

M. J. EDWARDS

THE VESSEL OF ZOSIMUS THE ALCHEMIST

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 90 (1992) 55–64

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## THE VESSEL OF ZOSIMUS THE ALCHEMIST

Zosimus of Panopolis, who flourished about 300 A.D., deserves a place in history, not because he invented the art of alchemy, or was even the first to expound it, but because in him it becomes attached to a name and a datable text.<sup>1</sup> Obscure though his works must be to the majority of classicists, they were the subject of two essays by C.G.Jung, for whom alchemy was psychology in embryo, a prodigy of culture whose gestation could be fruitfully renewed in the study of dreams.<sup>2</sup>

One image, which had interested the scholars of his period,<sup>3</sup> Jung held to have no history, to be explicable not so much by philological inquiry as by appeal to a common reservoir of symbols known to every race and age. This essay renews the project of the philologist, in the belief that ancient writers knew of a mystery, or at least a philosopher's notion of a mystery, which would explain how the alchemist came to enjoin salvation through the dismemberment and immersion of a priest.

### I

In the treatise *On Virtue* and those that follow in Berthelot's collection, Zosimus relates that, in a series of visions, he saw a priest in attendance at an altar, which was fashioned like a bowl (Φιαλοειδή: III.1.2 and III.5.5b). This vessel was in one scene filled with water, over which the celebrant "gained power" when he enacted at once the roles of priest and victim in a grotesque immolation. His skin was flayed, his limbs dissected, his own teeth rent his flesh (III.1.2). The water, though it boiled and seethed (III.1.3), was of an absolute purity, and surrounded by a host of embodied souls. Their goal, which was to learn the art of embalming, was said to be achieved when the fleshly envelope was broken by the dismembering of the priest:

τοῦτον ὃν εἶδε χαλκάνθρωπον, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἱερούργων καὶ ἱεουργούμενος, καὶ τὰς ἰδίας σάρκας ἐξεμοῦντα. καὶ αὐτῷ ἐδόθη ἡ ἐξουσία τοῦ ὕδατος τούτου καὶ τῶν τιμωρουμένων.

(III.1.3; cf. III.6.1).

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<sup>1</sup> Text found in Berthelot, *Collection des Anciens Alchimistes Grecs* (Paris 1888). Berthelot's numeration of the treatises is employed throughout.

<sup>2</sup> See C.G.Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (London 1953) pp.360-73 and especially *The Visions of Zosimus in Alchemical Studies* (London 1967) pp.57-108, both translated by R.F.C.Hull.

<sup>3</sup> See R.Reitzenstein, *Poimandres* (Leipzig 1904) pp.9-11; an interest was also taken in the relation of the alchemist to Gnosticism by J.M.Creed, *The Heavenly Man*, *Journal of Theological Studies* 26 (1924-5) 119-20. A discussion of Greek alchemy under the Roman Empire is found in A.-J.Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste Vol I* (Paris 1950) pp.217-82, with an inventory of works by Zosimus extant in Arabic at pp.385-99. Commentators on the Hermetic analogue, which has received more frequent notice, are cited below.

The themes are all well known to anthropology - of death vicarious and participated, of quitting home for paradise, of drowning to revive. The narrative suffered long and strange transfusions in the mediaeval period,<sup>4</sup> but in antiquity there is one obvious congener to the suffering of the priest. This, the murder of Zagreus, or the infant Dionysus, is the most celebrated crime in Orphic myth. The Titans, in whose custody the infant Dionysus had been left by Zeus, resolved upon his murder. Beguiling his attention with a mirror, they came behind him secretly and tore him limb from limb. The victim was devoured, but the atrocity did not escape detection, and the thunderbolt of Zeus reduced the murderers to ashes. From these remains Zeus formed a new race, and the innocent nature is still at war with the guilty in the constitution of man.<sup>5</sup>

This was not the only myth concerning the nativity of the soul, but that event was always traced to a rupture in the homogeneous essence of divinity. Proclus, an ardent reader of Orphic literature, remembered having read of a certain vessel of Dionysus and its cognates, which were set within the spheres:<sup>6</sup>

ἐπεὶ καὶ ἄλλοι παραδέδονται κρατῆρες ὑπὸ τε Ὀρφέως καὶ Πλάτωνος· Πλάτων τε γὰρ ἐν Φιλήβοι (61 b.c) τὸν μὲν Ἡφαίστειον κρατῆρα παραδίδωσι, τὸν δὲ Διονυσιακόν, καὶ Ὁ. οἶδε μὲν καὶ τὸν τοῦ Διονύσου κρατῆρα, πολλοὺς δὲ καὶ ἄλλους ἰδρύει περὶ τὴν Ἡλιακὴν τράπεζαν.

