

DIVINE RITES AND PHILOSOPHY IN NEOPLATONISM

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The essay deals with the problem of relationship between philosophy and ritual in late antiquity and attempts at showing that their close connections in Neoplatonism were determined not only by their common anagogic and mystic aim (homoiosis theo ideal), but also by distant origins of philosophy (in the form of traditional wisdom and hermeneutics: explanations of oracles, omens, riddles, rites, and events) from the integral unit of the cosmogonical and 'seasonal' (or rather metaphysical) ritual-and-myth complexes. Philosophy in her most ancient sense and under different names can be regarded as a semi-theurgic activity (framed by the particular world-model and the archaic conception of language) inseparable from the 'divinely sanctioned' law-making, ruling, healing and fighting. Even the much later syllogistic procedures and dialectical operations in some formal respect resembled ritualistic activities as if imitating certain 'rhythmical' patterns of proper behaviour in the context of the harmonious whole governed by the cosmic order or divine intelligence. Despite the well-known prejudices of the one-sided post-Enlightenment scholars against rites and liturgies, their own zealous pedantry and strive for classifications, rules, and systems could be interpreted in the light of ancient rituals (always strict and dogmatic in every detail) and sacrifices. The integration of some religious cults, symbols, and mysteries into the body of the post-Iamblichean Neoplatonism cannot be regarded as an artificial undertaking directed against the supposed 'rationalist purity', itself partly invented by the Modern Western scholars. Rather it should be understood as the peaceful symphonia of the maximally employed human reason and ineffable divine mysteries, including all practical and contemplative (or aesthetic) sides of life.

Preamble

The contemporary spokesman of archetypal psychology James Hillman argues that 'we can imagine nothing or perform nothing that is not already formally given by the archetypal imagination of the gods'.¹ Thus he turns (though maintaining that one path of the *imitatio dei* is through infirmity) to the main Neoplatonic theme of philosophy as imitation of the gods and striving for the 'golden' life. But life is a trouble and it is never going to be any better. In contrast to the lofty dreams of the grandeur, 'the humankind is weak and small, it sees but little and has nothingness in its nature', according to Iamblichus. Therefore the only cure for this congenital nothingness (*oudeneia*), confusion and unceasing change is 'its sharing to the extent possible in divine light' (*De myster.*III.18).

For Neoplatonists, despite different levels, ranks, and orders, everything is an irradiation of the One. The task of every being is not only to follow his noetic archetypes, but to come

¹ *The Essential James Hillman. A Blue Fire*, ed. by Thomas Moore, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 150.

back, as far as possible, to the supreme and ineffable source of light. This is accomplished by rejecting the ontological distinction through a sacrificial death. Therefore we can ask: whether philosophy itself is not a sort of 'modernized' theurgy? Could we propose that *theoria* and *theourgia*, or *telesiourgia*, are somewhat convertible items if regarded as means of ascent in the grand cosmic theatre – the world which reveals the power of unspeakable symbols known only to the gods and the world which itself is a Myth? Indeed, for Sallustius, 'the cosmos itself can be called a myth, since bodies and material objects are apparent in it, while souls and intellects are concealed' (*De diis* III. 8-10).

Ritual and Cosmic Order

It is almost impossible to reveal the exact meaning of such crucial but rather Proteian terms as 'philosophy', 'myth', 'ritual', 'theurgy'. Any attempt to produce a firmly established solution raises more questions than answers. However, our humble task is not to solve the fundamental riddles of human civilization, but simply to show that, in the context of Neoplatonism and Hellenic culture, theurgy cannot be regarded as a strange misunderstanding incompatible to the rational philosophizing. This is because theurgy follows certain universal patterns – universal in a historically determined sense of spiritual 'genre' – and philosophy itself is partly based on a ritual transformed into discursive and rational 'ceremonies' of thought. Similarly, one can see the analogy between ritual and grammar. The grammarian undertakes the same operations with respect to the text as the priest does with respect to the sacrifice: both of them decompose the primal unity, then identify the separated parts according to the new set of relationships and finally produce or confirm the unity on a higher level of synthesis.

The Neoplatonic science of dialectic follows a similar course which clearly resembles the divine manifestation and gradual integration of manifested parts into the single archetypal source. Ritual is both work, deed, enterprise (*to ergon*, skr. *kriya*) and order, rule, law (*telete* as an accomplishment of perfect revolution while moving in a circle, skr. *rita*).

As Proclus says in his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* VII.1161:

'[...] the Intellect, through its unchanging reversion towards the intelligible, anticipates causally circular motion; and not only the Intellect, but every divine soul, by reason of its "dance" round Intellect, takes on incorporeal circular motion [...]. The theologians also known of incorporeal circular motion, seeing that the theologian of the Hellenes (sc.Orpheus) declares about the primary and hidden god, who is prior to Phanes, "And he was borne unceasingly about/ In an endless circle" (fr. 71). And the Oracles lay down that "all the founts and the beginnings whirl, and yet always remain fixed in an unwearing eddy" (fr. 49)'.

