurgic sympathy) that allows the soul to be moved by the gods and make it receptive the good things that the gods bestow on the initiands during the second stage of the mysteries.

We find further corroboration of this theurgic interpretation of the confusing experience associated with the mysteries from Proclus’s above-mentioned discussion of the function of myths in his *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*. The passage is quoted by Walter Burkert in his epochal study about Greek mystery cults as a last witness of the deep emotional impact of initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries.<sup>19</sup> Proclus writes:

T.8 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 the proceedings in a manner that is both unknowable to us and

19 Burkert (1987) 113–114; admittedly, Eleusis had been destroyed some fifteen years before Proclus was born, but, Burkert remarks, Proclus knew well the daughter of the last Eleusinian hierophant Nestorius, one Asclepigeneia, whom he admired greatly because of her knowledge of the sacred traditions. Note, that Asclepigeneia was in fact the granddaughter of Nestorius (Marin. *Vit. Procl.* 28.10–15).

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 (*kataplêtesthai*) and are filled with fear for the divine (*deimatôn theiôn*), while some 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*. (Procl. in R. II.108.17–32)<sup>20</sup>

In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades had observed 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.<sup>21</sup> 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 need first to 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., *daimons*, as well as human souls. These *daimons*, since they belong to the same causal series as the god that stands at the head of such a series, are attracted to material symbols that belong to this causal series.

20 Procl. in R. II.108.17–32: “Οτι δὲ καὶ εἰς τοὺς πολλοὺς δρώσιν οἱ μῦθοι, δηλοῦσιν αἱ τελεταὶ. καὶ γὰρ αὐταὶ χρώμεναι τοῖς μύθοις, ἵνα τὴν περὶ θεῶν ἀλήθειαν ἄρρητον κατακλείωσιν, συμπαθείας εἰσὶν αἰτίαι ταῖς ψυχαῖς περὶ τὰ δρώμενα τρόπον ἄγνωστον ἡμῖν καὶ θεῖον· ὡς τοὺς μὲν τῶν τελουμένων καταπλήττεσθαι δειμάτων θείων πλήρεις γιγνομένους, τοὺς δὲ συνδιατίθεσθαι τοῖς ἱεροῖς συμβόλοις καὶ ἑαυτῶν ἐκστάντας ὅλους ἐνιδρῦσθαι 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 μεσοῦς ἦν παντοίων ἀγαθῶν, ὧν θεοὶ προξενούσιν ἀνθρώποις, ἄνευ δὲ ἐκείνων ἄπνοα πάντα καὶ ἄμοιρα τῆς τῶν θεῶν ἐστὶν ἐπιλάμπσεως; Ἀλλὰ τῶν μὲν μύθων τὰς αἰτίας καὶ ἐν τοῖς Περι τῶν μυθικῶν συμβόλων ἐξειργάσμεθα.

21 On these different responses see Burkert (1987) 114.

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 *ekplêxis* 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 others.<sup>22</sup> 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:

T.9 Socrates thus already appears to be some sort of *daimonic* creature, since he creates an even greater mental confusion (*ekplêxis*) in him (i.e., Alcibiades, RMvdB) and increases further his amazement (*thauma*) about philosophy. And it is reasonable that Socrates does this. For in many cases such confusing experiences (*ekplêxeis*) make us sympathetic (*sympatheia*) towards the good. Thus, just as in the most holy initiations certain disturbing experiences (*kataplêxeis*) proceed 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, RMvdB] stand in the porch of philosophy, his guide creates amazement (*thauma*) and confusion (*ekplêxis*) in the young man about himself (i.e., Socrates, RMvdB) in order that the arguments that are put forward will have an effect on him and will call him to the philosophical life. (Procl. *in Alc.* 61.8–62.2)<sup>23</sup>