(Comm. in Tim. 41d = Vol. III p.254.17 Diehl).

The cup recurs in a passage of Macrobius: Crater Libri ... ebrietatem illic primum descensuris animis evenisse silva influente significat (Comm. in Somnium Scipionis I.12.7). This vessel is at the threshold of the cosmos, the beautiful but delusive world of material phenomena, and the sweet draught which it holds excites the soul to forsake its birthplace in the intelligible realm (Fr. 241 Kern; cf. Comm. in Somn. Scip. I.12.11 = Fr.240 Kern). Porphyry informs us that the same conceit was favoured by the Mithraists, who spoke of cups or κρατῆρες where others spoke of honeyed draughts and springs (De Antro p.69.1-2 Nauck).

Zosimus was enamoured of the name and works of Hermes, and his writings are cited frequently for comparison with the Hermetica.<sup>7</sup> One such text alludes to the engulfing of the soul in the waves of matter (Hermetica XII.2, Extract from Stobaeus XXV.8), and yet

<sup>4</sup> See C.G.Jung, *The Psychology of the Transference*, trans. R.F.C.Hull as part of *Collected Works Vol XVI* (New York 1969), separately published, London 1983.

<sup>5</sup> See for a treatment of the earliest sources M.L.West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford 1983) pp.140-75.

<sup>6</sup> See O.Kern. *Orphicorum Fragmenta* (Berlin 1922) Fr.217 and p.308. No light is shed on our question by the so-called Little Vessel, pp.309-10.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Chapter 3 of the *Treatise on the Omega*, which is edited with commentary by W.B.Scott, *Hermetica*, Vol IV (Oxford 1936) pp.104-44 and by A.-J.Festugière (1950) pp.363-8.

another chalice of oblivion passed through the hands of the Syriac poet and theologian Ephraim Syrus:<sup>8</sup>

Hermes taught that there was a bowl, filled with whatever it was filled with, and that there are souls excited by desire, and they come down beside it, and when they have come to it, in it and by reason of it, they forget their own place.

Knowledge of the first treatise in this Corpus, the Poimandres, can be demonstrated by Zosimus' allusion to it in his Treatise on the Omega (c.17), where he exhorts his addressee to "take refuge with Poimenandres and be baptized in the cup". The name is a corruption of "Poimandres", which, glossed as "the Mind of the Sovereignty",<sup>9</sup> is the title of the didactic apparition in the first of the Hermetica.<sup>10</sup> In his lesson to the unnamed initiate, Poimandres speaks of a voluntary submersion of the cosmic soul in matter as the cause of the present world:

καὶ ὁ τοῦ τῶν θηντῶν κόσμου καὶ τῶν ἀλόγων ζῴων ἔχων πᾶσαν ἐξουσίαν διὰ τῆς ἀρμονίας παρέκυψεν, ἀναρρήξας τὸ κύτος, καὶ ἔδειξε τῇ κατωφερεῖ φύσει τὴν καλὴν τοῦ θεοῦ μορφήν, ὃν ἰδοῦσα ἀκόρετον κάλλος <καὶ> πᾶσαν ἐνέργειαν ἐν ἑαυτῷ ἔχοντα τῶν διοικητόρων τὴν τε μορφήν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐμειδίασεν ἔρωτι, ὡς ἄτε τῆς καλλίστης μορφῆς τοῦ Ἀνθρώπου τὸ εἶδος ἐν τῷ ὕδατι ἰδοῦσα καὶ τὸ κτίσασμα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. ὁ δὲ ἰδὼν τὴν ὁμοίαν αὐτῷ μορφήν ἐν αὐτῇ οὖσαν ἐν τῷ ὕδατι, ἐφίλησε καὶ ἠβουλήθη αὐτοῦ οἰκεῖν· ἅμα δὲ τῇ βουλή ἐγένετο ἐνέργεια, καὶ ὄκησε τὴν ἄλογον μορφήν· ἡ δὲ φύσις λαβοῦσα τὸν ἐρώμενον περιεπλάκη ὅλη καὶ ἐμίγησαν· ἐρώμενοι γὰρ ἦσαν. (Hermetica I.14).