Therefore ritual and cosmic order, including order of seasons and order of *logos*, are inseparable. The cosmos itself is *ton aidion theon gegonos agalma* – 'a shrine brought into being for the everlasting gods' (*Tim.*37c). In its outward aspect, ritual is a program of demonstrative acts and patterns which attempts at establishing the identity and solidarity of the closed group and determine its *skopos* and *telos*.

The Aim of Philosophy

Ancient Hellenic philosophy intended to transform souls through various 'spiritual exercises', because the task of the philosopher was not primarily to communicate 'an encyclopedic knowledge in the form of a system,'² but to live the philosophical life. In Neoplatonism, psychogogy is tantamount to mystagogy, and the Delphic maxim 'know thyself' means 'return to the source, the first principle of all'. This 'reversion' (*epistrophe*) is both *epistrophe pros heauton* and elevation through the ontological symbols accomplished by the divine energies.

Although humans are not able to attain knowledge of the gods by their discursive reason, according to Iamblichus, philosophy in the Pythagorean manner is a road to wisdom in which one will propound, not contradictions, but firm and unchanging truths strengthened by scientific demonstration through sciences (*mathematon*) and contemplations (*theorias*). He is wise who contemplates the One, the goal of all contemplation and is able to see from here, as if from a watch-tower, god (who presides over all truth, happiness, all being, causes, principles) and all in the train of god.

The goal of the Platonic philosophy is wisdom and immortality achieved through the ascent (*anagoge*) of the soul. It is coming to be like a god (*homoiosis theo*) and union with the divine at the level of noetic theophanies or the ineffable source itself. Therefore philosophy as a rational discourse is the hermeneutically developed substitute of the ancient rituals which were viewed as an integral part of the cosmic events. Philosophical games and contests for truth themselves could be regarded as special and partly individualized cases of ritualized cosmogony which is an imitation of the gods and a sort of divine service.

Different Aspects of Divine Acts

We know little about the Neoplatonic hieratic art as such, and different scholars draw different pictures of it. According to Hans Lewy, theurgy and philosophy were two parallel methods aimed at the same goal, union with the gods.³ Laurence Jay Rosan was able to make distinction between a lower and a higher theurgy.⁴ Anne Sheppard divided the Procline theurgy (as it is attested by Hermeias) into three types, claiming that 'Proclus still thinks of the final union as a 'Plotinian' mystical experience, not as some magically induced trance',⁵ as if the so-called lower theurgy was nothing but a silly striving for hallucinations. Arguing that Proclus re-interpreted the Plotinian mystical experience in terms of the theory behind

² Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. A. I. Davidson, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995, p. 21.

³ Hans Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy. Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire*, ed. Michel Tardieu, Etudes Augustiniennes, Paris, 1978, pp. 462-463.

⁴ Laurence Jay Rosan, *The Philosophy of Proclus. The Final Phase of Ancient Thought*, New York: Cosmos, 1949, p. 213.

⁵ Anne Sheppard, "'Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy", *Classical Quarterly* 32, 1982, p. 224.

theurgy, Sheppard describes mystical union as ‘a lofty kind of theurgy because turning the “one in the soul” towards the supreme One was thought as activating a *sumbolon* in the direction of what is symbolized’.⁶ Therefore the supreme theurgy is also a *theia philosophia*.

Gregory Shaw discerns material, intermediate and noetic theurgies, because *theia erga*, divine acts, in the last analysis constitute the whole path of *proodos* and *epistrophe*. They are the manifested reality as such, or rather a set of *sumbola* and *sunthemata* which reveal both demiurgic and anagogic power of the Forms and their henadic background. Therefore, as Shaw pointed out:

‘The law of theurgy was the law of cosmogony in ritual expression; hence one could never ascend to the gods by favouring one ‘part’ of the soul over another, however transcendently the soul was imagined. [...] In this sense, Neoplatonic theurgy was profoundly anti-gnostic, for it never allowed the disoriented condition of the embodied soul to be projected on the cosmos as an ‘ontological’ conflict’.⁷

Despite the different classifications derived from the painstaking analysis of the extant texts⁸ and widely disseminated myth of Plotinus’ exceptional and purely intellectual mysticism – which stands behind various approaches ready to ridicule *le mirage de la theurgie* (as H. D. Saffrey did in fact⁹) or to defend it as a material basis of one’s philosophical development – it should be clear that

- 1) one thing is to dispute endlessly about details and
- 2) another thing is to explore the metaphysical principles that provide the foundation for the whole super-structure of ancient hieratic life and thought.

As A. H. Armstrong has emphasized, the later Neoplatonists simply ‘give strong and carefully worked out arguments for the importance of sacred rites and ceremonies and the use of material symbols in our approach to the Divine and the Divine’s approach to us. Therefore, the principles upon which they base these arguments are by no means always non-Hellenic or altogether incompatible with the thought of Plotinus, or even of Plato’.¹⁰

Theurgy and Spiritual Hermeneutics

The Neoplatonic *telestike* (which includes purifications, *katharmoi*, and rites, *teletai*) can be hermeneutically deduced from the several texts by Plato, especially from the *Laws*, *Timaeus*,

⁶ Anne Sheppard, “‘Proclus’ Attitude to Theurgy”, *Classical Quarterly* 32, 1982, p. 221.

