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PROCLUS ON POETIC MIMESIS, SYMBOLISM, AND TRUTH

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THE difficulty of digesting traditional myths which some Greek thinkers were facing led, so the mainstream modern argument goes,¹ to the development of allegoresis. This method, ingenious though it appeared, was always replete with intellectual thorns. One of them, in the post-Platonic period at least, was the explicit rejection of myths by Socrates irrespective of whether or not they contain 'deep meanings' (*ύπόνοιαι*: Plato, *Rep.* 378 D-E). The Platonic strictures did not have the expected effect. Neither the successors of Plato in the Academy nor those other philosophical schools, Stoicism for example, deeply influenced by the Platonic legacy abandoned allegoresis because of the Platonic prohibition.²

As Plutarch succinctly put it (*Aud. poet.* 15 B-C), poetry resembles the head of the octopus in that it is very pleasant to the senses but also liable to cause nightmares. And many nightmares poetry did cause, especially to those of a philosophic disposition. The basic criticism that Plato levels against art in general and poetry

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¹ The *defensive* origin of allegoresis is still accepted by most modern scholars, although a case has been made which shows its *positive* aspect: J. Tate, 'The Beginnings of Greek Allegory', *Classical Review*, 41 (1927), 214-15, and 'On the History of Allegorism', *Classical Quarterly* [CQ], 28 (1934), 105-14.

² Cf. J. Tate, 'Plato and Allegorical Interpretation', *CQ* 23 (1929), 142-54, and *ibid.* 24 (1930), 1-10; A. Long, 'Stoic Readings of Homer', in R. Lamberton and J. J. Keany (eds.), *Homer's Ancient Readers* [Readers] (Princeton, 1992), 41-66.

in particular is their imitative character. Art is at a third remove from truth (*Rep.* 602 c), since it imitates particulars and instantiations of the Forms¹ rather than the Forms themselves. Before Plato *μίμησις* was used in medical texts to refer to the means whereby the art of medicine relates to the workings of nature.² In Aristotle *μίμησις* is what enables *κάθαρσις*, another term used in medicine, to take place. By and large, mimesis implied *assimilation*; it also implied *approximation*; but it implied *deception* by the same token.³ To escape any undesired overtones, Plato coined the word *μέθεξις*. In his mind, worldly things *participate* in the Forms (and the Forms are *present in*, and *in contact with*, particulars) but artefacts *imitate* worldly things.⁴

Proclus had an extreme reverence for Plato, but he had an equal reverence for Homer.⁵ He thought that the age-old quarrel between

¹ Here and in what follows the terms 'Idea' and 'Form' are used indiscriminately, the preference of one over the other being a matter of style.

² Cf. Hipp. *De victu* 1. 11–24 (vi. 477 ff. Littré).

³ Cf. Democr. B 154; Antiphon A 3 (=Xen. *Mem.* 1. 6 ff.); Herod. 3. 37; Aesch. fr. 353 Dind.; Thuc. 1. 95. 3; Ar. *Thesm.* 149 ff.; Gorgias B 23.

⁴ Cf. *Rep.* 597 B ff.; *Phaedo* 100 c ff. I have not studied all the relevant Platonic passages with a view to establishing the claim that Plato *never* uses 'imitation' to refer to the relationship between Forms and particulars, but the examples that D. F. Ast gives (*Lexicon Platonicum* s.vv. *μέθεξις*, *μετέχω*, *μετάσχεσις*, *μετοχή*, *μίμημα*, *μίμησις*, *μιμητής*, *μιμητικός*, *μιμούμαι*) seem to indicate that this is indeed the case; at any rate, the preponderance of 'participation' over 'imitation' when reference is made to the Forms plainly shows Plato's inclination.

⁵ The most significant recent contributions to the understanding of Proclus' literary exegesis are, in reverse chronological order: Oiva Kuisma, *Proclus' Defence of Homer [Defence]* (Helsinki, 1996); Wolfgang Bernard, *Spätantike Dichtungstheorien: Untersuchungen zu Proklos, Herakleitos und Plutarch [Dichtungstheorien]* (Stuttgart, 1990); Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian [Homer]* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1986); Anne D. R. Sheppard, *Studies on the 5th and 6th Essays of Proclus' Commentary on the Republic [Studies]* (Göttingen, 1980); James A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm [Microcosm]* (Leiden, 1976). The works of Proclus mentioned in this paper are cited from the following editions:

In Remp. Procli in Platonis Rem publicam commentarii, ed. W. Kroll (2 vols.; Leipzig, 1899–1901).

In Tim. Procli in Platonis Timaeum commentaria, ed. E. Diehl (3 vols.; Leipzig 1903–6).

In Parm. Procli commentarius in Platonis Parmenidem (=Procli philosophi Platonici opera inedita, pars tertia), ed. V. Cousin (Paris, 1864; repr. Hildesheim, 1961).

ET Proclus: *The Elements of Theology*, ed. E. R. Dodds, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1953).

PT Proclus: *Théologie Platonicienne*, ed. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink (6 vols.; Paris, 1968–98).

H. Procli Hymni, ed. E. Vogt (Wiesbaden, 1957).

philosophy and poetry in the tenth book of the *Republic* (607 B) could be settled. The optimistic view that writers may one day successfully defend poetry and present a convincing account of its value in verse or prose is mentioned as an open possibility in the *Republic* (607 C–608 B). The accusation brought against poetry will be inconclusive, Socrates the fair-minded holds, unless the offended side is also given a voice before the tribunal of reason. And Proclus undertakes precisely this task. He assumes the role of poetry's advocate—which, among philosophers, is that of devil's advocate.

The Aristotelian understanding of imitation as an important feature of human nature deeply influenced Proclus' attitude towards art.⁸ The cathartic function of mimesis played an important part in his defence of poetry. The discrepancy, however, between Plato and his exegete of the fifth century AD is puzzling none the less. While Plato condemned poetry as imitation, Proclus takes its imitative character for granted and construes Plato in such a way that the poets are banned from the ideal state not because their art is imitation, but because it is *bad* imitation.

Unlike some other commentaries by Proclus,⁹ *In Rempublicam*, the main text in which he expounds his theory of poetic symbolism and of mimesis in poetry, consists of a collection of independent essays. Two fundamental purposes permeate the separate discourses of the work: (1) the removal of contradictions detectable in the Platonic corpus and (2) the refutation of those critics of Plato who accused him of looking down upon poetry. Proclus saves poets from philosophic disrepute and frees Plato from allegations of poetic insensitivity by using Platonic principles.¹⁰

I shall first present some of the main arguments of the fifth and sixth discourses of *In Rempublicam* and then attempt a synthesis. Although my springboard is the Proclan commentary, I shall try

Sacr. *De sacrificio*: 'Proclus: Περὶ τῆς καθ' Ἑλληνας ἱερατικῆς τέχνης', ed. J. Bidez in J. Bidez, F. Cumont, A. Delatte, O. Lagergrantz, and J. Ruska (eds.), *Catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques grecs*, vi (Brussels, 1928), 137–51.

⁸ *In Remp.* i. 46. 14–15 φύσει γὰρ τὴν ψυχὴν ἡμῶν χαίρειν τοῖς μιμήμασιν, διὸ καὶ φιλόμυθοι πάντες ἐσμέν.

⁹ Cf. E. Lamberz, 'Proklos und die Form des philosophischen Kommentars', in J. Pépin and H. D. Saffrey (eds.), *Proclus, lecteur et interprète des anciens* (Paris, 1987), 1–20.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Trouillard, *L'un et l'âme selon Proclus* (Paris, 1972), 72.

to address larger questions concerning symbolism in poetry and literature's claim to truth.

1. The development of the argument

The first question that Proclus raises refers to an apparent contradiction in the writings of Plato: why does Plato expel the poets from the ideal state in the third and tenth books of the *Republic* when he himself explicitly states here and elsewhere (*Rep.* 398 A; *Ion* 533 D–534 E; *Phdr.* 264 B) that poetry is sacred and the poetic inspiration of divine origin? In reply to that question Proclus distinguishes between an imitation that is unfaithful to the imitated things and another that is faithful to them. The unfaithful poetic imitation refers to the names, attributes, and deeds of gods and heroes who are treated inadequately by the poets (*In Remp.* i. 44. 6–17). But there is a difference between their respective treatments. The tales told about the gods are, to be sure, myths. They are lies certainly, Proclus argues following Plato, but they are good lies because they hide the (ineffable) truth about the gods under the guise of beautiful words which, by the same token, reveal the beauty of the divine (i. 44. 23–6). By contrast, the poetical treatment of heroes is utterly misleading, because the heroes are represented like ordinary human beings with all the weaknesses and imperfections of common people (i. 44. 26–45. 1). The same holds true when the gods are said to steal, rape, commit incest, or fight one another. When gods are represented as fallible mortals, imitation fails (i. 45. 17–27). It is not the representational aspect of imitation that is faulty but the inadequacy of representation. In a later passage (i. 63. 21–8) Proclus speaks of the unfaithfulness of imitation not only with respect to gods and heroes but also with respect to members of the human species. Poetry is bad and unsuccessful when, as often happens, men are presented speaking like women, slaves like masters, brave men like cowards, simpletons like philosophers.