Here again the immersion is a cause of the estrangement, and conduces to deliverance only by bringing about the state from which deliverance is required. As in the Orphic metaphor, the world itself is the seductive vessel. The fact that the Anthropos is seduced by his own reflection may remind us of the coupling of Hephaestus and Dionysus in the passage adduced by Proclus from the Philebus (61d apud Proclum, as above); for Hephaestus is the artisan at whose forge the Titans laboured and who was said to have made

<sup>8</sup> Discourse against Mani, cited by Scott (1936) p.164 from C.W.Mitchell et al., S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan, Vol II (London 1921) p. xcvi. The translation is that of F.C.Burkitt.

<sup>9</sup> W.B.Scott, Hermetica, Vol II (Oxford 1925) pp.15-16 suggests that the name translates a title of Ra. The perversion Poimenandra he imputes to a scribe, but the spelling is tendentious rather than ignorant, and the etymology "shepherd of men" already assumed at Hermetica XIII.19 (ποιμαίνει ὁ νοῦς). I therefore see no reason for denying that the orthography in the Treatise on the Omega is the author's Scott (1925) p.15 n.3 denies an association with the name of Poimandros, founder of Tanagra; but an author of too much learning, such as Zosimus, might have found some gratification in the discovery of the word ποιμανδρία, used of a receptacle at Lycophron, Alexandra 326.

<sup>10</sup> Scott (1925) pp.11-12 maintains that this is the earliest of the treatises, a view which is supported by the allusions in the thirteenth treatise and by the absence of the name of Hermes, which would be difficult to account for if the author were following a known tradition. Assuming the Greek etymology for Poimandres, Reitzenstein (1904) p.11ff argues that this tract was known to the author of the Shepherd, who wrote under the name Hermas in the first quarter of the second century A.D.

the mirror which facilitated their ambush of the child (Fr. 209 Kern). As we shall see, this "mirror of Dionysus" was supposed to represent the enmattered universe, the bait for which the erring soul descends (Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.3.12, below).

But, while there is an obvious community of images between the alchemical literature and the Orphic, the two traditions put them to an entirely different use. In Orphic myth the death is a mere calamity, and the soul is precipitated into matter as a lost scion of divinity, produced and disinherited by the same act of division. In Zosimus the discription of the priest is beneficial, and the souls do not lose but recover their divinity by immersion in his bowl.

## II

By contrast, the analogy is perfect in the fourth treatise of the *Hermetica*, where the cup is a bath to purify the disembodied soul:

Διὰ τί οὖν, ὦ πάτερ, οὐ πᾶσιν ἐμέρισε τὸν νοῦν ὁ θεός; Ἡθέλησεν, ὦ τέκνον, τοῦτον ἐν μέσῳ ταῖς ψυχαῖς ὅσπερ ἄθλον ἰδρῦσθαι. 4 Καὶ ποῦ αὐτὸν ἰδρύσατο; Κρατῆρα μέγαν πληρώσας τούτου κατέπεμψε. δοῦς κήρυκα, καὶ ἐκέλευσεν αὐτῷ κηρύξαι ταῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων καρδίαις τάδε· Βάπτισον σεαυτὴν ἢ δυναμένη εἰς τοῦτον τὸν κρατῆρα, ἢ πιτεύουσα ὅτι ἀνελεύσει πρὸς τὸν καταπέμψαντα τὸν κρατῆρα. ἢ γνωρίζουσα ἐπὶ τί γέγονας. (Hermetica IV.3-4).

It is always a question with any Hermetic treatise, whether it belongs to the world that fathered Christianity, or to the world that it created. In his study of this passage in the fourth *Hermeticum* Scott appealed directly to the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist;<sup>11</sup> Festugière, asking pertinently what orthodox liturgy speaks of an immersion in the chalice, was inclined to construct a pedigree from works of a Gnostic character.<sup>12</sup> He instances the Excerpts from Theodotus,<sup>13</sup> made by Clement of Alexandria in the third century, and the Book of Jeu, a document which, though extant only in Coptic of the fourth century, embalms at least three hundred years of impenetrable fabling and a multitude of esoteric trends.<sup>14</sup>

Neither of these writings yields clear evidence that a pagan of the third century would have had to hand a Christian allegory of immersion in a cup. The passage in the Book of Jeu which juxtaposes a vessel of wine with one of wine made water (ch. 45ff) and thus implies that the chalice of the Eucharist is also the font of baptism, cannot be shown to be earlier than the manuscript, and the work is not, in any case, of the purest Christian or Jewish stock.