⁷ Gregory Shaw, “Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus”, *Traditio*, vol. XLI, 1985, p. 27.

⁸ See, for example: Andrew Smith, *Porphyrus’ Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition. A Study in Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1974; John F. Finamore, “Plotinus and Iamblichus on Magic and Theurgy”, *Dionysius*, vol. XVII, Dec. 1999.

⁹ H. D. Saffrey, *Recherches sur le neoplatonisme apres Plotin*, Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1990, p. 48.

¹⁰ A. Hilary Armstrong, “Iamblichus and Egypt”, *Les Etudes philosophiques*, no 2–3, 1987, p. 181.

Phaedrus and *Symposium*. However, it seems that in a certain sense the philosophy of Plato himself is the disguised reinterpretation of Orphic and Homeric myths and motifs, or even the 'patricide' of the true Parmenides, the initiated healer and priest of Apollo, as Peter Kingsley tries to persuade us.¹¹ Much more. According to Christos C. Evangeliou, the Platonic tradition is closer to the Eastern ways of thinking (especially the Indian) than to the narrowly defined 'Western rationality'.¹² And the genesis of the entire Hellenic philosophy corresponds precisely to the time when *Hellas* met *Aiguptos*.¹³ It means that Hellenic philosophy, albeit in a radically emancipated manner, still appears as the direct prolongation of an ancient wisdom. Neoplatonism simply tries to restore the supposed primordial and sacred unity of the cosmos, regarded as a cultic body of the divinity. Therefore no wonder that theurgy albeit in Platonic terms fulfilled the goal of philosophy understood as a *homoiosis theo*. As Gregory Shaw pointed out, 'both cultic acts and philosophic *paideia* were rooted in one source: the ineffable power of the gods'.¹⁴ For Iamblichus and Proclus, the idea of the sacred tradition, received from the gods themselves and transmitted through the *Hermaiike seira* (a sort of *silsilah*, regarded more in vertical than in horizontal sense), becomes the central issue.

Although Iamblichus insists that theurgy must be exalted above the discursive philosophy and exempt from philosophical criticism as merely human reasoning, he also emphasizes the necessity of proceeding in short steps, i.e. to start with material gods in the elevation (*anabasis*) to the immaterial gods (*De myster.* 217.8-11). Instead of saying that Iamblichus fully harmonized (1) the Chaldean rites of soteriological elevation in a divinely guided spiritual journey and (2) the late Neoplatonic doctrine of procession and return, we prefer to assert that he rather made explicit the initial harmony of divine rites and divinely inspired sacred knowledge which only gradually and due to the physiological, cosmological, ethical, and metaphysical interpretations was turned into a sort of philosophical discourse. The structure of syllogistic procedures and the ancient logic itself is still bound to the ritualistic patterns of order, represented by the traditional cosmogonies, and this scientific logic still functions in the cosmos which is the 'most sacred temple of the Demiurge' (Procl. *In Tim.* I.124.16-22).

Iamblichus harmonized a Platonic epistemology and the conception of the anagogical force within rituals as such (be they corporeal rites and sacrifices or rituals of thought and noetic liturgies), claiming that *sunthemata* themselves perform their work. An ascent to the truth which is accomplished by contemplations, noetic sacrifices and inspired interpretations of symbols assists in producing the hermeneutical meta-structure of philosophy as a discourse

¹¹ Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, The Golden Sufi Center, Inverness, California, 1999, p. 44, 140.

¹² Christos C. Evangeliou, *The Hellenic Philosophy: Between Europe, Asia, and Africa*, Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University, 1997, p. 51.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁴ Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul. The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, p. 5.

based on the systematic reasoning and logic. Such philosophy is coextensive with sacred rites. Iamblichus says:

‘Listen therefore to the intellectual interpretation of symbols according to the mind of the Egyptians (*kata ton Aiguption noun ten ton sumbolon noeran diermeneusin*), at the same time removing from your imagination (*tes phantasias*) and your ears the image (*eidolon*) of things symbolical (*ton sumbolikon*), but elevating yourself to the intellectual truth’ (*ten noeran aletheian: De myster. 250. 13–18*).

Phantasia as a mirror can reproduce images of higher principles and by an image-making power (*eikastike dunamis*) the soul can make itself like beings superior to itself. Therefore Proclus argues that ‘by the same power it also makes its inferior products like itself and even like things greater than itself because it fashions statues of gods and daemons’ (*theon te agalmata kai daimonon demiourgei: In Crat.19.6f*).