But imitation can also be faithful. This happens when men are represented in the variegated fashion that is part and parcel of their nature (i. 46. 23–9). The poets succeed in imitating humans, for they depict them with all the passions, turmoils, sufferings, and vicissitudes that normally characterize them. But it is precisely where imitation succeeds that its educational value becomes suspect

(i. 46. 29-47. 14). For by imitating the variety of human passions and the diversity of man's attitudes, the poets do not manage to raise themselves and their audience above the phenomenal world, attain to immovable truth, and acquire a vision of perfection.

Ergo: when *men* are represented the imitative character of poetry is faithful, but its educational validity is nil; when *heroes* are represented the poetic imitation is both unfaithful and misleading; when *gods* are represented imitation is unfaithful and untrue but it conduces to truth (i. 47. 14-19). This arrangement of kinds of imitation provided by Proclus is not yet a reply to the initial question of the sacredness of poetry. It has, however, cleared the ground for an eventual answer. To that end a new notion is needed, that of symbolism. Before its introduction into the discussion Proclus makes a new beginning by assuming the divine origin of poetry. 'We all take it for granted', he says, 'that the art of poetry is sacred and that it came to humans from the Muses by means of the inspiration that they imparted to the poets' (i. 47. 20-2). This statement is in perfect accord with what Socrates claimed in the *Ion* when he pointed out that only when a man is possessed by a god is he truly a poet (534 B; cf. *Phdr.* 265 A-B). But whereas the argument is used there to baffle Ion with respect to his supposed understanding of Homer or to prove that the knowledge of the philosopher is no less divinely inspired and sublime than that of the poet, here the same argument is summoned to disprove the allegations of inconsistency among the various claims of the third and tenth books of the *Republic*. Proclus insists that it is only from the best polity, only from the ideal republic, that poetry should be expelled (i. 47. 26-48. 1). In all other social organizations that bear the Platonic ideal in mind, but do not manage concretely to realize it here and now, poetry is indispensable. Then Proclus introduces the concept of symbol. An elaboration of what is meant by the term will occur only later, in the sixth discourse. The concept is here used rather prematurely, since at this point Proclus does not seem to have clarified the difference between *σύμβολον* and *εἰκὼν*, or symbolism and mimesis.

Proclus asserts that what is said symbolically helps even the lowest of the partial intellects to elevate themselves to the divine realm. By means of the symbols an unobstructed intuition of the divine comes down to visit us (i. 48. 1-13). There are people for whom art that imitates the variety of human characters and demeanours is more useful than that which imitates only simple characters. Those

unable to philosophize cannot attain to divine wisdom through disciplined reasoning; to those truth can only be suggested, not fully established, by means of symbolic language that approximates the world of true being. Having mentioned the concept of simplicity, Proclus then expounds an argument clarifying what is meant by the simple (i. 48. 20-4). The simple, he says, is twofold: it is either what is better or else what is worse than the multifarious. In cities ruled authoritatively by one single man, variety in art is preferable to artistic simplicity (i. 48. 13-20). For in those cities the simple is worse than the varied since the simple conforms to the absolute will of the tyrant, which is by definition bad and hateful. It is only in the best polity that the simple should by all means be sought out and established, since it is only there that knowledge of the Form of goodness is the sole factor that determines political and social affairs. The simple to be found in the ideal state is the good. This same simple good prompts gods to possess mortals and turn them into poets. But since the political communities to which poetry addresses itself are not ideal, it is not inappropriate that divine inspiration engenders imitation of the varied rather than the simple. Thus we are led to see the compatibility between belief in the divine origin of poetry and its banishment from the ideal state (i. 48. 24-6).

However, the exile of the poets was not total. Plato believed that some types of poetry, such as hymns to the gods and encomia to exceptionally brave mortals, could be retained in his republic because they would promote piety and virtue (*Rep.* 607 A). Proclus took Plato seriously: he himself composed hymns which diverge from the traditional genre in that they do not relate the birth and adventures of a deity but describe his/her powers in a language firmly rooted in philosophic speculation.¹¹ Such hymns to gods can be easily accommodated in the context of an ideal polity. But the principal targets of the Platonic critique were tragic and comic dramas and what, like Homeric epic poetry,¹² most resembled them

¹¹ A representative example of Proclan poetry is his hymn to the Muses. The first nine verses (*H.* 3. 1-9) praise the Muses' power characterized as 'light that drives upwards' (*ἀναγώγιμον φῶς*) and describe how they manage to raise the mind above material conditions and save it from the thick forgetfulness of earthly misery. The last eight verses (10-17) summon the divine power and beg for its assistance in the poet's own life.

¹² Plato, *Rep.* 589 D *τὴν τε τραγωδίαν καὶ τὸν ἡγεμόνα αὐτῆς Ὀμηρον.* Cf. *In Remp.* i. 196. 5.

by giving voice to the characters of myth in direct speech. These poetic genres were considered to allow for, and be grounded in imitation of the varied in its most evident form of *impersonation*. The Aristotelian understanding of poetry had defended tragedy and comedy through the introduction of the notion of catharsis. Proclus felt the need to harmonize the apparent divergence (i. 49. 13-20). He distinguishes the effects of dramatic poetry on the life of the mature citizen body from its effects on the education of the young (i. 49. 25), and manages to side with Aristotle in all essential points but also to defend the Platonic view in some sense.

Human passions, Proclus says, cannot be eradicated from the human soul. There is no way that the pathetic faculty of the soul can be cut off from the rest of the psychic faculties and thrown away. But the passions should not be allowed fulfilment either, because that would result in their supremacy over reason.¹⁴ The solution is that they should be properly channelled and allowed indulgence and 'movement' in specific prearranged periods of time.¹⁵ This is the function that tragedy and comedy are called to accomplish. They can discharge the burden of accumulated passions and purify the souls of the spectators. But what is good and useful for grown-up citizens would be disastrous for the immature souls of adolescent boys and girls who do not as yet know how to distinguish good from evil (i. 50. 2-51. 18). The didactic function of drama is based precisely on the capacity of discernment that youths and maidens still lack. For that reason, Proclus argues, Plato banned dramatic performances from his republic.

But then, with an astonishing argumentative leap, Proclus claims that the educational value of drama being nil, tragedy and comedy should be prohibited because they are superfluous to grown-ups and harmful to teenagers (i. 51. 18-20). Proclus seems to have moved too far in the Platonic direction, and obviously against the wish that he expressed in his introduction (i. 42. 10-15; cf. i. 49. 13-17). The sought-for combination of the Platonic absolute prohibition against the poetry of passions with the Aristotelian theory of purification has led Proclus to find the justification of the Platonic imperative in the excesses not of poetry as such but of some poetic

¹³ Cf. G. M. A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* [*Thought*], new edn. (London, 1980), 185.

¹⁴ *In Remp.* i. 42. 13-14 a [sc. τὰ πάθη] μήτε παντάσῃ ἀποκλείειν δυνατόν μήτε ἐμπιπλάναι πάλιν ἀσφαλές.

¹⁵ *In Remp.* i. 42. 14 δεόμενα [sc. τὰ πάθη] δὴ τιμὸς ἐν καιρῷ κινήσεως. Cf. i. 51. 4.

genres, and possibly in the excesses of the actual tragic and comic dramas of the fifth century.¹⁶ Since poetry is imitative by nature, perfect poetry must use myths and imitate (i. 65. 25-9). But the task of perfect poetry—it is only in perfection that one can see the true nature of a thing¹⁷—is to make myths that are similar to the imitated subjects. For if the myths are dissimilar, then the imitated subjects are destined to concealment. The function of poetry is to reveal by mimesis, not to cover and disguise.¹⁸

The foregoing points of harmonization between Platonic philosophy and poetic thought derive from the general introductory remarks that cover pp. 42-69 of the first volume of Kroll's edition of *In Rempublicam*, or the fifth discourse.¹⁹ It seems that Proclus was not fully satisfied with them.²⁰ He reiterates the problem of the relationship of philosophy to poetry by focusing on the Homeric myths and their use in Platonic dialogues. He also presents a theory of myth which does not distinguish myths devised by the philosophico-poetical mind of Plato from traditional tales of the Homeric epics.²¹ In the sixth discourse, which is worthier of atten-

¹⁶ *In Remp.* i. 50. 21-4 *ἐκείνας δὲ ἄρα τὰς ποιήσεις πρὸς τῇ ποικιλίᾳ καὶ τὸ ἄμετρον ἐχούσας ἐν ταῖς τῶν παθῶν τούτων προκλήσειν πολλοῦ δεῖν εἰς ἀφοσίωσιν εἶναι χρησίμους.* It seems unlikely that an intellectual to whom tradition ascribed the composition of such a purely philological work as the *Χρηστομαθία* had no knowledge of classical literature, and of 5th-cent. drama in particular, other than that derived from Plato's quotations.