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

23 Procl. *in Alc.* 61.8–62.2: δείκνυται οὖν ἤδη καὶ δαιμονίως τις ὁ Σωκράτης μείζονα τὴν ἐκπλήξιν ἀνεγείρων ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ πολλαπλασιάζων τὸ θαῦμα τὸ περὶ φιλοσοφίαν. καὶ τοῦτο εἰκότως ὁ Σωκράτης ποιεῖ· πολλαχοῦ γὰρ αἱ τοιαῦται ἐκπλήξεις εἰς τὴν περὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἡμᾶς ἐπισπῶνται συμπάθειαν. ὡσπερ οὖν ἐν ταῖς ἀγιωτάταις τῶν τελετῶν προηγούνται τῶν δρωμένων καταπλήξεις τινές, αἱ μὲν διὰ τῶν λεγομένων, αἱ δὲ διὰ τῶν δεικνυμένων ὑποκατακλίνουσαι τῷ θείῳ τὴν ψυχὴν, οὕτω δὴ καὶ ἐν τοῖς τῆς φιλοσοφίας προθύροις ἀνεγείρει θαῦμα τῷ νεανίσκῳ καὶ ἐκπλήξιν περὶ ἑαυτὸν ὁ καθηγούμενος, ἵνα δράσωσιν εἰς αὐτὸν οἱ λόγοι προϊόντες καὶ ἐκκαλέσωνται πρὸς τὴν φιλόσοφον ζωὴν.

It is telling that Proclus here equates Alcibiades' amazement about Socrates' loyalty with the overwhelming experience of *ekplêxis* 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* (T.2) in mind. Socrates' position as a *daimonic* force that stands in the porch 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" and which turns (*epistrophei*) the soul towards the Good (T.5). 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.

## 2 *Ekplêxis* and Neoplatonic Aesthetics: Some Illustrations

### 2.1 *A Case of Aesthetic Ekplêxis: Animated Statues*

Now that we have examined the role of *ekplêxis* in Neoplatonic theorizing about theurgy, let us turn to some actual examples of the emotional shock associated with divine epiphany through beautiful works of art, in particular in the case of statues and literature. As we noted briefly in the introduction, ancient Greek religion associated cult statues with divine epiphanies. It has been argued that chryselephantine cult statues in particular had been designed so as to recreate the experience of epiphany, the glimmer of the gold together with the whiteness of the ivory evoking feelings of surprise and admiration that were traditionally associated with the luminous appearances of the gods.<sup>24</sup> Proclus, in a passage from his *Commentary on the Timaeus*, explains the aesthetic qualities of a statue from the degree in which the divine is present to that statue. Echoing Plotinus essay *On Beauty* (*Enneads* 1.6 [1]), Proclus holds that the beauty of physical objects is due to their participation in the Intelligible.<sup>25</sup> The degree of beauty is thus directly related to the degree of participation. This explains, thus Proclus, why Plato in the *Timaeus* describes the material cosmos as being "the most beautiful," because it, being the handiwork of the Demiurge, participates more than any other physical object in the intelligible. Moreover, the more beautiful an object, i.e., the more it partakes

24 I borrow this description of the visual impact of chryselephantine statues from Constantinidou (2010) 92; Platt (2011) 83–91 makes a similar point in connection to the statue of Athena Parthenos by Phidias.

25 On this passage and its relation to Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6 [1], cf. Sheppard (2017) 283–285.

in the intelligible, the more the divine is present to it. This holds also true for statues:

T.10 Every image that participates more distinctly in the form is indeed an image of a paradigm with a higher degree of purity. Just as in the case of statues connected with the practice of initiation, those who obtain a dimmer divine presence (*parousia*)<sup>26</sup> enjoy the secondary and the tertiary powers of the divine, but those who obtain a clear presence participate in the very first and highest creations of the divine, in the same way, I imagine, the god, who was initiator of the cosmos made it appear most beautiful as an image of the very first of eternal beings. (Procl. *in Ti.* 1.330.29–331.4; transl. Runia and Share 2008, 186)<sup>27</sup>

In his recent study of this passage, Todd Krulak wonders why some of those statues attract only the secondary and tertiary powers of the gods. He suggests that in the case of these statues either the animation ritual had not been performed completely perfect or that these statues were less fit to receive the divine. It may also be due to a combination of these two explanations. Krulak thus seems to ascribe the difference between the statues in terms of some sort of failure. In view of what we have seen so far, however, I take it that Proclus assumes that the difference between the statues is intentional. Above (cf. T.8), we found that encounters with *daimonic* epiphanies supposedly prepared the initiands for the manifestation of the gods who correspond to those *daimons*. In a similar fashion, we may assume that the contemplation of statues inhabited by *daimonic* powers proceeds the contemplation of statues of the corresponding divine power. If so, the statues associated with the secondary and tertiary divine powers should not be thought of as imperfect versions of the ones associated with primary divine powers, but as being intentionally designed to attract a *daimonic* presence.