The hermeneutical elevation, aimed at the intellectual truth, follows the same anagogic call for the participation in the perfection of the One, directed by the ‘calling power’ (*he anakletike dunamis*). With the help of this all pervading power, some of the divinely inspired philosophers and theurgists (*hoi hieratikoi*) can achieve the union with the divine. ‘Souls cannot ascent without music’, according to Pythagoras, as it is related by Aristides Quintilianus. But they cannot ascend without exegesis, or *sumbolike theoria*, of sacred rites (*teletai*), myths, and fundamental metaphysical texts, such as the *Parmenides* of Plato, as well. In the Islamic Sufi tradition, which is partly based on the Neoplatonic intellectual heritage, the *ta’wil*, or exegesis of soul, leads the soul back to its truth (*haqiqat*) and, according to Henry Corbin, ‘transmutes all cosmic realities and relations and restores them to symbols; each becomes an Event of the soul, which, in its ascent, its *Mi’raj*, passes beyond them and makes them interior to itself.’¹⁵

By asserting that every soul and every intellect have twofold activities, (1) the unical activities (*tas men henoeideis*) which are better than intellectual, and (2) the intelligible activities (*tas de noetikas*), Proclus makes a sort of division between the rational philosophy and the final knowledge which is higher than science (*In Parm. VII.63K*). According to Proclus, the ‘dialectical operations are the preparation for the strain towards the One, but are not themselves the strain’ (*In Parm. VII.75K*). Therefore ‘after going through all the negations, one ought to set aside this dialectical method also’ (*ibid.*).

Hieratic Rites of Ascent

In the extant fragments of his *Commentary on the Chaldean Oracles*, Proclus discusses (1) the ‘theurgic race’ (*to theourgon phulon*) which is beneficent and devoted to a zealous

¹⁵ Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, tr. W. R. Trask, Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 34.

imitation of the goodness of God (*tes tou theou agathotetos*: *De phil. Chald.* 27–28, p. 208 des Places) and (2) elevation by means of the anagogic life (*dia tes anagogou zoes*: *ibid.* A 14, p. 206).

The end of all spiritual elevations is the participation in divine fruits and filling the soul with divine fire, which allows the contemplation of God. The soul is placed in the presence of the Father (*ibid.* A 17–19, p. 206). The sacred rites of ascent are equated with

‘the intellectual and invisible hymns of the ascending soul (*kai noeroi kai aplaneis humnoi tes anagomenes psuches*), awakening the memory of harmonic reasons (*ton harmonikon logon*), which bear the inexpressible images in it of the divine powers’ (*aporrhētous eikonas ton theion en ante dunameon*: *ibid.* A 25–26, p. 206–207).

Despite the splendid images of the Chaldean rhetoric, this fiery elevation is at the same time understood as a Platonic *anamnesis* of the ultimate truth and a way to the pure noetic contemplation, thus escaping a transient nature of *genesis*. But the true end of the Father-loving soul, which obeys the calling to run to the hot (since the spirit is elevated by heat) and to fly from the cold, is the all-receptive temple of the Father who receives and unites ascending souls (*ibid.* A 3–6, p. 206). ‘Let us become fire, let us travel through fire’ (*pur genometha, dia puros hodeusomen*: *ibid.* B2, p. 208), argues Proclus and explains two integral sides of this ‘hymn’, consecrated to God as an assimilation to him by laying aside all multitude and uniting to the hypernoetic *huparxis*:

‘Philosophy says that a forgetfulness of eternal reasons (*ton aidion logon*) is the cause of the departure of the soul from the Gods, and that a reminiscence of the knowledge of the eternal reasons or Ideas is the cause of the return to them, but the Oracles assert that the forgetfulness and reminiscence of the paternal synthemata (*ton patrikon sunthematon*) are respectively the causes of the departure and return. Both statements are in harmony. For the soul is constituted from sacred reasons and divine symbols (*apo ton hieron logon kai ton theion sumbolon*), of which the former proceed from the intellectual forms (*apo ton noeron eidon*), but the latter from the divine henads (*apo ton theoin henadon*); and we are images of the intellectual essences, but statues of the unknown synthemata (*kai esmen eikones men ton noeron ousion, agalmata [ta] de ton agnoston sunthematon*). And just as every soul is a fulness (*pleroma*) of forms, but subsists wholly or simply according to one cause, thus also it indeed participates in all synthemata, through which it is united to divine things’ (*De phil. Chald.* E 18–26, p. 211, 1–4, p. 212).

Here we have the famous distinction made between an *eikon* and a *sumbolon*. In the later Neoplatonism, higher realities may be revealed either through *eikones* (related to their respective *paradeigmata*), or through *sumbola* which cannot resemble the objects symbolized. However, ‘similarity’ (*homoiotetes*) is a key term in both cases, because everywhere the similar is naturally united to the similar, according to Proclus. Therefore like noetic objects are known by *noesis*, so that which is prior to intellect is related to the so-called flower of the intellect.

It would be rather incorrect to restrict philosophy to that limited faculty of the soul which knows true and divine beings *kata to dianoetikon* or investigates cosmos through *eikones* (in a Procline sense, for instance, regarding the recapitulation of the *Republic* at the beginning of Plato's *Timaeus* as an *eikon*, in contrast to the Atlantis myth understood as a *sumbolon*). Likewise, to think that there is such a thing as an 'empty ritual', somewhat detached from the fundamental noetic structure of being and intellect, is too naive. The Neoplatonic philosophy itself is a homecoming rite, *nostos*, paradigmatically accomplished by the Homeric hero Odysseus. The path of return is the path of an archetypal hero with a corresponding god. There are thematic connections between the conception of 'ancestor' (or sage, *sophos*) and the conception of hero, related to the 'seasonal eschatology.'