¹⁷ Cf. *In Remp.* i. 75. 25-8. The ninth and tenth questions of the fifth discourse (*In Remp.* i. 67. 10-69. 19) deal with perfect poetry and with the divine poetic paradigm by imitating which human poetry comes into being. The introductory summary remark makes this point clear (*In Remp.* i. 43. 22-3 *τίς ὁ ἐν τῷ παντὶ ποιητής; εἰς οὗν βλέπων καὶ ὁ τῆδε ποιητής τεύξεται τοῦ οἰκείου τέλους*). Several traditional deities (Zeus, Apollo, Hermes, Asclepius, and the Sirens) are summoned to act as the divine prototypes of poetic genres (*In Remp.* i. 68. 24-69. 19).

¹⁸ *In Remp.* i. 65. 29-30 *ὁμοίους [sc. μύθους] πλάττειν τοῖς ὑποκειμένοις, ἀλλὰ μὴ διὰ τῶν ἀνομοίων ἐβέλλειν αὐτὰ κρύπτειν.*

¹⁹ I have omitted the more specific points about the relationship between tragedy and comedy, the appropriate and inappropriate rhythms and musical scales, and Plato's view of Solon, all of which Proclus discusses (*In Remp.* i. 51. 26-65. 15), taking his departure from a casual, or less casual, Socratic claim.

²⁰ It is accepted that the sixth discourse was composed later and is more sophisticated than the fifth. See C. Gallavotti, 'Eterogeneità e cronologia dei commenti di Proclo alla Repubblica', *Rivista di filologia e di istruzione classica*, 57 (1929), 208-19, and 'Intorno ai commenti di Proclo alla Repubblica', *Bollettino del Comitato per la Preparazione dell'Edizione nazionale dei Classici Greci e Latini*, 19 (1971), 41-54; Sheppard, *Studies*, 15-38.

²¹ Proclus' extensive treatment of the Platonic myth of Er in the sixteenth treatise (*In Remp.* ii. 96-359), for instance, is identical with his treatment of the myths of Homer. Proclus does not distinguish between popular myths and myths devised for

tion than the fifth, Proclus seems to have changed his mind about the expulsion of the poets. Instead of claiming that poetry should be banned from actual polities or from the ideal state, he holds that, if some necessary distinctions are drawn, poetry might be retained in all constitutions. The important concept here is appropriate discrimination. In fact the preservation of poetry applies only to those advanced in philosophy, and therefore, in harmony with the earlier view, excludes the uninitiated.

Of all poets it was Homer and Hesiod who, according to an often-quoted Herodotean dictum (2. 53), provided the Greeks with their divine mythology. Of the two, Homer excelled in the consciousness of tradition and outclassed his rival both in poetic skilfulness and in myth-making capacity: the Homeric epics have been characterized, not without reason, as the books of the Hellenic Bible.²² It comes as no surprise that when Proclus begins to deal with the symbolic language of poetry in a more detailed and scholarly way he limits his enquiry to Homer, 'the best and most divine of poets' (i. 158. 6-11 = Plato, *Ion* 530B-C).

The pedagogical inappropriateness of some myths as opposed to others is stressed anew with a novel distinction between two kinds of myths (i. 81. 11-12; cf. 84. 22 ff.).²³ The genus of myth is split into the educative species (*παιδευτικόν*) and the ritualist-cum-perfecting—both notions coexist in the Greek term—species (*τελεστικόν*). The former, which has morality as its goal, is also political, whereas the latter, aiming at contact with the divine, is meant for the gifted individual. Because contact with the divine presupposes exceptional determination, lifelong study, perseverance, and hard work, it can be attained only by the very few (i. 83. 14-18). The former type of mythology, by contrast, should be offered to the vast majority of people. This is also the type that is commonly known to the many as conducing to morality. Here Proclus has obviously the Platonic praises and hymns in mind. Now, since the body politic comprises the entire population and is, as a result, numeri-

a particular philosophic purpose. For him all myths are, in essence, poetic because the medium of poetry is myth. Philosophy may occasionally use traditional myths or create new ones, but then philosophy is no longer in its proper domain. Proclus' distinction is, for the most part, the traditional distinction between *λόγος* and *μῦθος*.

²² Cf. K. W. Gransden, 'Homer and the Epic', in M. I. Finley (ed.), *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal* (Oxford, 1981), 65-92.

²³ Cf. Kuisma, *Defence*, 103 ff.

cally characterized by the many, the political training of the citizens must be based on this educative and ethical species of myth. But the *hoi polloi* of the democratic regime of Socrates' time are the young of the Platonic republic (i. 83. 7-12). Hence the restriction applies equally to the many of any constitution other than the ideal, but only to the young of the Platonic polity. However, this restriction does not mean that the telestic kind is of no value. Telestic myths are indeed of higher value since they reveal the mysteries of the gods. But the two types should be kept separate at all costs. Since the telestic myths are hermetic and, therefore, unintelligible to the uninitiated mind, the many, trained as they are to understand ethical myths, tend not only to miss the meaning of telestic myths but, what is most dangerous, to misconstrue the intentions of the poet. *Absurdity in myth is an indication that a deeper meaning lies hidden.*²⁴ Confusion arises if and only if the telestic species of myth is mistakenly taken to be educative. This happens to all those people who take the Homeric myths (which are telestic) at their face value (as if they were ethical myths). And these myths are subject to Socrates' stipulation that poetry should be purified before it is accepted in the ideal state. The kind of poetry that is there discussed is, according to Proclus, the political type, which should by all means be of the ethical species.

Proclus' fundamental proposition revolves around the distinction between the proper use of myth and its inappropriate use, be it misuse or abuse. We cannot judge the value of wine, he points out, from its excessive misuse by immoderate men. Intoxication, in itself a divine gift, should not be prohibited merely because it sometimes results in indecent behaviour (i. 75. 29-76, on Plato, *Leg.* 646 A). Excessive drunkenness is the effect, not the cause, of imprudent demeanour. Likewise, the myths are not to be judged by the misconstruals forcefully attached to them by the unwise, who cannot elevate themselves above the world of the senses. If incest, castration, robbery, and the like occur in the tales of the gods, it is because the symbolic language of myth narrates in visual imagery what should be understood as atemporal divine reality (i. 81. 28 ff.). The myths are not to blame if foolish people, incapable

²⁴ Cf. J. Pépîn, 'Porphyre, exégète d'Homère', in *Porphyre* (Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique, 12; Vandœuvres-Genève, 1966), 229-72, esp. 251 ff.; R. Lamberton, 'The Neoplatonists and the Spiritualization of Homer', in Lamberton and Keane, *Readers*, 115-33.

of scratching the surface and grasping the theological meaning, take them at their face value, ignore the symbolism contained therein, and ascribe indecent behaviour to the divine order.

2. Two principles of allegorization

The so-called allegorical reading of Proclus, based on the oral teaching of his master Syrianus,²⁵ follows two principles. They both derive from the hierarchical construction of reality as he expounded it with utmost logical coherence and supreme condensation in *The Elements of Theology*. The account given there is a rigorous deduction of all reality from the One (cf. *ET* 11-12) on the basis of some elementary logical premisses. The recurrent model is that of the mirror, with the concomitant syzygy of prototype and representation, original and copy. This model presents the fundamental law of all reality, the law of causality, whose logical expression in propositional terms is that the cause is always superior to its effect (*ET* 7). The two principles of Proclan allegorization of myths can be ultimately reduced to the one single principle of causation, but for clarity they are here presented as separate.

The first principle distinguishes metaphysical reality (the domain of the gods which transcends sense perception) from physical operations. Of primary importance here are the concepts of temporality and of divisibility. Both time and corporeality acquire their existence from the transcendent principles: they are the mirror images of eternity and immateriality respectively (cf. *ET* 52-5, 72, 94). Since the medium of the poetic art is myth—the poet is a poet of myths, not of rational accounts, Plato said in the *Phaedo* (61 B)—when the poet comes to describe the divine realm he is bound to express the theological message by means of images, the essential components of mythology. Thus myths represent the indivisible and incorporeal as divisible and material, the timeless and eternal as temporal and successive, and the intelligible as sensible (*In Remp.* i. 77. 9-79. 4; cf. *PT* i. 21. 7-12). In that respect, poets imitate nature. For nature first and foremost creates sensible images of the intelligible forms;²⁶ and it is on the level of nature that the imagery

²⁵ *In Remp.* i. 71. 2-6 and 24-7; cf. 95. 27-31. A full discussion of Proclus' debt to Syrianus can be found in Sheppard, *Studies*, 39-103.

²⁶ *In Remp.* i. 77. 13-14 καὶ ἡ φύσις εἰκόνας δημιουργοῦσα τῶν ἀδύτων καὶ νοητῶν εἰδῶν.

of poetry functions. The Proclan assumption, the reverse of the empiricist view, holds that nothing comes to be in the senses that does not pre-exist in the divine intellect on the transcendent plane. The famous ejection of Hephaestus from Olympus, for example (Hom. *Il.* 1. 594), is interpreted as showing the procession of the divine activity throughout the whole hierarchy of being down to the lowest planes of the sensible world (*In Remp.* i. 82. 10-12). More philosophically demanding is the Hesiodic myth in which Cronus is portrayed as swallowing his children (*Th.* 453-67). His binding and imprisoning of them in his own belly (cf. *Th.* 501-2) is explained as the ineffable union of cause and effect.²⁷ The obstruction of activity, the impediment to free development (which is what we normally understand by 'binding'), is the distorted image of a prototypical divine operation.²⁸ This divine activity, we are led to conclude, is positive and praiseworthy because it allows things to stand in their causes.²⁹ Without such standing-in-the-causes there would be no standing-together of the dispersed elements that constitute distinct beings, hence no separate entities. Things would, rather, immediately crumble and disintegrate into chaotic indeterminacy.