The statue of Aphrodite that threw Damascius off balance (T.1), is such a *daimonic* statue.

26 For the ancient Greeks epiphany is about divine presence (*parousia*), see Versnel's definition of epiphany quoted in the introduction.

27 Procl. *in Ti.* 1.330.29–331.4: πᾶσα γὰρ εἰκὼν ἐναργέστερον μετέχουσα τοῦ εἶδους καθαρωτέρου παραδείγματός ἐστιν εἰκὼν· καὶ ὡσπερ τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς τελεστικῆς ἀγαλμάτων τὰ μὲν ἀμυδροτέρας τυχόντα τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ παρουσίας δευτέρων ἀπολαύει καὶ τρίτων τοῦ θεοῦ δυνάμεων, τὰ δὲ ἐναργεστέρας καὶ αὐτῶν τῶν πρωτίστων αὐτοῦ καὶ [τῶν] ἀκροτάτων μετέχει ποιήσεων, τὸν αὐτὸν δῆπου τρόπον καὶ ὁ τοῦ κόσμου τελεσιουργὸς θεὸς κάλλιστον αὐτὸν ἀπέφηνεν ὡς εἰκόνα τοῦ πρωτίστου τῶν αἰώνιων·

The description of Damascius' affections, i.e., the sweat, the amazement and confusion, echoes the descriptions of the effects of falling in love with a beautiful person in Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. In this case, however, Damascius does not fall in love with a beautiful person, but with a beautiful statue of the goddess of love herself. Damascius next elaborates briefly on the beauty of the statue: it is not the sweet or sensual beauty usually associated with Aphrodite, but a dignified and virile one. This description invites comparison to another statue of Aphrodite, the famous nude Aphrodite of Cnidus by Praxiteles. It was so life-like, thus generating the experience of epiphany, that it exercised a strong erotic attraction on male visitors, even to the degree that some tried to have sex with it.<sup>28</sup> Praxiteles's statue thus represented what in the Platonic tradition is called the demotic or vulgar manifestation of Aphrodite, the one that is primarily concerned with the desire for sex and procreation. The Aphrodite of Damascius, on the other hand, is a manifestation of Aphrodite Ourania, i.e., heavenly Aphrodite, who imbues philosophical souls with the desire to ascend towards intelligible Beauty. She encourages the more philosophically minded people to turn their back to the body and its pleasures. It is hard to tell what this statue of a warlike Aphrodite looked like.<sup>29</sup> However, Proclus, in one of his hymns to Aphrodite Ourania, equips her with arrows, the weapons traditionally associated with Aphrodite's son Eros. More in particular, he prays to Aphrodite that she may steer his life "with your most righteous arrows, while putting an end to the chilly impulse of unholy desires" (Proclus *Hymn* 2. 19–21). We may assume that overwhelming experience of seeing the statue of Aphrodite has precisely this impact on Damascius: the amazement and confusion (*thambos* and *ekplêxis*) directs his focus away from the material world and fills him with desire for divine beauty, thus rendering him sympathetic to Aphrodite Ourania.

## 2.2 *Ekplêxis in the Neoplatonic Classroom: Sublime Platonic Myths and Inspired Teachers*

I will now turn to a different category of artworks in which the divine may be present and the encounter with which may turn the soul of the reader around. The above-quoted passage from Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic* (T.8) offers, as we found, valuable information about the celebration of the Eleusinian mysteries. It deserves mentioning, however, that this passage

28 For an extensive discussion of this statue in relation to epiphany, see Platt (2011) 180–211.  
29 Ruurd Halbertsma has kindly drawn my attention to examples of representations of Aphrodite in arms, see, e.g., LIMC II, 1 (1984): 36 (Aphrodite with a lance) and 57 (Aphrodite with a sword).