The Common Metaphysical Background

It would be incorrect to relate the Neoplatonic theistic art exclusively to the *Chaldean Oracles* and regard this cosmological and soteriological poem as a single mysterious source of theurgy. Rather we should accept a fruitful hypothesis that the Neoplatonic theurgy is only a hellenized branch of ancient beliefs that prevailed in the Middle East and Egypt in the form of the 'theurgic' kingship and ideologies of the all-embracing cosmic state. These sacred ontologies and their entirely pragmatic technologies of the temple magic, related to the supernatural cosmic bureaucracy for the purpose to ensure a harmonious flow of energy between the different levels of being, were transformed and survived now as the efficacious means of personal gnostic 'salvation' – the task which constitutes *raison d'être* of Platonism as well.

Regarding Near East parallelism we ought to remember that even the most striking convergences in detail may turn out to be nothing more than a typological analogue. However, the common metaphysical background of various paths of rebirth and solar immortality, including that of the Pythagoreans, Orphics, Chaldeans, Egyptians and the Neo-Vedic initiates of the 'five fires' and 'two ways', is quite evident, notwithstanding of considerable differences in detail. According to the assertion made by Heinrich Zimmer:

'The late Vedic-Gnostic reincarnation doctrine of the "knower" who through his gnosis escapes from the sublunar world and its cycle of death and rebirth, must have had its ultimate roots in Mesopotamia. [...] a Sumerian-Babylonian spiritual heritage, diffused to the Orient and there creatively transformed, also travelled westward to become the Greek Orphism, and finally, nourished anew by the old energies of its Near Eastern mother soil, celebrated its resurrection in Gnosticism'.¹⁶

¹⁶ Heinrich Zimmer, "Death and Rebirth in the Light of Indian", *Man and Transformation. Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. by J. Campbell, Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 341.

Perhaps a picture of the ideal theurgic cosmos is always the result of reconstruction, even if we understand the term *theourgia* not in a strictly Neoplatonic sense (as the Chaldean neologism, coined in the III century A.D.), but simply as a working of the gods (*theon erga*) and their theophanies, including

- 1) the creative or magical divine power that underpins and pervades all that exists in the spiritual, psychic and material world (since spirit and matter are woven out of the same substance);
- 2) the whole eidetic meta-structure of the cosmic state and the hieratic (ontogenetic and eschatological) institute of kingship, supported by certain myths and daily rituals, thus following the macrocosmic and microcosmic 'rhythms'.

Philosophers as Sacred Statues

In the world of real hierophanies, the gods are not to be distinguished from their statues or images, since the image, by invoking the name (or the essence) of the substance imaged, is itself animated, i.e. magically transformed from being mere image to being an image infused with the spiritual (or noetic) substance it portrayed. This world is manifestation of the life-giving and sounding noetic Light, of sound made substantial. The sacred images (seasons, landscapes, temples, statues, animals, trees, human beings as *dramatis personae* or their body-members, identified part by part with a number of different deities) are vehicles of an indwelling divine presence.

In the Egyptian theology (revered by theurgical Platonism for ability to imitate the nature of the universe and the creative energy of the gods), the sacred action is the action performed ritually and such action is no longer personal. The self-identification with a god is common also in the magical papyri. Similarly, the Hermetic philosopher or the Chaldean sage (representative of the sacred philosophy, *maghdim*) are not self-induced individual 'authors', but rather divine masks and symbols, ranks and archetypal functions. This attitude partly survived into the late Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism.

Regarding the animating of statues, we should draw certain parallels from the both Hindu and the Egyptian world. According to the Tantric view, purification of the elements and *nyasa* is the ritual infusion of life force into an object, including one's own body, by which it is divinized, transformed into a divine body, externally symbolized by *asanas* – postures, which make the practitioner immune against the onslaught from the pairs of opposites. An action or a state of consciousness that is not ritualized is merely human, but through the ritualized action or ritualized mental (eidetic) pattern the initiate becomes a mediator of the divine light. Therefore, as Jeremy Naydler observes, for the Egyptians:

'Ritual action is invocatory; by means of it the magician invokes spiritual powers. The ritual act thus takes place as much in the spiritual dimension as in the physical. Rituals occur in the realm of

the gods; the gods are necessarily witnesses of and participants in the sacred rites – for this is precisely what makes them sacred'.¹⁷

Whatever external rituals may be performed, the noetic component is never absent and the intense visualization (visualizing oneself as one's chosen deity, *ishta-devata*, in the Tantric ascent) is the crucial step. Here the material body is also regarded as a temple of the divinity, an *agalma*, or a living statue, raised up in accordance with the sacred iconography. And certain Hellenic philosophers (Syrianus, for instance) indeed were regarded as divine statues. In a sense, philosopher is analogous to the *agathos aner* who is build up like a solid and stable statue, or *kouros*-like hero, fixed forever in the brilliance of an unchanging youth where everything is beautiful, *panta kala*.