<sup>11</sup> Scott (1925) p.140.

<sup>12</sup> A.-J.Festugière, *Hermetica*, *Harvard Theological Review* 31 (1938) 1-12.

<sup>13</sup> Excerpta 81.1, cited by Festugière from the edition by R.P.Casey (London 1934), who prepared the text as Volume I in the series *Studies and Documents*, with commentary and translation. See now the edition of Clemens Alexandrinus by O.Stählin, Vol III (Berlin 1970) pp.131-2.

<sup>14</sup> Now translated, with notes, by V.Macdermot (Leiden 1970) from the text of C.Schmidt. Festugière (1938) makes use of it on pp.9-11.

Theodotus,<sup>15</sup> who belongs to a less contaminated strain of Christianity, enjoins a second baptism (81.1), which will purify the intellect as the first has cleansed the body; but this, like that foretold by John the Baptist (Luke 3.16, Matthew 3.11) is a rite, not of water, but of fire. Theodotus will not speak for Festugière without a great deal of embellishment, abstracted by the modern scholar from contexts which need not have been brought together by any contemporary hand.<sup>16</sup>

Festugière noticed subsequently that an analogue to the notion of a baptism in the upper world (though not to the receptacle) appears in the Book of Baruch,<sup>17</sup> of which Hippolytus provides an epitome in his Refutation of all Heresies. This, if it has been correctly attributed,<sup>18</sup> can be dated to the first half of the third century A.D.:

καὶ πίνει ἀπὸ τοῦ ζῶντος ὕδατος, ὅπερ ἐστὶ λουτρὸν αὐτοῖς, ὡς νομίζουσι, πηγὴ ζῶντος ὕδατος ἀλλομένου. διακεχώριται γάρ, φησὶν, ἀνὰ μέσον ὕδατος καὶ ὕδατος, καὶ ἔστιν ὕδωρ τὸ ὑποκάτω τοῦ στερεώματος τῆς πονηρᾶς κτίσεως, ἐν ᾧ λούονται οἱ χοϊκοὶ καὶ ψυχικοὶ ἄνθρωποι, καὶ ὕδωρ ἐστὶν ὑπεράνω τοῦ στερεώματος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ζῶν, ἐν ᾧ λούονται οἱ πνευματικοὶ ζῶντες ἄνθρωποι.

(Refutatio V.27.2-3)

The Book of Baruch is certainly of such a date that Zosimus might have read it, but no more with this than with any Gnostic writing can we exclude the possibility that its pagan antecedents would be known at first hand by a pagan author. That the author drew on pagan myths is evident from his use of the name Priapus for the supreme divinity (Refutatio V.26). Hippolytus surmised that the work was founded on an anecdote in Herodotus, while a modern critic has called it a showcase of Gnostic syncretism.<sup>19</sup> The fourth Hermeticum is as likely to be a product of such a writing as its source.

<sup>15</sup> Theodotus was a Valentinian of the eastern school. On the return of Valentinus from Gnostic to catholic principles see my Gnostics and Valentinians in the Church Fathers, Journal of Theological Studies 40 (1989) pp.26-47.

<sup>16</sup> Festugière (1938) 5-8 adduces various images of "drinking wisdom" from Gnostics, Valentinians and Marcosians, but such a threadbare metaphor would do little to demonstrate a peculiar influence, even if its antecedents were not to be found, as Festugière observes, at Plato, Symposium 176c-d.

<sup>17</sup> For the text see the citation from Hippolytus immediately following. For the association with Hermeticum IV see A.D.Nock and A.J.Festugière, Corpus Hermeticum, Vol I (Paris 1945) p.54 n.10. I have used this edition for the text of the Corpus Hermeticum, but for discussion (with the exception of this one reference) the reader is referred by Festugière to the cited article.

<sup>18</sup> C.C.J.Bunsen, Hippolytus and his Age (London 1854), Vol I pp.329-336. I.Mueller, Hippolytus Retractus, Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 8 (1989) pp.233-52 cites forthcoming articles at p.234 n.5.

