

PHILOSOPHY AND THEURGY IN THE THOUGHT OF IAMBLICHUS: SYMBOL AND BEAUTY

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Σύμβολα γὰρ πατρικὸς νόος ἔσπειρεν κατὰ κόσμον,
ὅς τὰ νοητὰ νοεῖ· καὶ κάλλη ἄφραστα καλεῖται.¹

One of the most controversial points in relation to an exegesis of the thought of Iamblichus is the coexistence in his work of an indisputable valuation of philosophy and a substantial presence of theurgy. This question is particularly interesting since ultimately it implies a much wider and more complex one: the meaning of the relationship between mystical religions and philosophy at that time.

Since proposing a chronology that could dismantle this coexistence cannot be convincingly justified, an attempt at theoretical understanding becomes inevitable. At this point most experts propose that since Iamblichus had distanced himself from the anthropological optimism of Plotinus, he was obliged to introduce theurgy as a supernatural aid to overcome the weakness of the intellect, incapable of joining with the divine of its own accord. We believe that it is difficult to support this interpretation if the assertions made by Iamblichus throughout his work (e.g. *Myst.* 1.3.2-18) are taken seriously. These assertions open the way to an exploration of a new interpretative framework to account for the convergence of philosophy and theurgy in the thought of Iamblichus, respecting its internal coherence and searching for the meaning and soundness of what he proposes. The profound theoretical implications of the notions of symbol and beauty are crucial in the search for this framework.

¹ *Orac. Chald.* Fr. 108 (p. 50 Kr. = Proclus, *In Crat.* 20.31-21.2)

1. Introduction

Understanding the relationship between philosophy and theurgy in the thought of Iamblichus poses a challenge with profound implications which transcend the specific framework of this philosophy and question our own suppositions. This is undoubtedly one of the most significant and obscure relationships in the history of thought. When we explore it we are also exploring the image we have of ourselves, laboriously built up over recent centuries: the history of thought envisaged as an arduous task of rationalization, of clearing away the undergrowth in a forest of myths and rituals, of superstition and fear of the supernatural, with philosophy as the discipline which little by little opens the way to a rational world understanding. This image has triumphed in important areas in our culture, shaping a discourse to legitimate the order of things. This is a triumphalist view where the work of philosophy has reached its culmination in the scientific discourse currently responsible for interpreting today's world, intoxicated with transparency and efficiency.

This interpretative framework makes it impossible to define the relationship between philosophy and theurgy in the thought of Iamblichus. In this context, more than in any other, the expert has to seek objectivity when interpreting the text, in an attempt to avoid the predominant mentality of the time. The first important obstacle encountered en route is precisely the pressing need to create a space where the meaning can emerge. This means starting from scratch, taking a step back from ourselves and our age, and clutching onto the texts as if we had been shipwrecked and are attempting to find our way on a desert island.

The first step forward in this task of finding their significance is to avoid blindly accepting the meaning assigned to the terms. If we assign a specific meaning to ancient philosophy and reduce it to mere conceptual work or knowledge reduced to predicative discourse with the aim per se of creating conceptual systems; and if we also assign a specific meaning to theurgy, that of an irrational space for drawing closer to the divine through rituals or non-intellectual mediations, the result is clear: making sense of their reconciliation becomes impossible. At this point we must look for the rationale for the coexistence of these two areas in the work of Iamblichus, referring to the chronological² sequence of the texts or, discarding this

² Larsen 1972 prefers this hypothesis, while acknowledging the difficulty of ordering the works of Iamblichus chronologically. Furthermore, although the wording of *Protrepticus* is uncertain, *De Mysteriis* is often considered an early work, written before the death of Porfirio. (In this regard see C.V. Liefferinge 2000: n. 86).

option, to the dual personality of Iamblichus³ or even to his desperation in a moment of anguish⁴ which led him to break away from the anthropological optimism of Plotinus and to seek out irrational means as a way of approaching the divine.

The studies of Iamblichus underway at present increasingly try to rescue his thought from any suspicion of irrationality, and progress has been made in the search for coherence and soundness in his philosophical proposal⁵. Along these same lines, we propose here an attempt to build an exegetic framework, with a study of the terms as a starting point and taking into account their significance and structure as the key to delimit the meaning. The study must not presuppose the meaning of these terms beforehand, but instead patiently combs through the texts, considering them as a map to be deciphered.