To Be Reborn into the Solar World

Syrianus, the famous master of Proclus and Hermeias, conceived the rites of the sacrifice, offered by the Homeric Achilles at the funeral pyle of Patroklos (*Iliad*. XXIII.192f), as an imitation of the soul's immortalization, performed by the theurgists (Procl. *In Remp*.I.152.7). This analogy cannot be regarded as entirely fabulous, because the funeral of Patroklos in *Iliad*, are strikingly close to the royal funerary rituals that are recorded in official Hittite documents.¹⁸ The Vedic god Agni as the supreme model and guide of rebirth himself is a psychopomp, by virtue of cremation of the dead. In his aspect of terrestrial fire, he provides the dead hero with a direct link to Agni as celestial fire: the divine Sun.

In various parts of the ancient world, the initiatory or real death was conceived as the ritualized contest for immortality in bliss as a prize to be won by those who had wished to live in accordance with virtue and to be reborn into the solar world of Agni, Ra, or Apollo-Helias. The statue-like body of Osiris is awakened by the solar rays issuing from the falcon head of Horus. And Horus himself is reborn through Osiris, thus becoming a shining spirit, or *akh*.

Such texts as the Egyptian *Book of Coming Forth into the Day* (*pert em hru*), known as the *Book of the Dead*, should not be regarded simply as funerary texts. There is a firm correspondence between the temple rituals, performed by and for living, and the night journey of the Sun. The temple rituals served the purpose of achieving rebirth and bringing the soul back to its solar origins. However, they were performed for the benefit of the world as a whole (for the Beloved Land, *ta-meri*, which is *mundi totius templum* and *imago caeli*) and regarded as the actual return (or ascent) to the First Time (*tep sepi*), the realm of metaphysical realities conceived in terms of certain symbolic images that are comparable to the realm of the

¹⁷ Jeremy Naydler, *Temple of the Cosmos. The Ancient Egyptian Experience of the Sacred*, Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1996, p. 144.

¹⁸ Gregory Nagy, *Greek Mythology and Poetics*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 128.

Platonic Ideas, understood as the beautiful, intelligent and everlasting gods, and their hieroglyphs (*medu neter*).

The same task, albeit on the level of individualized and rationalized discursive thought, is performed by philosophy and, especially, by various branches of Platonism. According to Douglas Frame, in ancient times, the Sun worship habitually ends by rationalizing itself and becoming the secret possession of the initiates and philosophers.¹⁹ Therefore there is a close relationship between solar theologies and the elite – be they kings, magicians, initiates, heroes, or philosophers. The philosophers represent the last link in the chain of those electi, who completed the secularization of solar hierophanies turning them into ideas. The *Chaldean Oracles* simply re-mythologized the philosophical ideas (as the Persian theosopher al-Suhrawardi, the shaykh of Ishraq, who moved to the same direction) by turning them back into the living mythical beings of the pious hieratic imagination: the Iynges, Connectors (*sunochais*), Teletarchs, angels, and daemons.

The Cosmic Theatre of Sacrificial Fires

The Chaldean cosmology as a whole is also informed by a heliocentrism in which the Sun represents the hearth or centre of the cosmos. The three worlds (Empyrean, Ethereal, and Material: cf. Procl. *In Tim.* II.57. 10–14) can be regarded as the fiery circles dominated by the visible Sun and Moon. The architecture of cosmic spheres constituted the stage for the souls journey down and up. Both the descent and ascent are conducted by using different vehicles (*ochemata*) in the course of embodiment and disembodiment. Thus there are two cosmological vectors: (1) the descent and appearance on the stage of the world (*skr. avatarana*), comparable to that of the actor who emerges from the greenroom, and (2) the heroic ascent through the cosmic spheres which in Platonism is partly accomplished by dialectical reasoning.

The cosmic theatre with its puppets (*thaumata*), suspended by the golden threads or solar rays from above and exciting a sort of wonder (*to thaumazein*) that is the source of philosophy, according to Plato, has a well ordered structure. The Year is the great symbol of the whole. As the Sun belongs to the Year, so the Moon belongs to the months. Therefore the idealized cosmology (today regarded merely as a symbol of noetic and psychic functions) reveals the energies of the gods in action and embodies the path (*hodos*) along which not only mythical heroes are led to Olympus, but even Parmenides is driven by the goddesses – perhaps the same ‘right road to truth’ as mentioned by Pindar (*III Pythian* 103).

In the all-embracing cosmic structure, *aion* is visualized as the synthesis of the finite and the infinite in the form of a circle. The seasons (*rtu*) are the doorkeepers of the spheres in the late Vedic tradition of sacrifice. The sacrifice itself is tantamount to a theurgic elevation.

¹⁹ Douglas Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978, p. 32.