<sup>19</sup> For the alchemist's use of Gnostic sources see now H.Jackson, The Seer Nicotheus and his Lost Apocalypse, Novum Testamentum 32 (1990) 250-77. As the origin of Justin's Book of Baruch Hippolytus, Refutatio V.25.1 cites Herodotus IV.8-10. M.Marcovich, Justin's Book of Baruch: A Showcase of Gnostic Syncretism, in his Essays on Greco-Roman Religion and Gnosticism (Leiden 1988) pp.93-119.

## III

The chief interest (for our argument) of the Book of Baruch lies in its illustration of a thesis which is common in such documents, that the properties of the higher world are exactly duplicated in the lower. The notion of two waters is perhaps of Orphic provenance, for one of the earliest poems speaks of a fountain of oblivion in the underworld, which, though it is the goal of the departed herd, will be shunned by the initiate, who will seek the spring of memory.<sup>20</sup> If the more philosophising readers of Orphic literature were to posit a cup of matter in which the soul forgets its origins, they would not be slow to posit a cup of mind in which the memory is restored.

The axiom that the lower is a replica of the higher was espoused by creeds and races which the Empire had acquainted with the classical tradition. If the Chaos of the mythographers signifies anything, it is matter; but the Naassenes, a sect of the second century who frequented every shrine and cult in the hope of finding images of the Heavenly Man,<sup>21</sup> concluded that this Chaos was but one half of a single, unformed substance, the blessed ἀρχημοσύνη (Refutatio V.7.18-19), which divides into a lower stream of matter and an upper stream of mind (Hippolytus, Refutatio V.6-7). This watercourse is the Ocean of Homeric verse (V.7.37) and the Jordan of the Israelites (V.7.40), both of which are said to have two currents of opposite tendency; the Naassenes, like Baruch, reserved the upward current for themselves:

Θνητὴ γὰρ, φησί, πᾶσα ἢ κάτω γένεσις, ἀθάνατος δὲ ἢ ἄνω γεννωμένη· γεννᾶται γὰρ ἐξ ὕδατος μόνου καὶ πνεύματος πνευματικός, οὐ σαρκικός· ὁ δὲ κάτω σαρκικός. τοῦτ' ἔστι, φησί, τὸ γεγραμμένον· "τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς σὰρξ ἔστι, καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστιν". (Refutatio V.7.40).

In stating that both mind and matter are formless, that they originate in the parting of a single ἀρχημοσύνη, the Naassenes were borrowing a paradox from philosophy. What Platonists said of matter they found that they could say, with perfect symmetry, of mind. It was agreed that matter, implied as it was in every existent object, was no one of them, and therefore had no predicates. But Plato had insisted that the Intelligible does not owe its identity, as things phenomenal do, to any spatial or temporal determinants, and his followers concluded that the Intellect itself cannot be defined except by negatives. It has frequently been noted that the epithets bestowed on mind by Platonists like Albinus could as well have stood for matter; for each of these is not so much an entity as the condition of existence as an entity, each is a capacity, a *dunamis*, which is known to us only in the constant process of

<sup>20</sup> Orphicorum Fragmenta 32a Kern (Berlin 1922); see also G.Zuntz, *Persephone: Three Essays on Religion and Thought in Magna Graecia* (Oxford 1971) pp.358-61.

<sup>21</sup> See Creed (1924-25) and R.P.Casey, "Naassenes and Ophites", *Journal of Theological Studies* 27 (1926-7) pp.374-87.



becoming, of instantiating an object or its kind.<sup>22</sup> As he understood space or topos in the Timaeus to denote the material substrate of particulars (Timaeus 52a-b and 57c etc.), so Aristotle called mind the place or topos of Ideas (De Anima 429a). The mind, he said, was "all things": this passive and individuated intellect he believed to stand as matter to the active (De Anima loc.cit.), which certain of his followers took for God's.<sup>23</sup>

It may be that the same thought is at work in those Hermetic books where Moses is the root and Greece the nursery of an arcane communication.<sup>24</sup> When Poimandres manifests his character to the seer in the first Hermeticum, he becomes a teeming light, and the beholder is no less enamoured than the Anthropos, though he is looking up, not down:<sup>25</sup>