Thus, we will not presuppose what philosophy or theurgy are, and then look for the significance of their coexistence in the work of Iamblichus. What we propose here is to take a step back and examine the meaning of philosophy in the school of Iamblichus and the meaning of theurgy outlined in his texts, to discover if the reason for their coexistence can be explained and if there is a clearly marked coherence, perhaps with important underlying motives. To carry out this task with due care is beyond the scope of this paper, and so we will limit ourselves here to outlining the proposal, indicating the main headings, but leaving aside for the present those questions which must be posed later in all their complexity⁶.

2. Understanding philosophy

The first question to ask ourselves is therefore what classical Platonic philosophy really was, what it understood itself to be, and what its scope and *raison d'être* were. A serious approach to this question, taking the relevant texts into account, reveals a vision of philosophy which is familiar to us all but which tends to go unnoticed at the heart of its nature

³ Cf. Des Places 1981: 337.

⁴ In his famous study affirms Dodds 1951: 287: “The *De Mysteriis* is a manifesto of irrationalism, an assertion that the road to salvation is found not in reason but in ritual [...] To the discouraged mind of fourth-century pagans such a message offered a seductive comfort”. See also Dodds 1928: 142.

⁵ We refer to scholars as Larsen 1972, Lieffering 1994, Clarke 2001 or Molina 2012 who from the seriousness and rigor have tried to rescue the thought of Iamblichus, offering respectful exegesis of the meaning of his work.

⁶ For a more complete discussion of this issue see Hermoso Félix 2012.

and the depth of its proposal. As lucidly shown in the work of Hadot⁷, we will not find a closed conceptual system in the work of Plato, with philosophy understood as a conceptual discourse which embraces a descriptive - predicative world truth.

Rather than a discourse, at its core Plato's philosophy is revealed as an active dialectic of beauty which seeks a unified vision, extending the feeling of the soul, alienated by the shells and stones that have grown over them, to use the image from the *Republic* 612a.1. This philosophy starts from the affirmation that human perception is blinded by those "fearful and unavoidable"⁸ processes which have to be endured to reach existence: The fears, impulses and passions which are naturally linked to the formation of the individual alter the order and fundamental balance of the soul. This alteration is not only ethic but also aesthetic, it affects the vision of the soul, its capacity for experience, and the quality of its perception.

This alienation and oblivion form a prison in which man has to shape his identity. In the caverns of his own passions, impulses and divided perception, man lives in thrall to an illusion which takes the place of the real life of the soul.

Platonic philosophy can be understood as an operational process that is able to reverse this situation and re-establish the primary experience of the soul by offering an active, present itinerary to free the soul: "A conversion and turning about of the soul from a day whose light is darkness to the veritable day that ascension to reality of our parable which we will affirm to be the true philosophy"⁹.

This notion of philosophy as an active route to the freedom and transformation of the soul is shared by Iamblichus at all times. In his *Protrepticus* he follows Plato closely, paraphrasing or citing his work. Each of the main themes in his understanding of philosophy starts from the work of Plato and is inspired by it.

For the purpose of this present study, it would be useful to focus now on the nature of the mediations Plato outlines to facilitate this liberating process and the return of the soul to its primordial order, including the beauty of the world and contemplation of universal order and harmony.

⁷ Cf. Hadot 2002.

⁸ *Ti.* 69d.

⁹ *R.* 521c: ψυχῆς περιαγωγή ἐκ νυκτερινῆς τινος ἡμέρας εἰς ἀληθινήν, τοῦ ὄντος οὕσαν ἐπάνοδον, ἣν δὴ φιλοσοφίαν ἀληθῆ φήσομεν εἶναι. (The English translations used are those mentioned in the bibliography with some small variations).

Once the alienation of the soul in its imprisonment is fully understood, the way is open for philosophy to discover how to facilitate the return of the soul to its primary contemplation. In the *Republic* 518d Plato affirms that there would be an art of conversion of the soul (τέχνη ἄν εἴη, τῆς περιαγωγῆς), a way of enabling the eye of the soul to turn around and contemplate “the essence and the brightest region of being. And this, we say, is the good (τὸ ὄν καὶ τοῦ ὄντος τὸ φανότατον [...] τοῦτο δ' εἶναι φάμεν τὰγαθόν)”. Iamblichus in his *Protrepticus* 82.15 cites and glosses this understanding of philosophy, which he makes his own.