The second principle of Proclus' exegesis of divine myths (intimately connected with, or rather subordinated to, the first) is the splitting of each deity into distinct entities in descending order of causal concatenation.³⁰ By means of this device Proclus manages to accommodate some traits of the traditional tales about the gods that are incompatible with one another, without impairing the gods' simplicity or their self-caused unity (cf. *ET* 114) and without deviating from the law of contradiction.³¹ An extreme example of this tendency can be seen in the commentary on the *Timaeus* (iii. 190. 19-26), a work that Proclus had completed at the age of 28, accord-

²⁷ Cf. Plot. 5. 8. 12-13. The Hesiodic account of transference of universal power described as the mythic succession of divine personages to sovereignty attracted the Neoplatonists' attention early on. See P. Hadot, 'Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus in Plotinus' Treatise against the Gnostics', in H. J. Blumenthal and R. A. Markus (eds.), *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought* (London, 1981), 124-37.

²⁸ *In Remp.* i. 82. 23-5. The interpretation given by Proclus cannot readily be accommodated to any of the classes of myth tabulated by Sallust (*De diis et mundo* 4. 21-2 Nock).

²⁹ *In Remp.* i. 82. 14-16 οἱ δὲ Κρόνιοι δεσμοὶ τὴν ἔνωσιν τῆς ὅλης δημιουργίας πρὸς τὴν νοεράν τοῦ Κρόνου καὶ πατρικὴν ὑπεροχὴν δηλοῦσιν.

³⁰ *In Remp.* i. 92. 2-9; cf. *ET* 260; Bernard, *Dichtungstheorien*, 95 ff.

³¹ Cf. L. J. Rosán, *The Philosophy of Proclus* (New York, 1949), 104-5.

ing to his biographer.³² There the philosopher splits Zeus into five distinct entities to account for the various attributes which Plato, in accordance with *πάτριος νόμος* and not without a tone of irony, ascribes to him.³³

3. Σύμβολον and εἰκών

Proclus understands very well that if the imitative character of art is the primary reason for its rejection and if mimesis is the cause of literature's inadequacy, we shall be compelled to apply the same strict rule to the dialogues of Plato, whose mimetic character, and salient impersonation in particular, no one could possibly deny (*In Remp.* i. 161. 9–14; 163. 2–5; 199. 4–9). Because of this sensitive understanding of mimesis, Proclus prefers to speak of *σύμβολα* rather than *μιμήματα τῆς ἀληθείας*. But he often identifies *σύμβολα* with *εἰκόνες τῶν παραδειγμάτων*. Both concepts could be accommodated in the context of a philosophical position that reveres Homer no less than Plato. But symbolism is a more flexible concept. It allows for contradictions between truth in the strict conceptual sense and the imagery of poetry.

On a superficial reading, Proclus gives the impression that he wants it both ways: he states that the symbol does not imitate that of which it is a symbol;³⁴ he claims that poetry relies on imitation and that it is in imitation, when excellently performed, that one can grasp the true meaning of poetry;³⁵ and he claims, moreover, that the poetic myths about deities of the Orphics (and of those who create similar theogonies) are symbols *par excellence* (*PT* i. 20.

³² Marinus, *Vita Procli* 329–30 Masullo.

³³ Cf. Plato, *Crat.* 396 A; *Gorg.* 523 A; *Phdr.* 246 E.

³⁴ *In Remp.* i. 198. 13–24 καὶ πῶς γὰρ ἂν ἡ διὰ συμβόλων τὰ θεῖα ἀφερμηνεύουσα μιμητικῆ προσαγορεύοιτο; τὰ γὰρ σύμβολα τούτων, ὧν ἐστὶ σύμβολα, μιμήματα οὐκ ἔστιν τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐναντία τῶν ἐναντίων οὐκ ἂν ποτε μιμήματα γένοιτο, τοῦ καλοῦ τὸ αἰσχρὸν, καὶ τοῦ κατὰ φύσιν τὸ παρὰ φύσιν ἢ δὲ συμβολικῆ θεωρία καὶ διὰ τῶν ἐναντιωτάτων τῆν τῶν πραγμάτων ἐνδείκνυται φύσιν. εἴ τις ἄρα ποιητὴς ἔνθους ἐστὶν καὶ διὰ συνημάτων δηλοῖ τὴν περὶ τῶν ὄντων ἀλήθειαν, ἢ εἴ τις ἐπιστήμη χρώμενος αὐτὴν ἡμῖν ἐκφαίνει τὴν τάξιν τῶν πραγμάτων, οὗτος οὔτε μιμητὴς ἐστὶν οὔτε ἐλέγεσθαι δύναται διὰ τῶν προκειμένων ἀποδείξων.

³⁵ This is the main argument of the fifth discourse: *In Remp.* i. 44. 20–3 δεῖ γὰρ τὸν μιμητὴν καὶ τὰς ἐνοίας οικείας παρέχεσθαι τοῖς πράγμασιν, εἰκόνας ἐκείνων εἶναι βουλομένης, καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα πρέποντα ταῖς ἐνοίαις ἐκλέγεσθαι. However, cf. i. 198. 26–8 ὁ ποιητὴς μιμητὴς: ὁ μιμητὴς τρίτος ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας: (ὁ ποιητὴς ἄρα τρίτος ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας).

6-7). How Proclus managed to reconcile two contradictory views is not self-evident. Since preoccupation with symbolism is the main theme of the sixth discourse, whereas only imitation is emphasized in the fifth, one would be tempted to ascribe the discrepancy to the development of Proclus' thought. This is probably correct but leaves some questions unanswered.

Originally *σύμβολον* was a token of recognition.³⁶ Several passages in ancient literature testify to this primary usage of the word.³⁷ A *σύμβολον*, in accordance with its etymology (from *συμβάλλω* 'bring together'); could be either of the two parts of a broken object (such as an ankle-bone or a coin), the perfect fitting of which with one another would prove to the bearers that they truly are who they claim to be. In this way the symbol has a claim to knowledge understood Platonically as recognition. From the concrete object the word moved in the direction of the concept that we all know. But in ancient times at least, *the original meaning remained present as an undertone in the theoretical usage of the term.* Thus 'symbol' always connoted truth, or better expressed, it meant that which is conducive to truth, that which leads to truth, and, ultimately, the way of truth. In Neoplatonism the concept attained eminence with Iamblichus. Proclus, following Iamblichus on symbolism,³⁸ understands by 'symbol' all the properties and aspects of the world of the senses that point to the reality above it. Thus the age-old rituals and religious practices are thought to be symbolic of the immovable and changeless nature of the gods. Likewise with the myths of poetry (cf. *In Remp.* i. 78. 18-79. 4). A synonym for the Proclan *σύμβολον* is the word *σύνθημα* of similar etymology (from *συντίθημι* 'bring together, com-pose'; cf. modern 'synthesis'), for which we have a definition: *συνθήματα* are the sensible things that manifest hidden powers, namely the things that themselves seen in extended [i.e. material] forms reveal other beings

³⁶ Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1986), 31 ff.; Coulter, *Microcosm*, 60-72.

³⁷ Cf. e.g. Aesch. *Ag.* 144; Plato, *Symp.* 191 D; Arist. *EE* 1239^b23-32.