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.8, Proclus refers his readers back to his now lost work *On Mythical Symbols* for further elaboration on this point. An elaborate discussion of 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.<sup>30</sup> Proclus believes that Homer's poems were symbolical in a double sense. In reply to Plato's complaint about Homer's blasphemous depiction of the gods, Proclus argues that these should be understood symbolically, i.e., all those stories that Plato in the *Republic* found offensive of how the gods behave human all too human should not be taken at face-value, but instead as referring to Neoplatonic metaphysics. However, such symbolical literature functions also 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 hence 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.

On the issue of the theurgic qualities of Plato's own myths, Proclus is far less informative. Our present study of the notion of *ekplêxis*, however, may allow us to speculate about this topic. The first thing to note is that *ekplêxis* is a term that is at much at home in ancient literary criticism as it is in religious contexts. In Plato's *Ion* 535b–c, e.g., Socrates uses it to describe the impact that the rhapsode Ion has on its public and ascribes that effect on Ion's ecstatic state. Ion next describes the violent emotions he experiences during a performance: he will have tears in his eyes, his heart will leap and his hair will stand up for fear. The term gains special prominence in the treatise *On Sublimity*, traditionally ascribed to a certain Longinus, perhaps the rhetorician and philosopher Cassius Longinus, who taught Porphyry before he became a pupil of Plotinus.<sup>31</sup> Sublimity in literature is a matter of writing in a grand style about elevated subjects in order to stir strong emotions in the audience, just

30 For discussion on this type of symbolism see Berg (2001) 91–101.

31 On the (contested) identification of the author of *On Sublimity* with Cassius Longinus, see Heath (1999).

as, for example, we may be moved by the sight of natural phenomena such as mighty rivers or erupting volcanoes. *Ekplêxis* is a crucial term in this context, as appears from the definition of sublimity that Longinus provides at the start of his treatise:

T.11 Sublimity is a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse. It is the source of the distinction of the very greatest poets and prose writers and the means by which they have given eternal life to their own fame. For grandeur produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearer; and the combination of confusion (*ekplêxis*) and amazement (*thaumasion*) always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant. This is because persuasion is on the whole something we can control, whereas amazement and wonder exert invincible power and force and get the better of every hearer. (Longin. *Subl.* c. 1. 3–4; transl. Russell and Winterbottom 1972, 148 adapted)<sup>32</sup>

We see here the combination of *ekplêxis* and ecstasy that we have already encountered above in Plato's *Ion*. In fact, Longinus considers both Plato and Sappho to be sublime authors, because they have the power to move their readers emotionally. In the case of Sappho, he even quotes (c. 10.2) precisely the ode of Sappho in which she describes the unsettling effects of seeing her beloved which underlies the above-quoted passage from Plato's *Phaedrus*.

Longinus explicitly praises Plato (c. 13) for his grand and sublime style and presents him as striving to outdo the sublime author par excellence, Homer himself. He does not, unfortunately, deal with any of Plato's myths. Many ancient literary critics, however, celebrate the great myth of the *Phaedrus* for its grandeur that is characteristic of sublime literature.<sup>33</sup> At the beginning of the *Platonic Theology*, Proclus, for example, imagines that someone may accuse Plato that he is no better than the tragic poets when he interrupts serious philosophical discourse for this "solemn and impressive spectacle"

32 Longin. *Subl.* c. 1. 3–4: ... ἀκρότης καὶ ἐξοχή τις λόγων ἐστὶ τὰ ὕψη, καὶ ποιητῶν τε οἱ μέγιστοι καὶ συγγραφέων οὐκ ἄλλοθεν ἢ ἐνθένδε ποθὲν ἐπρώτευσαν καὶ ταῖς ἑαυτῶν περιέβαλον (εὐκλείαις τὸν αἰῶνα. οὐ γὰρ εἰς πειθῶ τοὺς ἀκρωμένους ἀλλ' εἰς ἔκστασιν ἄγει τὰ ὑπερφυᾶ· πάντη δὲ γε σὺν ἐκπλήξει τοῦ πιθανοῦ καὶ τοῦ πρὸς χάριν αἰεὶ κρατεῖ τὸ θαυμάσιον, εἶγε τὸ μὲν πιθανὸν ὡς τὰ πολλὰ ἐφ' ἡμῖν, ταῦτα δὲ δυναστεῖαν καὶ βίαν ἄμαχρον προσφέροντα παντὸς ἐπάνω τοῦ ἀκρωμένου καθίσταται.