τοῦτο εἰπὼν ἡλλάγη τῇ ιδέᾳ, καὶ εὐθέως πάντα μοι ἤνοικτο ῥοπῆ, καὶ ὀρῶ, θέαν ἀόριτον, φῶς δὲ πάντα γεγεννημένα, εὐδιόν τε καὶ ἰλαρόν, καὶ ἠράσθην ἰδών

(Hermetica I.4)

Then spirit turns to matter, darkness falls and "all things" wear another guise as the elements are discerned. These are to constitute the lower nature, the one that was more usually thought to deserve the epithet ἀόριτος.<sup>26</sup> This, no less desirable to sense than the upper nature to the intellect, will capture the Anthropos by embracing his reflection, enchanting with his own face the radiant image of the Mind.

It is obvious from this survey that the cups of Dionysus and Hephaestus would lend themselves to duplication as readily as the springs of Orphic poetry, the extremes of metaphysical negation. The inquiry ends in no one text, but rather in the principle that joins them: mind and matter, the poles of life, cannot fail to attract the same images when they are credited with the same properties. Why, then, should the bowl of the fourth Hermeticum and the bowl-shaped altar of Zosimus be anything but the invention of a pagan Hermetist, who

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Symposium 210e-211b; Alcinoüs/Albinus, Isagoge 10 (p.165.4-17 Hermann): ἄρρητος ... οὔτε γένος ἐστὶν οὔτε εἶδος ... οὔτε κακόν ... οὔτε ἀγαθόν ... οὔτε ποιόν ... οὔτε ἄποιον. On Platonic negation see further A.-J.Festugière, La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste, Vol IV (Paris 1953) pp.79-141.

<sup>23</sup> On Aristotle see further H.Cherniss, Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy. Vol I (New York 1944 p.112ff; for later interpretations F.M.Schroeder and R.Todd, Two Greek Aristotelian Commentators on the Intellect (Toronto 1990); on the use of the notion in Peripatetic and Platonic theology, A.H.Armstrong, The Background of the Doctrine that the Intelligibles are not outside the Intellect, Entretiens Hardt V: Les Sources de Plotin (Geneva 1960) 391-413, and R.Norman, Aristotle's Philosopher-God, Phronesis 14 (1969) 63-74.

<sup>24</sup> On the Jewish milieu of Hermetica I see C.H.Dodd, The Bible and the Greeks (London 1935), B.A.Pearson, Jewish Elements in Corpus Hermeticum I, in R. Van den Broek and M.J.Vermaseren (eds) Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions (Leiden 1981) 336-48. On Hermetica III see Scott (1925) pp.110-2, and on Hermetica XIII G.Zuntz, On the Hymns in the Corpus Hermeticum, Hermes 90 (1955) 68-92, esp. 83-5, also in Opuscula Selecta (Manchester 1972) pp.150-77, esp. 167-9.

<sup>25</sup> The author proceeds to speak of a σκότος ... σκολιῶς ἐπειραμένον, ὡς (ᾧ) εἰκάσαι με. The serpent which has crept into the manuscript has Gnostic relatives: see Nock-Festugière (1945) p.12 n.9. That Keil read ἠγάσθην for ἠράσθην at Hermetica I.4 would suggest that he was reminded of the passage in the Timaeus (37c), in which the Demiurge is said to have "rejoiced" (ἠγάσθη) in his creation of a world on the model of the blessed Paradigm.

<sup>26</sup> For the ἀόριτος δυνάς in Plato see Aristotle, Metaphysics 1081a14 etc; cf. Plotinus, Enneads II.4.2.3 etc. and on the evolution of the concept J.Dillon, The Middle Platonists (London 1977) pp.2-4 and 126-8.

merely follows custom by depicting the return of the soul in images conventionally employed for the rehearsal of its fall?

#### IV

It remains to explain the suffering of the priest, for which no parallel can be found in the Hermetic and Orphic authors whom we have brought to bear upon this parable. A striking likeness can be found in a Platonist, who died perhaps a generation before the prime of Zosimus, and whose works, replete with allusions to the mysteries, contain one of the fullest elucidations of the principle that the soul's flight from the world is a mirrored image of its fall.