³⁸ Proclus himself is aware of the difference between the Porphyrian and the Iamblichian interpretative approaches to literature when he says (*In Tim.* i. 204. 24-7) *Πορφύριος δὲ καὶ Ἰάμβλιχος τῇ πάσῃ τοῦ διαλόγου προθέσει σύμφωνον ἀπέφηναν, ὁ μὲν μερικώτερον ὁ δὲ ἐποπτικώτερον.* In general Proclus prefers universal and holistic interpretations, like Iamblichus', to those that tend to be more analytic, as Porphyry's are.

that cannot be perceived by the senses because they have no sensible form.³⁹

Although *σύμβολον* as a sensible thing is an image, it need not be an *εἰκών*.⁴⁰ The two words have different connotations in accordance with their different etymological derivations and cover only partially overlapping semantic fields. *εἰκών* (from **εἶκω* 'resemble, look like') is an image to the extent that some images are copies that bear a resemblance to an original after which they are fashioned. *εἰκών* means simulacrum, replica, ersatz.⁴¹ Hence an *εἰκών* is the product of mimesis *qua* mimicry, not of mimesis *qua* the conjuring up of a presence: *εἰκών* is as removed from the represented as a copy is from the original. The English word 'image' encompasses a wider semantic horizon than *εἰκών* because the meaning of the modern word is not necessarily reached through the mediation of the original-copy syndrome. An 'image' may, but need not, have a hidden prototype. The view of a natural setting is its own image, which may, but need not, point to something other than itself; the manifest content of a dream is a series of psychic images which may, but need not, be allusions to a latent content. Image is what is perceived by the mind in a visual fashion. *εἰκών*, by contrast, is what is perceived by the mind as a visual image while the mind is *made aware* that what is perceived thereby is only the external appearance of a hidden entity or the phenomenal surface of a latent power; hence, only an intimation, an imprecise depiction, or even a most accurate copy of its prototype. Re-presentation is the salient feature of *εἰκών qua* resemblance and mere appearance. Allusion is the salient feature of *σύμβολον qua* token of recognition.⁴² Both are images in the most general non-technical sense of the term; but whereas *εἰκών* is the image of something distinct from itself, *σύμβολον* is the image of itself that points to the unimaginable nature of the gods. The *σύμβολον* is therefore more suggestive than the *εἰκών*, more fit to recall the full range of an

³⁹ *In Remp.* ii. 242. 24-6 *συνθήματα γὰρ τὰ ἐμφανῆ τῶν ἀφανῶν ἐστὶν δυνάμειον, τῶν ἀμορφώτων τὰ ἐν μορφαῖς ὁρώμενα διασταταῖς.*

⁴⁰ Cf. J. Dillon, 'Image, Symbol and Analogy: Three Basic Concepts of Neoplatonic Allegorical Exegesis' ['Image'], in R. Baine Harris (ed.), *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (Norfolk, Va., 1976), 247-62.

⁴¹ Cf. J.-P. Vernant, *Religions, histoires, raisons* (Paris, 1979), 105-37.

⁴² Cf. the clear distinction between *εἰκών* and *σύμβολον* at *In Tim.* i. 30. 4-14.

epoptic vision. Consequently, most myths use symbols rather than εἰκόνας.⁴³

The εἰκὼν *qua* replica and simulacrum performs its epistemological function by analogy. Between the copy and the original there is a one-to-one correspondence. Thus the εἰκὼν is more straightforward than the symbol but, by the same token, more deceptive. The εἰκὼν is a screen as well as curtain of truth like a transparent garment.⁴⁴ It simultaneously veils and unveils truth. The εἰκὼν reveals in so far as it provides the contours, shape, and shade of truth: it outlines truth. As in a shadow-theatre,⁴⁵ on the other hand, the εἰκὼν hides truth because it allows only the profiles but not the complete natures of true beings to come to sight. By outlining truth an εἰκὼν foreshadows and shadows at once. In that respect the εἰκὼν fulfils the function of keeping truth in its divine pre-eminence as well as keeping it from profanation (*In Remp.* i. 74. 20–4; cf. ii. 108. 18–19).

The symbol is an image. Its apprehension is the result of a vision of the divine. As an image of the divine the symbol is a condensed image, for it can be analysed in conceptual language. The symbol points to, but does not exhaust, that of which it is the symbol. By so doing the symbol does not *directly* imitate the divine. It is allowed to represent the powers and activities of the gods by means of actions that, if taken literally, are immoral and ignoble (cf. *In Remp.* i. 73. 16–74. 30). But we know, Proclus argues, that no blemish, moral or otherwise, should be predicated of the divine; we know from Plato that error and evil are the results of ignorance and weakness which have no models on the intelligible plane (*In Remp.* i. 27. 9–33. 7; 37. 23–39 on Plato, *Rep.* 379 B–383 C). It follows, therefore, that the symbol and, by extension, poetry do *not* imitate the divine.⁴⁶

If the symbol does not imitate the divine, *is* it the divine or

⁴³ *In Tim.* i. 30. 14–15 καὶ γὰρ οἱ μῦθοι τὰ πολλὰ διὰ τῶν συμβόλων εἰῶθαι τὰ πράγματα ἐνδείκνυσθαι.

⁴⁴ The language used by Proclus is very indicative of what he has in mind and his choice of words very careful. *In Remp.* i. 73. 12–16 δεῖ δὲ ἄρα τοὺς μύθους, εἴπερ μὴ παντάπασιν ἀποπεπτηκότες εἶσονται τῆς ἐν τοῖς οὐαῖ ἀληθείας, ἀπεικάζεσθαι πως τοῖς πράγμασιν ὧν ἀποκρύπτειν τοῖς φαινομένοις παραπετάσματος τὴν θεωρίαν ἐπιχειροῦσιν. Cf. Lambertson, *Homer*, 185 ff.

⁴⁵ *In Remp.* i. 179. 16–26 ἡ δόξαις καὶ φαντασίαις συμμιγνυμένη καὶ διὰ μιμήσεως συμπληρωμένη καὶ οὐδὲν ἢ μιμητικὴ καὶ οὐσα καὶ λεγομένη καὶ τότε μὲν εἰκααῖα προσχρωμένη μόνον, τότε δὲ καὶ φαινομένην προϊσταμένη τὴν ἀφομοίωσιν, ἀλλ' οὐκ οὐσαν . . . καὶ τὰς τῶν πραγμάτων φύσεις οὐχ οἰαίπερ εἶσιν, ἀλλ' οἶαι φαντασθεῖεν ἂν τοῖς πολλοῖς ἐπιδεικνύουσα· σκιαγραφία τις οὐσα τῶν ὄντων, ἀλλ' οὐ γνώσις ἀκριβῆς (cf. Plato, *Rep.* 602 c–d).

⁴⁶ *In Remp.* i. 73. 11–12 οὐ γὰρ εἰκότα φανείται τὰ σύμβολα ταῦτα ταῖς ὑπάρξεσι τῶν θεῶν.

has it no contact with the divine? Both notions should be rejected out of hand. Obviously, the symbol is *not* the divine but *indicates* the divine in a way appropriate for the human mind; the symbol *is* in contact with the gods, it hinges upon them. But the symbol exists on a lower level of reality than the divine itself. This lower existence of the symbol could only be expressed in Neoplatonic language as the product of participation. With the tendency to harmonize Plato and Aristotle, the distance between the two notions of participation and imitation, though not abolished, was surely shortened. The different semantic fields of μέθεξις and μίμησις⁴⁷ are made to coincide so that a Neoplatonist (who had, to be sure, a predilection for the former Platonic concept) could sometimes use them indiscriminately. Thus poetry is imitation. However, in ordinary speech imitation refers to imitation of sensible things. Symbolic poetry does not imitate worldly things or the objects and qualities of sense perception. The first Neoplatonist who seems to have applied the concept of direct mimesis of Forms to art and to have construed art as the result of an immediate imitation of Forms is Plotinus (5. 8. 1, 32-40). Proclus follows this intuition. The defence of Homer resides in the view that *poetry can be mimesis without necessarily imitating sensible things*. And this is what Proclus has in mind: poetry *imitates* the Forms and *symbolizes* the divine Henads from which the Forms derive.⁴⁸

In Proclus' view, the derogatory Platonic mimesis is always to be understood as imitation of *sensible* things, i.e. of deceptive appearances. Plato never discusses the possibility that poetry may imitate the Forms. Now, imitation of Forms is not mimesis in the strict and limited sense of the term. But it may be imitation in the sense of 'having some contact with the archetype'. The poetic symbols, for Proclus, are no more divine realities than philosophical concepts are divinities. These are ineffable and 'unimaginable'. But both concepts and symbols have affinity with these realities. Otherwise they would be arbitrary and artificial signs of human invention. It does not seem that Proclus would accept such a modern semiotic theory. That σύμβολα may carry allusions without being imitations of phys-

⁴⁷ Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in the Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven and London, 1986), 9 ff., esp. 11.

⁴⁸ *In Remp.* i. 199. 1-2 αὐτοῖς σύνεστι [sc. ὁ πρῶτιστος καὶ θεϊότατος ποιητής] τοῖς οὖσιν καὶ θεᾶται τὴν περὶ τῶν ὄντων ἀλήθειαν; 199. 14-16 ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ μιμείσθαι, φησὶν [Plato, *Rep.* 599 A], Ὅμηρος ἱκανὸς καὶ πρὸς τῷ παραδείγματι τὸν νοῦν ἔχειν καὶ ποιεῖν ταῦτα ἃ μιμείται.

ical things, i.e. without being semblances in the sense that mimetic artefacts are semblances, is what can account for the inconsistency in Proclus' application of the expression *εἰκῶν τοῦ παραδείγματος* to many a *σύμβολον*. In these cases *εἰκῶν* should be understood as a non-mimetic image, as what conjures up a presence by having some affinity with it.

Proclus' *σύμβολον* differs substantially from modern 'symbol'. The modern semiotic symbol is pre-eminently characterized by its systematicity: it derives meaning from its belonging to a system where syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships not only feature prominently but, more importantly, are a *sine qua non* for the meaningfulness of individual symbols. The modern symbol does not have meaning in and by itself. We could not make such an assertion with reference to Proclus' *σύμβολα*. A *σύμβολον*'s meaning is in fact derivative, but no more derivative than anything posterior to the Henads is derivative. A *σύμβολον* is indeed a sign, as some scholars have said, but a sign whose form, far from being contingent, originates in the reality to which the sign refers. Thus designation, denotation, and reference belong together.