Among the five sacrificial fires that constitute the Vedic cosmos, the first is that which the gods make their offerings in the upper noetic world. Its fuel is the Sun, whose rays are the smoke; the day is its flame; the four cardinal points are its coals, and the intermediate directions its sparks. In this fire the gods offer up faith (*sraddha, pistis*) as the unconditional certainty. According to the Upanishads:

‘Those who know all this, and those, too, who in forest solitude revere Faith (*sraddha*) in their mind and concentration as the truly real, pass into the flame of the [cremation] fire; and from the flame, into the day, from the day, into the half-month of the waxing moon; from the half-month of the waxing Moon into the six months (the half-year) during which the Sun moves northward [i.e., into the rising year between winter solstice and summer solstice]. From those months they pass to the realm of the gods (*deva-loka*), and from the realm of the gods to the Sun; from the Sun to the sphere of lighting. [...] That is the Way of the Gods’ (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 6.2.15).²⁰

Golden Cords of Apollo

According to the *Chaldean Oracles*, the soul hastens towards the streams of light. Thus the soul is drawn upward and mingles with the solar rays (fr. 66). Proclus explains that ‘in the callings and self-manifestations (*en tais klesesi kai autophaneiais*) it seems as if the gods would approach men, whereas in fact the latter are drawn upwards by the former. For in reality the mystes is moved, while the godhead does not leave its place’ (*In Alcib.* 398.14).

Moving away from concrete, sensible images through the fiery flower or flame of intellect, the soul extends an empty mind (*teinai kenon noon*) towards the highest God. As Ruth Majercik observes, the emphasis here lies on sameness, not difference.²¹ But it is paradoxical that the one-sided Platonic anthropology, with its ‘immortal soul’ which outlasts the ‘philosophically’ rejected body, is built upon much older and more ‘materialistic’ (or rather magic) cosmology and the member-based psychology where qualities of the soul are regarded as parts of the body. Understood both symbolically and literally, fire is here of the utmost importance. It is related to the ancient conceptions of a transcendent and universal Fire of which our fires are only pale reflections.

The *Jaiminiya Brahmana* speaks of man’s twofold possibility of rebirth:

- 1) in the sublunar world of mortal beings, through the womb of a woman;
- 2) in the imperishable transcendent world (or *kosmos noetos* of Hellenic tradition), through the womb of the sacred votive fire, whose flame is a messenger and intermediary between men and the gods.²²

²⁰ Heinrich Zimmer, *ibid.*, p. 346.

²¹ Ruth Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles*. Text, translation, and commentary, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988, p. 24.

²² Heinrich Zimmer, *ibid.*, p. 335.

The initiate is aware of his solar self and is certain of his imperishable solar nature. As Heinrich Zimmer pointed out:

‘In the closing period of Vedic thought the dominant features of the ritual – the sacrificial fire and the burnt offering – still give symbolic form and structure to this secret doctrine: a man comes into being on earth through a transformation and rebirth, brought about by a fivefold burnt offering of the gods’.²³

According to the *Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahmana* (I.28.29), whoever speaks, hears, or thinks, does so by the ray of the solar Indra to whom all names belong, but who in fact has no name. The functional powers of Brahma (compared to a sparkling fiery wheel in *Maitri Upanishad* VI.24) are the solar rays or reins by which the only Seer and Thinker sees, hears, thinks and eats within us (*ibid.* II.6; VI.31). The active powers of speech, vision and thought are only the names of His acts.

Similarly, Apollo binds all things to himself, and orders them. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy argues that this bond, activated and controlled by *sutra-dhara* as a stage manager of Hindu tradition, is precisely Plato’s ‘golden cord’ by which the puppet should be guided if it is to play its proper part.²⁴ Since we are God’s toys, we ought ‘to dance’ accordingly, and this cosmic dance includes (1) irradiation, the demiurgical descent, and (2) elevation (measured by the eternal ratios, *metra aidia: De myster.* 65.6), the theurgical ascent. Both are just two sides of the same divine rite, the same cosmic game.

This doctrine of the supernal Sun implies the equivalence of life creating light and sound, since to shine (*bha*) means to speak (*bhan*), and ‘utterance’ is ‘raying’. The divine Sun speaks and what he has to say is the great and hidden name (*nama guhyam*). The similar doctrine is attributed to the Egyptian prophet Bitys by Iamblichus (*De myster.* 268. 2–3).

Therefore the theurgist himself – as an animated divine statue (*agalma*) – is tantamount to a solar ray or the microcosmic *axis mundi*: the channel of the fiery light in the chain (*seira*) of descent and ascent, *proodos* and *epistrophe*. According to the *Chaldean Oracles*, the theurgist stands as a warrior whose battle cry echoes the primordial sound of creation. He stands as a hero ‘arrayed from head to toe with a clamorous light (the all-armoured vigour of sounding light, according to Hans Lewy²⁵), armed in intellect and soul with a triple-barbed strenght’. He must cast into his imagination *pan triados sunthema* and go towards the empyrean channels collectedly (fr.2).

The initiate must rush to the centre of the sounding light: to the Sun (which is the supreme Death as well) and the central hearth of fiery transformation and rebirth. Like the supreme *sunthema* itself, he stands in the centre of the primordial *mandala* of the cosmos tantamount to the shining sphere of light.

²³ Heinrich Zimmer, *ibid.*, p. 344.