33 Cf. Porter (2010) 79 for examples of how the ancient "literary tradition was drawn like a magnet to this passage."

(ἡ τοιαύτη θεωρία σεμνή και ὑπερφυής) that does not encourage philosophical investigation.<sup>34</sup>

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 authors, such as the divinely inspired poet Homer:

T.12 For this sort of discourse is not demonstrative, but inspired, invented by the ancients not as a tool of coercion, but rather as one persuasion, which aims not at bare instruction (*mathêsis psilê*), but at sympathy (*sympatheia*) with the subject-matter (i.e., the gods, RMvdB) at hand. (Procl. *Theol.Plat.* 1.6.29.14–17)<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup> The opposition between the bare instruction, offered by philosophical argument, and the non-rational sympathy offered by myths, recalls Aristotle's remark as quoted by the Neoplatonist Synesius (T.6 above), that the initiates need not learn (*mathein*) anything, but are made fit, i.e., are rendered sympathetic to the divine.

For Proclus, then, Plato is a divinely inspired author, just as Homer is. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades had explained the emotional impact that Socrates has on him from the fact that he speaks divine words, just as divine music moves people. The above-mentioned passage from the *Ion*, furthermore, suggest that the performer of an inspired text will not only himself be moved

34 Procl. *Theol.Plat.* 1.6.30.11–17; 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.* 111.199.29–200.3) describes, among other things, as “solemn” (σεμνός) and “striking” (καταπληκτικός; cf. 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.

35 Procl. *Theol. Plat.* 1.6.29.14–17: Οὐ γὰρ ἀποδεικτικὸν τὸ τοιοῦτον εἶδος τῶν λόγων, ἀλλ’ ἐνθεαστικόν, οὐδὲ ἀνάγκης ἀλλὰ πειθοῦς ἕνεκα τοῖς παλαιοῖς μεμηχανημένον, οὐδὲ μαθήσεως ψιλῆς ἀλλὰ τῆς πρὸς τὰ πράγματα συμπαθείας στοχαζόμενον.

36 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 is more or less identical with it.

by his divinely inspired word, but pass on this inspiration to his public, who, like the performer, will share in the confusion (*ekplêxis*) that results from this inspiration. In this respect, the Platonic teacher is in a situation that is comparable to the Homeric rhapsode and the *daimonic* Socrates. Proclus, when in the *Platonic Theology* discusses various interpretations of the great myth of the *Phaedrus*, described above as a “solemn and impressive spectacle,” recommends the interpretation of that myth by his master Syrianus, because Syrianus was apparently himself moved to ecstasy by the Platonic myth, in the manner described in T.9:

T.13 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 (*ekplêxis*) about the Platonic spectacle? (Procl. *Theol.Plat.* iv.23.69.8–12)<sup>37</sup>

Longinus, in his account of the sublime especially highlights especially the emotions of confusion (*ekplêxis*) and amazement (*thauma*) as hallmarks of great literature. Proclus here ascribes these same effects to the great myth from the *Phaedrus*. Above, we found that Proclus assigns theurgic powers to confusion (*ekplêxis*), if caused by some sort of divine presence. The same goes for amazement (*thauma*). Plato (*Theaetetus* 155d1–5) had famously stated that wonder is the characteristic emotion (*pathos*) from which philosophy starts.<sup>38</sup> The astonishment caused by the Platonic spectacle, i.e., by the literary imagery of the myth of the *Phaedrus*, creates the sort of amazement that fuels philosophical investigation. There is, however, also a religious aspect to it. When he discusses the notion of wonder in his *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, Proclus reminds his reader that wonder is not only a human emotion, but also a divine power:

T.14 Amazement (*thauma*) comes first, since while already in our case (i.e., that of human beings) this is the starting point of the knowledge of universal entities, in the case of the gods it connects (*synaptein*) the amazed with the amazing. For this very reason, the wise men concerning divine matters praise Thaumatas as a very great god, who by means of

37 Procl. *Theol.Plat.* iv.23.69.8–12: Τί γάρ δεῖ λέγειν τὸν ἡμέτερον καθηγεμόνα τὸν ὡς ἀληθῶς Βάκχον, ὃς περὶ τὸν Πλάτωνα διαφερόντως ἐνθεάζων καὶ μέχρις ἡμῶν τὸ θαύμα καὶ τὴν ἐκπληξίν τῆς Πλατωνικῆς θεωρίας ἐξέλαμψεν.