Plotinus, in the ninth treatise of the sixth Ennead, exhorts the soul to flee from the domain of the particular to a state beyond personality, a state in which it will neither see nor be, since it will enjoy a plenary union with that of which we cannot predicate anything except that it is One. The soul which thus aspires to a deliverance from everything - from objects of the mind as of the senses, from the timeless and impassible no less than from the passible and passing - is seeking nothing less than the annihilation of form:

ἀλλ' ὡςπερ περὶ τῆς ὕλης λέγεται, ὡς ἄρα ἄποιον εἶναι δεῖ πάντων, εἰ μέλλει δέχεσθαι τοὺς πάντων τύπους, οὕτω καὶ πολὺ μᾶλλον ἀνείδεον τὴν ψυχὴν γίνεσθαι, εἰ μέλλει μηδὲν ἐμπόδιον ἐγκαθήμενον ἔσεσθαι πρὸς πλήρωσιν καὶ ἔλλαμψιν αὐτῇ τῆς φύσεως τῆς πρώτης. (Enneads VI.9.7)

The One, as the source of being and of all noetic entities, is itself devoid of being and of any predicates that can define it. In this it resembles matter, and both are described in the Enneads in like terms.<sup>27</sup> The cause of every property and virtue cannot itself be any one of them, any more than matter, the receptacle, can possess what it is waiting to receive.

The objects of intelligence cannot subsist, according to Plotinus, except in a state of mutual penetration. Since the intelligence is not to be divorced from its objects,<sup>28</sup> the souls who have renounced the world of sense for that of intellect forgather there in communion so perfect that every one is as present and as known to every other as to itself.<sup>29</sup> An image from the mysteries describes the case in which the soul elects to rupture the intellectual harmony and appropriate an individual being which estranges it from others:

Ἀνθρώπων δὲ ψυχαὶ εἶδωλα αὐτῶν ἰδοῦσαι οἷον Διονύσου ἐν κατόπτρῳ ἐκεῖ ἐγένοντο ἄνωθεν ὀρμηθεῖσαι, οὐκ ἀποτμηθεῖσαι οὐδ' αὐταὶ τῆς ἑαυτῶν ἀρχῆς τε καὶ νοῦ. οὐ γὰρ μετὰ τοῦ νοῦ ἦλθον, ἀλλ' ἔφθασαν μὲν μέχρι γῆς, κάρα δὲ αὐταῖς

<sup>27</sup> For ἄμορφος see Enneads II.4.2.3, II.4.4.18 etc. (of matter) and VI.7.33.4, VI.9.3.39 etc. (of the One). For ἄπειρος see II.4.14.29, II.4.15.19-20 etc. (of matter) and VI.5.12.5 (of the One). For ἄοριςτος see II.4.2.3 etc. (of matter) and cf. ἀοριστεῖς at VI.9.7.1 (of contact with the One). See further C. de Vogel, *Philosophia*, Part 1 (Assen 1970) pp.378-93.

<sup>28</sup> See Enneads V.5 and Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 20.94-5 for this distinctive tenet, and for the interpretation of the Forms V.5.1 etc.

<sup>29</sup> See especially Enneads V.8.10.

ἐστήρικται ὑπεράνω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. πλέον δὲ αὐταῖς κατελθεῖν κυβέβηκεν, ὅτι τὸ μέσον αὐταῖς ἠναγκάσθη, φροντίδος δεομένου τοῦ εἰς ὃ ἔφθασαν, φροντίσαι. Ζεὺς δὲ πατήρ ἐλεήσας πονουμένας θνητὰ αὐτῶν τὰ δεσμὰ ποιῶν, περὶ ἃ πονοῦνται, δίδωσιν ἀναπαύλας ἐν χρόνοις ποιῶν σωματίων ἐλευθέρως, ἵν' ἔχοιεν ἐκεῖ καὶ αὐταὶ γίνεσθαι. (Enneads IV.3.12. 1ff).

Since all form resides in the intelligible, to sink below the intellect, no less than to rise above it, will entail a loss of form. With the fall we surrender what would help us to restrain it, and the soul would be inexorably led on to its dissolution were it not for the intervention of a deity, who gives it certain bounds.<sup>30</sup> Plotinus takes the dismemberment of Dionysus-Zagreus for a symbol of the breach made by the lapsed soul in the community of intellects, and the cause of this (represented by the mirror) he conceives to be an ignorant self-love.