The form of the *σύμβολον* derives from its content and its content from its referent. To repeat a familiar example,⁴⁹ such-and-such a cigar as symbol of Churchill has the form that it has because of its content, i.e. because it conjures up Churchill's presence, and has this particular content because it refers to Churchill, because it has Churchill as its referent. The universal function of a *σύμβολον* is the conjuring up of a presence. (Hence function is a contentless content, a variable content, that is to say the universal form of the content.) The conjuring up of *A*'s specific presence is the specific content of the specific *σύμβολον* *α*; the conjuring up of *B*'s specific presence is the specific content of the specific *σύμβολον* *β*, etc. The means to the functioning, activation, manifestation of the specific content is the specific symbolic form. (Thus *α*'s specific form differs from *β*'s according as *α*'s specific content is other than *β*'s.) And the specific symbolic form derives from the specific content, which derives from the referent, i.e. from *A* in the case of *α*'s form, from *B* in the case of *β*'s form, etc. Ultimately the referent gives both form and content to the *σύμβολον*. If the cigar-as-symbol-of-Churchill example does not immediately obey that rule, it is because

⁴⁹ The example is taken from Dillon, 'Image', 250.

the symbolized Churchill, as what the cigar refers to, is a sensible thing.

The imagery of poetry refers to the Platonic Forms and consequently provides access to the level of Intellection (Nous), whereas the symbolism of mythology reflects the onenesses-above-the-Forms (i.e. the unifying principles of the Forms themselves) and consequently provides direct access to the level of Henads and possibly indirect access to the level of the One. Strictly speaking, imitative image-making is an intellectual enterprise that could be called 'disguised philosophy' and 'allusive knowledge-of-Forms'; whereas non-imitative symbolism is a non-intellectual understanding that could be called 'disguised theology' and 'allusive knowledge-of-gods'. The former stands or falls according to the power of intelligence that sustains it. The latter transcends the level of thought by referring directly to the unifying principles of being with no intermediary reference to Ideas.

The above-mentioned amalgamation of *μέθεξις* and *μίμησις* was not pressed further than the desired harmonization of Plato with Aristotle required. The distinction was preserved in so far as it could provide interpretative tools for a theoretical understanding of myths and symbols. Because a *σύμβολον*, in Proclus' view, reflects the metaphysical level of divine Henads (that is superior to that of Forms) without imitating the paradigms of being, its relation to the archetypes is characterized by direct *participation*. By contrast, an *εἰκὼν*, being a copy of the original Form, relates to its paradigm by means of direct *imitation*.

The basic notion that guarantees the functioning of the symbol is the relationship of whole to parts. According to Proclus, there are three ways in which the concept of wholeness should be understood.⁵⁰ First and foremost, there is the whole above parts, the intelligible whole of absolute unity. Every god, as a divine Henad (ET 114), is such a whole-above-parts and self-subsisting, absolute identity. Second, there is the whole that consists of parts. This is the cosmos in its entirety, the world seen as one living being. The being of the senses is a whole-of-parts, unity-in-multiplicity and identity-in-difference. The unity and identity of the physical

⁵⁰ PT v. 74. 20-75. 20 *τριτὴ δὲ ἐστὶ* [sc. ἡ τελειότης], τὸ ὅλον εἰπεῖν ἢ μὲν πρὸ τῶν μερῶν οἷον δὴ ἐστὶν ἡ τῶν θεῶν τελειότης. . . ἢ δὲ ἐκ τῶν μερῶν ἐστὶ τελειότης. . . οἷα δὴ ἐστὶ ἡ τοῦ κόσμου τελειότης. . . τρίτη δὲ ἄλλη τελειότης ἢ ἐν τοῖς μέρεσιν. . . ὡς δὲ συνελόντι φάναι, καὶ ἡ τελειότης τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον τῇ ὁλότῃ διαιρείται. ET 67 *πάσα ὁλότῃς ἢ πρὸ τῶν μερῶν ἐστὶν ἢ ἐκ τῶν μερῶν ἢ ἐν τῷ μέρει.*

world as a whole are borrowed (from the gods above) but they are not partial; for nothing physical is left out. Last and least, there is the whole of each particular part. Every particular member of the sensible world, the historical Socrates, for example, is such a whole-among-parts, a whole-in-parts and a part-of-whole. The unity and identity of such wholes-in-parts are both borrowed and partial.

Symbolism aims towards the gods, towards the unimaginable and ineffable whole-above-parts. As a matter of course, this aim cannot be achieved by means of the whole-of-parts. For the whole-of-parts, i.e. the world of the senses in its entirety, cannot be perceived by the senses and cannot, therefore, be represented. The whole-of-parts, though sensible in itself, yet transcends the capacity of the senses. What remains for poetry to use as symbols is particulars, wholes-in-parts. And this is what poetry does. It uses symbolic images as a means to the end of visualizing the divine principles which, operating outside space, permeate all places and spaces of physical reality. What allows a physical particular to become a symbol and an image of the divine is the very ontological structure of reality. Reality does not have parts deprived of all wholeness and of all unity. All parts of the world are simultaneously microcosmic wholes. Any physical part may become a symbol because it essentially reflects the structure of the whole-above-parts.

But there is more to symbolism than the microcosmic-macrocosmic relation. There is also appropriateness. According to a famous maxim of Proclus (who follows Porphyry here),⁵¹ 'everything is in everything, but in the appropriate manner for each thing'.⁵² This means that each particular thing has all the characteristics of all things in a more or less pronounced way according to its own nature. There is universal *sympathy* of all parts with one another and with the whole of which they are parts. This doctrine is fundamental for Proclus' view on the rituals of traditional religion and on the symbolism of theurgy.⁵³ The parts reproduce the whole in

⁵¹ Cf. Porph. *Sent. ad intell. duc.* 10.

⁵² *ET* 103 πάντα ἐν πᾶσι, οἰκείως δὲ ἐν ἐκάστῳ. Cf. *PT* ii. 56. 16-21 πᾶσι γὰρ ἐνέσπειρεν ὁ τῶν ὄλων αἰτιος τῆς ἑαυτοῦ παντελοῦς ὑπεροχῆς συνθήματα, καὶ διὰ τούτων περὶ ἑαυτὸν ἰδρῶσε τὰ πάντα, καὶ πάρεστιν ἀρρήτως πᾶσιν ἀφ' ὄλων ἐξηρημένος. ἕκαστον οὖν εἰς τὸ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ φύσεως ἀρρητον εἰσδυόμενον εὐρίσκει τὸ σύμβολον τοῦ πάντων πατρὸς. —

⁵³ Cf. *Sacr.* 148. 5-10 καὶ οἱ ἱερατικοὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ἐν τοῖς φαινομένοις ἅπασι συμπαθείας πρὸς τε ἄλλα καὶ πρὸς τὰς ἀφανεῖς δυνάμεις, πάντα ἐν πᾶσι κατανοήσαντες, τὴν ἐπιστήμην τὴν ἱερατικὴν συνεστήσαντο, θαυμάσαντες τῷ βλέπειν ἐν τε τοῖς πρώτοις

their inner structure. Any physical object can become a symbol of an *aspect* of the divine according to the object's nature. Since some divine qualities are more prominent in some things than in others, it follows that some things are more appropriate to symbolize some divine attributes than others. Thus sensible/physical things are images and symbols at once: they are images because they copy the Forms; and they are symbols because they allude to the ontologically antecedent divine realities. *Aliquid stat pro aliquo* is the general law of symbolism. The more precise form of that law (especially when reference is made to religious symbols) is *pars pro toto*. Proclus modifies the general law of symbolism by endowing the symbolic part with the status of the whole. It can be said that symbolism is for Proclus the application of metaphysics to the problem of truth in poetry. What makes the *σύμβολον* more than a merely artificial symbol is the fact that the *σύμβολον*, taken in itself, i.e. apart from paradigmatic and systematic relationships, is a whole in its own right. The symbol is not an artificial *pars pro toto* but a natural *pars tota pro toto toto*.

The *locus classicus* in Proclus' corpus where the philosopher speaks *ex professo* about the ways of knowledge or what he terms 'modes of theology' (τρόποι τῆς περὶ τῶν θεῶν διδασκαλίας) is the fourth chapter of the first book of his *Platonic Theology*.³⁴ Proclus divides knowledge of divine principles into allusive cognition (δι' ἐνδείξεως) and uncovered understanding (ἀπαρακαλύπτως), and distinguishes no fewer than four separate modes of theology. Allusive cognition can be either mythico-symbolic (συμβολικῶς καὶ μυθικῶς) or iconic (δι' εἰκόνων), whereas unveiled understanding can be either scientific (κατ' ἐπιστήμην) or revelatory (κατὰ τὴν ἐκ θεῶν ἐπίπνοιαν). As was to be expected, the scientific mode is identified with dialectic, the proper mode of exposition and peculiar domain of philosophy *sensu stricto*, whereas the revelatory mode is exemplified by

τὰ ἔσχατα καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἔσχατοις τὰ πρῶτα, ἐν οὐρανῷ μὲν τὰ χθόνια κατ' αἰτίαν καὶ οὐρανίως, ἐν τε γῆ τὰ οὐράνια γῆνιως.