38 Cf. Arist. *Metaph.* A 2. 982b12–a19 for the same idea.

amazement (*thauma*) makes secondary entities submit to primary ones. (Procl. *in Ti.* I.133.8–12)<sup>39</sup>

Human wonder is the sort of wonder that we just discussed, i.e., the wonder that initiates the philosophical search for the universal Forms. Divine wonder is about entering into contact with the divine. In fact, the Greek term that Proclus uses to describe this connection between man and god, *synaptein* (to connect) is a technical term used in theurgic contexts to describe a stage that precedes the final unification.<sup>40</sup>

### 3 Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen how Proclus associates the strong emotions that we may experience when exposed to beautiful works of art with *daimonic* powers that transport us away from the material world and that forge a bond of sympathy between us and the gods. The descriptions of the confusion that overcame Damascius when he saw the beautiful statue of Aphrodite and that of Syrianus when he read the sublime myth of the *Phaedrus* invite comparison to the so-called Stendhal-syndrome. Stendhal famously describes how, when he visited the Santa Croce basilica in Florence, the idea of the presence of all the great men buried there and “the contemplation of sublime beauty,” suddenly got the better of him. He was overcome by such strong emotions that he left the church completely confused.<sup>41</sup> We may imagine that late Neoplatonists were prone to a similar experience for similar reasons. They believed to be surrounded by divine presences, while they considered the artworks that celebrated Greek pagan culture, be it statues of works of literature, as sublime works of art that had been produced by inspired artists. It comes as little surprise that viewing their surroundings in this state of mind, they too

39 Procl. *in Ti.* I.133.8–12: προηγείται μὲν οὖν τὸ θαῦμα, διότι καὶ ἐν ἡμῖν ἀρχὴ τοῦτό ἐστι τῆς τῶν ὄλων γνώσεως, ἐν δὲ τοῖς θεοῖς συνάπτει τῷ θαυμαζομένῳ τὸ θαυμάζον· ὅθεν καὶ Θαύμαντα θεόν τινα μέγιστον ὑμνήκασιν οἱ τὰ θεῖα σοφοί, τὸν διὰ τοῦ θαύματος ὑποκατακλίνοντα τὰ δεύτερα τοῖς πρώτοις.

40 Contact (συναφή) with the gods is the third phase in Proclus' theory of prayer, cf. Berg (2001) 89. One of the wise man Proclus refers to is probably Hesiod. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates in support of his claim that philosophy starts from wonder, offers an allegorical interpretation of the bit of Hesiod's *Theogony* (265–267) according to which Iris, thought to represent philosophy, is the off-spring of Thaumatas. For this identification of Iris with philosophy, cf. Procl. *in R.* II.255.23–25 and (possibly) Pl. *Cra.* 408b3.

41 Stendhal (1826) 325.

were at times overcome by strong, confusing emotions. While Stendhal himself framed his experience in terms of an at the time fashionable psychiatric condition (in Berlin, he notes, they would call it “the nerves”), the Neoplatonists understood similar experiences in religious terms and associated these with epiphanies. These must have been very welcome to them. As Verity Platt observes in her recent study of ancient epiphany, epiphanies provided “*cognitive reliability*, not only for the gods’ existence, but also for the traditions of representation by which they were known to their worshippers.”<sup>42</sup> If they chose to be present in the statues and other forms of representation that man had made of them, these representations apparently met with their favour. In an age in which Proclus and his fellow pagan Neoplatonists were fighting a last-ditch effort to stop Christianity, any proof for the existence of the traditional gods and the efficiency of pagan rites must have been extremely welcome.

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42 Platt (2011) 12.

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