The simile of the mirror is an equivocal one, for, if it is self-love that tempts the soul into desertion, it is knowledge of self, the vision of its own true countenance, that is required to guide it home:

γίνεται γὰρ καὶ αὐτός τις οὐκ οὐσία, ἀλλ' ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας ταύτης, ἢ προσομιλεῖ. εἴ τις οὖν τοῦτο αὐτὸν γεγόμενον ἴδοι, ἔχει ὁμοίωμα ἐκείνου αὐτόν, καὶ εἰ ἀφ' αὐτοῦ μεταβαίνοι ὡς εἰκὼν πρὸς ἀρχέτυπον, τέλος ἂν ἔχοι τῆς πορείας. ἐκπίπτων δὲ τῆς θεᾶς πάλιν ἐγείρας ἀρετὴν τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ κατανοήσας ἑαυτὸν ταύταις κεκομημένον πάλιν κουφισθήσεται δι' ἀρετῆς ἐπὶ νοῦν καὶ σοφίαν καὶ διὰ σοφίας ἐπ' αὐτό. (Enneads VI.9.11.42-48).

The soul has thus a choice between reflections, one as true as the other is perfidious; it is death to be oblivious to the intellect, but life to rise above it.<sup>31</sup> This, Plotinus tells us, is the secret of the mysteries, the prize of the inner sanctum which is known to the priest so long as he is preparing to enjoy it, and when enjoyed at last no longer known:

σοφὸς δὲ ἱερεὺς τὸ αἴνιγμα συνιεὶς ἀληθινὴν ἂν ποιοῖτο ἐκεῖ γεγόμενος τοῦ ἀδύτου τὴν θεάν. καὶ μὴ γεγόμενος δὲ τὸ ἄδυτον τοῦτο ἀόρατόν τι χρῆμα νομίσας καὶ πηγὴν καὶ ἀρχὴν, εἰδήσει ὡς ἀρχῇ ἀρχὴν ὄρα καὶ συγγίνεται [καὶ] τῷ ὁμοίῳ τὸ ὅμοιον. (Enneads VI.9.11. 28-33).

Plotinus would appear to be alluding to a special case of the principle observed by all initiates of the mysteries, that the path to a renewal or perpetuation of life is the experience of a simulated death.<sup>32</sup> After the purification of the intellect, the soul proceeds to a life beyond the intellect, from virtuous self-knowledge to a darkness in which knowledge and the virtues

<sup>30</sup> The allusion at IV.3.12.8 is to Symposium 191b.

<sup>31</sup> For another purgative mirror see Zosimus, adduced by Scott (1936) pp.142-3: "What says the philosophic word? Know thyself. It indicates the spiritual and intellectual mirror." Scott postulates a "Christian Gnostic" source, but the terms employed to gloss the image (Logos, Pneuma) are not uniquely Christian and are clearly no more important or intrinsic to its origins than is the citation of the Delphic maxim.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. R.Seaford, *Dionysiac Poetry and the Dionysiac Mysteries*, CQ 31 (1981) pp.252-75, esp. p.261 n.76.

are eclipsed. The mystery to which Plotinus summons us would appear to have not a little in common with that described by Zosimus; for, while it is a convention that the prophet should imbibe his inspiration from a fountain, it is not such a convention that this source should also serve as the interior of a temple, or that the desired result of the draught should be oblivion and a loss of being in its present state.

The soul must die in its upward path, no less than if the mirror of self-knowledge were the mirror of self-love. The alchemist, by making the priest undergo a fate like that of Dionysus, has carried through the logic of the similtude between the fall of the soul and its redemption. Where the priest in the *Enneads* is an emblem of the aspiring soul, in Zosimus he is the adept who must suffer for his flock. This distinction argues not a difference in the sources, but only in the character of those who have employed them; for Plotinus, though he was liberal in allusions to the mysteries, was not inclined to imitate the ecstasy of prophets or participate in the vulgar imbecility of cults.<sup>33</sup>

Because he offers no interpretation of his parable, we cannot tell whether Zosimus is describing an immersion in the mind, like the *Hermetica*, or in the ineffable which lies beyond it. Comparison with Plotinus shows at least that he required no inspiration from his dreams or from the nascent literature of Christianity. He speaks of a rite that was known to pagan Greeks, at least in literature, and one that he might consequently rely upon a privileged audience to comprehend.

New College, Oxford

M.J.Edwards

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<sup>33</sup> See Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 10.35 and Armstrong's note on ecstasy at VI.9.11 in his edition and translation (London 1988) p.342 n.1.