³⁴ PT i. 17. 18–24 φαίνεται γὰρ οὐ τὸν αὐτὸν πανταχοῦ τρόπον μετιῶν τὴν περὶ τῶν θεῶν διδασκαλίαν, ἀλλ' ὅτε μὲν ἐνθεαστικῶς ὅτε δὲ διαλεκτικῶς ἀνελίττων τὴν περὶ αὐτῶν ἀλήθειαν, καὶ ποτὲ μὲν συμβολικῶς ἐξαγγέλλων τὰς ἀρρήτους αὐτῶν ιδιότητας, ποτὲ δὲ ἀπὸ τῶν εἰκόνων ἐπ' αὐτοὺς ἀνατρέχων καὶ τὰς πρωτουργοὺς ἐν αὐτοῖς αἰτίας τῶν ὄλων ἀνευρίσκων. PT i. 20. 1–5 οἱ μὲν γὰρ δι' ἐνδείξεως περὶ τῶν θεῶν λέγοντες ἢ συμβολικῶς καὶ μυθικῶς ἢ δι' εἰκόνων λέγουσιν, οἱ δὲ ἀπαρακαλύπτως τὰς ἑαυτῶν διανοήσεις ἀπαγγέλλοντες οἱ μὲν κατ' ἐπιστήμην οἱ δὲ κατὰ τὴν ἐκ θεῶν ἐπίπνοιαν ποιοῦνται τοὺς λόγους.

theurgy and the *Chaldaean Oracles*. It would be beside the point of this paper to go into a detailed analysis of these four modes. We are principally concerned with allusive knowledge, which in Proclus' view does not seem to be essentially inferior to overt knowledge. Images and symbols are inferior to concepts and divine revelations only to the extent that their essentially allusive character may sometimes be missed. The symbols and myths that Proclus has in mind when he makes the *ex professo* classification of theological modes are those of Orphic cosmologies and similar mythologies about the origin of gods. His images, on the other hand, are the images of Pythagorean mathematics, which imitate, rather than directly unveil, the divine principles (*PT* i. 20. 6–25; cf. iii. 17. 23–18. 3). It is plain that Proclus' nuanced analysis cuts very differently from any modern semiotic theory, since the theurgic myths and rituals are not regarded as symbolic while the Orphic counterparts are. What is of importance for *our* understanding of Proclus' symbolism is that a symbol can refer to a reality without necessarily imitating that of which it is a symbol and moreover without deriving its intelligibility by means of an artificial system of invented signs. The symbol, no less than the concept, is meaningful because it stands in intimate and necessary relation to the symbolized as the human concept stands in such a relation to its original Idea.

4. The core of the argument

What lies beneath Proclus' treatment of poetry, Proclus' own *ὑπόνοια*, could be recaptured along the following lines. (The difference between the level of divine Henads and that of godlike forms, so essential for the metaphysics of Proclus, is here discarded for the purpose of clarification.)

There is meaning. Meaning is intelligible being (*νόημα*). (You can call it substance if you like, provided that you do not understand substance, *pace* Descartes, as a generic term that comprises *res cogitans* and *res extensa*: substance for the Platonists refers to intelligible being alone, to *res cogitata*.) When intelligible being is cognized it generates concepts. Concepts are subsequently expressed in language and are mediated by words. Words are intelligible in so far as they refer to concepts. Concepts are valid in so far as they are sustained by meaning. Philosophy sets itself the task of ascending

to concepts through the use of words. Philosophy is the array of linguistic concepts and the array of conceptual language.

Again: there is meaning. Meaning is intelligible being. When intelligible being is visually apprehended, it produces images, which can be seen and also described. Description takes place through language, which consists of words. The words refer to the image and the image refers to intelligible being. The image possesses contemporaneity and simultaneity of its various elements. Language, by contrast, possesses linear temporality and sequentiality. When language describes an image, it presents the simultaneous as sequential.⁵⁵ This is what poetry does. When reference is made to the divine in mythology, the temporal 'then' should be understood as a causal and logical 'then'. Temporal succession in myth indicates a causal dependence on the higher planes of reality. Poetry is the array of linguistic imagery and the array of symbolic language.

Both philosophy and poetry use language. Philosophy uses language in order to attain to concepts; poetry uses language in order to attain to images. Both images and concepts originate in meaning. The logical concatenation of concepts is philosophical ratiocination. The visual concatenation of images is poetic myth. The event of myth derives from the apprehension of the image which is the manifestation of meaning. The event of rationality derives from the cognition of the concept which is the manifestation of meaning. Both philosophy and poetry are means to the end of cognition. They both stand or fall according to whether or not they are in contact with meaning.⁵⁶

The historical growth of philosophy dealt a hard blow to poetry. Philosophy assumed that reference to concepts is higher than reference to images, i.e. that it has more immediate contact with mean-

⁵⁵ Cf. Lamberton, *Homer*, 171.

⁵⁶ Wang Pi (AD 226-59), one of the most non-scholastic and original thinkers to have commented on the Chinese *I Ching*, has left us precious insights on the relationship of words and images and their dependence on meaning: 'The images arise from the meaning, but if one retains only the images then what is retained are not the right images. The words arise from the images, but if one retains only the words then what is retained are not the right words. Thus only by forgetting the images can one grasp the meaning, and only by forgetting the words can one grasp the images' (quoted by Hellmut Wilhelm, in *Understanding the I Ching: The Wilhelm Lectures on The Book of Changes*, trans. Cary F. Baynes (Princeton, 1995), 111). Here the words are subordinated to the images, as is appropriate to poetry, and the images to meaning. In philosophy, by contrast, the words are subordinated to concepts and the concepts to meaning.

ing. The concept was given priority over the image.⁵⁷ Historically speaking, intelligible being gave birth first to images and only then to concepts in the matrix of human consciousness. But the concept, once discovered, did not remain in a state of subordination for a long time, nor was it satisfied with a status equal to that of the image. Hence it arrogantly placed itself between meaning and image. (Poetry always assumed that the imaginary space between meaning and image is too small to be occupied by anything at all, or rather non-existent.) The result of the arrogant claim of philosophy is rationalism. Rationalism is the overvaluation of the concept *vis-à-vis* the image. Rationalism is the mode of thought that takes its existence from the predominance of the concept. To think rationally is to think in the mode of *ratio*. Its opposite is not, as is often assumed, irrational thinking. The opposite of rationalism is symbolic thinking. To think symbolically is to think in the mode of *σύμβολον*, to think with reference to images rather than concepts, to think mythically and poetically.

In contradistinction to the prevailing interpretation of Middle and, perhaps, Old Platonism⁵⁸ but in accordance with both the Platonic and the Neoplatonic views,⁵⁹ the Platonic Idea, in Proclus' eyes, is not an idea. It is neither concept nor notion nor a single thought as perceived by the mind: it is the true being that possesses the form of its intelligibility within itself; it is being that has form not by participation but from its own very existence. The Platonic Idea is Existential Form—*οὐσιότης*.

If one approaches the Idea from the perspective of conceptual thinking, from the perspective of ratio, the Idea is cognized as a concept. If one approaches the Idea from the perspective of pictorial thinking, from the perspective of *σύμβολον*, the idea is cognized

⁵⁷ According to a very suggestive doxographical anecdote recorded by Diogenes Laertius (3. 5), Plato was originally a poet. At the age of 20, when he first met Socrates, Plato had already to his credit a fair production of dithyrambs, tragedies, and melic poems. The encounter with the wise man of ignorance, however, was so fascinating that the young man repudiated his poetic past and consigned all his poems to the flames of Hephaestus to rest in oblivion. *Se non è vero è ben trovato*: the fire of reason consumes the artistic imagery of symbolic intuition.

⁵⁸ Cf. J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca, NY, 1977), 29, 94, 201.

⁵⁹ An exception should be allowed for Plotinus, who thought that the Ideas are inside the Intellect, a doctrine that caused trouble to many Neoplatonists, beginning with Plotinus' own disciple Porphyry (*V. Plot.* 18). For the origin of this doctrine see A. H. Armstrong, "The Background of the Doctrine "That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect", in *Les Sources de Plotin* (Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique, 5; Vandœuvres-Genève, 1960), 391-425.

as an image. Philosophy approaches the Idea from the viewpoint of the concept. It thus conceptualizes and rationalizes the Idea. Poetry approaches the Idea from the viewpoint of the image. It thus 'imagines' and symbolizes the Idea.