²⁴ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, London: Denis Dorson, 1947, p. 106.

²⁵ Hans Lewy, *ibid.*, p. 192.

The Shining Forth Like a God

This position is similar to that of the god Horus-Ra, the Egyptian king as an ogre who eats men and lives on gods. He eats their *heka* (magic power of being, life, and intelligence) and devours their glory (*Pyramid Texts* 393–404). Placing himself at the hub of theophanies and assimilating their powers, he is the ritual model and prototype not only of the magician, but the philosopher as well, with only difference that for the Hellenic philosopher the distinction between the ‘subjective’ inner world and the ‘objective’ outer world is more or less firmly established.

In Egypt, the *ka* of the solar and lunar king permeated the whole country and was the focus of the collective consciousness. ‘He was the *ka* of Egypt, and he was the personification of *ka* as experienced in each individual’, according to Jeremy Naydler.²⁶ *Ka*, formerly translated as ‘double’, is the principle symbolizing physical, social, moral and spiritual appetites and tendencies, such as subsistence, creative power of food, nutrition, force, splendour, magic, illumination and so on.

The rudiments of the Plotinian metaphysics in mythological form can be seen already in the Egyptian conception of

- 1) *ka* energy of the god Horus, whom the king embodied;
- 2) *ba* as the vehicle of ascent, depicted as human-headed falcon, which exists in relation to both the physical and the spiritual worlds; literally it means ‘manifestation’, but is rendered ‘soul’ (and therefore can be related to the *Phaedrus* myth);
- 3) *akh* as a state of radiance and inner illumination, connected with the solar Ra and representing the king’s (who is the paradigmatic initiate and the supreme philosopher) transcendent identity with Ra, who himself emerged from the ineffable transcendence of Nun.

The appearance of the king, his shining forth, is tantamount to the theophany of Ra on the primordial hill *in illo tempore*. The Neoplatonic philosopher is dramatically striving to reach this ineffable glory as well, but, at the same time, he likes to leave this world only after it is fully ‘catalogized’ according to the rules of the post-Aristotelian logic and hymned through the scientific enthusiasm – not in the same manner as it was done by his predecessors from the Middle East and Egypt, nonetheless with the same practical and theoretical zeal.

Final Remarks

Philosophy as a sort of rational and critical discourse, a set of *problemata*, or examination and torture of reality, was born out of the ritualized combat (*agon*) for wisdom, initially related to the art of solving riddles and cosmological contests for the knowledge of principles. Only after the sharp separation of inner and outer reality was made, philosophy became a mistress

²⁶ Jeremy Naydler, *ibid.*, p. 197.

of the discovered and personalized inner world. Owing to this transformation, the spiritual and psychic events were no longer experienced by the collective imagination as outer events.

The introduction of the ancient hieratic theurgy into the one-sided and therefore too ambitious philosophy was an attempt to re-create the sacred ways of thinking in accord to the new scientific thought of the Hellenistic period. Perhaps it is theoretically possible – through the sophisticated metaphysical exegesis – to deduce theurgy directly from the dialogues of Plato, such as *Timaeus*, *Phaedrus*, or *Laws*. However, the writings of Plato himself cannot be explained without references to the transmutation of archaic symbols into his own patterns of thought.

Contemplation of the wondrous works (*thaumata erga*) of the gods and interpretations of the mysterious cosmic order marked the start of philosophy both as physiology and metaphysics. However, despite the early raised attempts to reject the traditional myth as such, philosophy (still determined by the old patterns of thought, hidden beneath the thin screens, *parapetasmata*, of scepticism and rationalism) inevitably turned towards the ‘divine light’, claiming that we cannot become happy unless by the aid of philosophy acquire and contemplate the wisdom of truly existing beings.

Philosophy is the science of living perfectly, according to Iamblichus. However, if the summit of perfection is achieved only through the union with the divine principles themselves and if they are called ‘gods’, the traditional means of ascent must be re-adapted. Therefore the marriage of philosophy and the Platonized branch of theurgy was destined *a priori* by the prevailing soteriological attitude towards the man’s last end (*telos*).

DIEVIŠKOSIOS APEIGOS IR FILOSOFIJA NEOPLATONIZME

Algis Uždavinyš

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje aptariamas ritualo ir filosofinio diskurso santykis neoplatonizme, mėginant paneigti tarp šiuolaikinių tyrinėtojų vis dar pasitaikančią nuomonę, kad teurgijos integravimas į platonizmo tradiciją reiškia racionalaus mąstymo nuopuolį. Autorius atskleidžia sintetinę filosofavimo, mitinio mąstymo bei teurginio ritualo vienybę pabrėždamas, kad neoplatonizme kultinis matmuo nėra iš nežinia kur atsiradusi naujiena, bet logiškai kyla iš paties Platono, taip pat orfikų bei pitagorikų iškeltų metafizinių principų. Antikos filosofija išauga iš kosmogoninių mitų ir ritualų aiškinimo. Šiuo požiūriu ji genetiškai siejasi su senovės Egipto, Mesopotamijos ir Upanišadų laikotarpio Indijos dvasine kultūra.

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