5. Some conclusions

Proclus puts Homer the supreme poet on an equal footing with Plato the supreme philosopher because he believes that *symbolism* is not inferior to *conceptualism*. He thus solves a Platonic problem which modern scholarship has repeatedly detected.⁶⁰ When Socrates declares that poetry is inadequate and misleading, and also possibly false since it stands at a third remove from truth, he assumes that imitation can *only* be imitation of *participating* things, of things, that is, participating in the Idea. It does not seem to have occurred to him that the imitative character of poetry may refer not to sensible things but, instead, to the Ideas themselves; in other words, that poetry may indeed imitate, but imitate *not* participating things but the participated Ideas. This possibility is never investigated in the three books of the *Republic* that deal with poetry. However, a passage from the sixth book⁶¹ indicates that for Plato the possibility that art may imitate 'the divine paradigm', rather than the sensible copies, cannot be excluded *a priori*. The context makes it clear that art is brought forth in the discussion as a metaphor meant to illuminate the expected actions of the philosophers when they decide to rule the state. The arguments employed here are not concerned with art *per se*. The logical possibility that seems to be forgotten in the proper discussions on the value of art is here taken into account.⁶² However, Plato's view is that, strictly

⁶⁰ Cf. e.g. Grube, *Thought*, 202; S. Rosen, *The Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry* (New York and London, 1988), 6. The insightful interpretation of the Platonic view of art by W. J. Verdenius ('Plato's Doctrine of Artistic Imitation', in G. Vlastos (ed.), *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ii (Notre Dame, Ind., 1978), 259-73, esp. 270) resolves the difficulty in a manner similar to (but different from) that suggested by Proclus without any recourse to him; cf. W. J. Oates, *Plato's View of Art* (New York, 1972), 58-61. Cf. also the reconciliation of the apparently divergent Platonic views on imitation by J. Tate, "'Imitation" in Plato's *Republic*', *CQ* 22 (1928), 16-23, and 'Plato and "Imitation"', *CQ* 26 (1932), 161-9, and the analysis by D. R. Grey, 'Art in the *Republic*', *Philosophy*, 27 (1952), 291-310.

⁶¹ Plato, *Rep.* 500b.

⁶² The view that this passage, corroborated by other Platonic passages, represents

speaking, the kind of 'art' that imitates the Forms is not art, but philosophy.⁶³

Plato nowhere states that art imitates the Ideas, although he does claim that only knowledge of the Ideas can produce, by means of imitation, truly beautiful things.⁶⁴ His view seems to be that even though there is nothing that (onto-)logically prevents art from imitating the Ideas, *existing* art does not in actual fact do so. Proclus detects the Platonic gap, understands its importance for interpretative purposes, and elaborates on it. If poetry imitates the Ideas, he seems to claim, then poetry is not further removed from truth than sensible things are, and is as ontologically worthy of respect and epistemologically valid as philosophy is. For philosophy, according to the prevalent Greek view, is a longing for wisdom, not wisdom itself.⁶⁵ Philosophy which does not coincide with the Ideas but cognizes the Ideas is, then, no better than poetry. What differentiates philosophy from poetry is their respective means of attaining to the common end of cognition and apprehending the metaphysical principles of reality: *concept* versus *symbol*.

In all ancient literary exegesis for which Proclus can be said to have been the late antique spokesman, the aim and purpose of literature does not lie in literature itself. Classical literature, before becoming classical in the strict Renaissance sense, was always considered to have a scope which lies objectively outside its own territory. The conception of literature as 'quite useless' in the famous expression of Oscar Wilde, and the corresponding stance of the aesthete summarized in the aphorism *l'art pour l'art*, would be totally unintelligible to the ancient mind. Literature, the ancients thought, has a value according to the degree of its usefulness, which can in turn be determined by means of criteria that are not created by the *sheer existence* of the work of art.⁶⁶ The theory of mimesis

the real, albeit hidden, stance of Plato on art, namely that art is imitation of Forms, is suggested by many modern scholars. See e.g. L. Golden, 'Plato's Concept of Mimesis', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 15 (1975), 118-31; V. Goldschmidt, 'Le problème de la tragédie d'après Platon', in *Questions platoniciennes* (Paris, 1970), 103-40; W. C. Greene, 'Plato's View on Poetry', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 29 (1918), 1-75.

⁶³ Cf. A. Nehamas, 'Plato on Imitation and Poetry in *Republic* 10', in J. Moravcsik and Ph. Temko (eds.), *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom and the Arts* (Totowa, NJ, 1982), 47-78, esp. 58-60.

⁶⁴ Cf. Plato, *Symp.* 212 A; *Phdr.* 278 C; *Gorg.* 503 B; *Polit.* 300 D-E.

⁶⁵ Cf. Plato, *Phdr.* 278 D.

⁶⁶ R. G. Collingwood's view ('Plato's Philosophy of Art', *Mind*, 34 (1925), 154-72

was one attempt at positing the standard by which literature is to be judged. The theory of symbolism, intimately related to imitation but exploring different possibilities in the relationship of copy to model, was another. At any rate, literature was regarded as intending something that exists objectively, either by holding up a mirror to nature and copying the sensible world (thus rendering the outlines and contours of objects sharper and more readily perceivable), or by using this very sensible world of appearances as a tool in the process of transcending the world's deception and ascending to the realm of true being.⁶⁷

As Nelson Goodman showed in his *Languages of Art*,⁶⁸ there is no such thing as universal representation. All art is ultimately symbolic. What is mimetic and representational in one set of signs characteristic of an art is not recognized as such in another set of signs and another art. Mimesis is relative to context. The highly 'mimetic' depiction of a person in a photographic picture is not recognized as a depiction of that person by whoever cannot read the symbolic system involved. Imitation of reality is the imitation of the reality that a culture creates, establishes, and sustains.

When a symbolic image first springs to mind its meaning is manifest. The myths of the entire epic poetry satisfied Homer's and Hesiod's minds as well as the eyes and ears of their audience. Until at least the sixth century they had attracted no censure and there was therefore no need to account for the myths' correctness and didactic and aesthetic sublimity. The poetic symbol shines forth without any need of mediation by philosophers or literary critics in so far as it finds immediate response in the hearts of those to whom it is presented. The primal 'tautegorical'⁶⁹ function of poetry con-

at 159), though attributed to Plato, is obviously un-Platonic: '[the work of art is] an object *sui generis* . . . to be judged . . . by a standard peculiar to itself'.

⁶⁷ The nuanced analysis of three streams of ancient literary exegesis by Coulter, *Microcosm*, 5-31, to which I am particularly indebted, does not pay due attention to the fact that even what he calls 'genre criticism' presupposes a reference outside the text. The cathartic function of tragedy, for instance (and that is what Coulter has not paid sufficient attention to), is determined by the *natural constitution of things* (including man's psychic constitution), which stipulates that purification of passions can take place only by encountering passions. And it is this objective reality that provides criteria whereby a particular tragic drama (e.g. *Oedipus Rex*) can be regarded as the perfect model of tragedy as such.

⁶⁸ N. Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 2nd edn. (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1976).

⁶⁹ It was Schelling who first made abundant use of this paradoxical term coined by Coleridge, in his *Introduction to a Philosophy of Mythology*. In the present century

sists in the fact that its images are manifest: they are immediately understood. There is as yet no distinction between explicit meaning, on the one hand, and implicit intention and reference, on the other. The poetic image is the thing. When later that distinction springs to the surface of human consciousness, there arises simultaneously a need to relate the external course of mythical events, now understood as other than the myth in itself, with the internal scope of the poetic work. To that effect a new apparatus is being forged—the conceptual apparatus—and a new mode of exposition is being devised—writing in prose—which must necessarily be other than the visual apparatus (i.e. the images) and the mode of exposition (i.e. the diction) of poetry. When the split has reached its ultimate conclusion, there is no other way of recapturing the lost symbolism of the past. It now appears dim, confused, and confusing, requiring an interpretative mediation which, *qua* mediation, is bound to remain allegorical. If full grasping of the obsolete poetic symbolism is still possible, it must proceed through the allegorical, i.e. the interpretative, efforts that explicate the poetic text in question in order to shake its opacity and restore it to its assumed original manifestedness. The various allegorical readings and the convergent, divergent, or opposite views which they suggest constitute the ongoing philosophical discourse as the indispensable means to the end of conceptualist apprehension of poetic symbolism.

The Athenian school of Neoplatonism elaborated a theory of symbolism which bypassed, without neglecting, the mimetic pitfalls. Poetry's imagery is now considered to consist of excellently devised symbols that allude to the profundity of things divine. Such a radical reinterpretation of Homer amounts to the invention of a new set of signs. These signs aimed to stress the relevance of traditional myths in a period when the old reading practices had become less effective as they continually caused intellectual turbulence. It is customary to assume that the old practices of reading were more genuine because they were supposedly based on face-value meaning. But it is salutary to be reminded (by Goodman, for instance) that so-called face-value meaning is the kind of representation that *we* recognize. Familiarity with Neoplatonic allegorism may shake

the only classical scholar, to my knowledge, to have taken Schelling's discovery seriously and employed it in his own work on religion and myth is Walter Otto: cf. W. Otto, *Essais sur le mythe* (Paris, 1987).

that conviction about the exclusive genuineness of so-called non-allegorical interpretations, as acceptance of the Wolfian critique, the studies of Milman Parry, and the recent performance theories has changed our ways of approaching and aesthetically appreciating Homer.

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