Preparing the soul for contemplation, the pursuit of this turn, has always been the concern of Platonic philosophy. In it the appropriate paths and the mediations which favour this change of direction are indicated. These form the philosophical method itself, the active itinerary of philosophizing. The idea that philosophy may connect with the soul in its current state and little by little restore it to order and equilibrium is based on the nature of these mediations. All of these ultimately refer to the power of beauty to restore order and to its capacity for being present at all levels of perception and reality. The beauty of the world has a profound potential to transform the soul, it can draw near to it, enchanting or dazzling it just to the required extent, attracting it gently, gradually, little by little, facilitating the gradual penetration of the soul into its intelligible nature: “Beauty alone has this privilege and therefore it is most clearly seen and loveliest”¹⁰.

Iamblichus fully appreciates the operational potential of philosophy, the power of the beauty within which the mediations it deploys are sustained, the gently balanced character of this mediating power. He understands perfectly that the soul needs the help of the philosophy to free its gaze, and that this careful process has to be gradual.

Plato understood philosophy as an itinerary to restore the primary nature of man and his higher capacity for seeing, and gave great importance to the contemplation of the universe. Its harmony and equilibrium can resound in the soul, restoring the balance of its movements and facilitating its likeness to the divine movements of the universal soul¹¹. Iamblichus understands this path to the ordering of the

¹⁰ *Phdr.* 250e1: κάλλος μόνον ταύτην ἔσχε μοῖραν, ὥστ' ἐκφανέστατον εἶναι καὶ ἔρασμιώτατον.

¹¹ Festugière 1949-1954 states in this regard: “Qu’il accorde ses pensées à celles de l’Intellect divin, qu’il se rende semblable à l’objet contemplé: alors il pourra, par l’esprit, habiter la Cité du Monde. Et en conséquence, dès ce vie mortelle, il participe à l’immortel et au divin, il obtiene la beatitude. [...] Si beaucoup cherchent un refuge à la Cité de l’Univers, c’est qu’un sage leur aura montré que

soul which Plato outlines in the *Timaeus* at the very core of its meaning. He follows Platonic philosophy in its outlines and fundamentals, sharing this view of the mediation which helps the soul lay it itself open to its divine quality.

The contemplation of the universe and of its composition, and its potential to open up to intelligible nature and express it in each of its forms, make it a model for the guidance that philosophy offers the soul. Philosophy rests on the shaping process of nature, as the image and expression of what is intelligible. It can widen the scope and intensity of the brilliant flashes in nature, making them more effective and thus enable the soul to seek out the traces of truth in the universe. In *Protrepticus* 116.15 we found the following text:

So it exhorts us to apprehend the theory and philosophy of the universe. For though the truth concerning the universe is naturally recondite, and sufficiently difficult of investigation, it must nevertheless be sought and investigated by man, and chiefly through Philosophy. For it is truly impossible to discover it through any other pursuit. But philosophy receiving certain small sparks from nature [...] blows them up into a flame, making them more active through the disciplines which she possesses¹².

Thus, Iamblichus shares the Platonic understanding of philosophy as an active, operative itinerary, opening the soul to the contemplation of beauty, and he also shares the significance of the mediations this philosophical method deploys. This intimate relationship between philosophy and contemplation of the universe, the attraction which its order and equilibrium have for the soul, is a constant source of inspiration for Iamblichus. As Plato mentions, this involves turning our eyes on the immense intelligible beauty contained in the universe and the primary nature of the soul, and finding how to facilitate this new viewpoint. Actively following this itinerary, delving ever deeper into the divine nature of what is real, is the true task of philosophy which transmutes the

l'Univers est la vraie patrie de l'intellect, et que tout souffrance, tout humaine désordre s'apaise lorsqu'on s'unit, par la contemplation, à l'ordre du ciel" (1954: 141).

¹² *Protr.* 116.15: ὥστε προτρέπει τῆς τοῦ παντός θεωρίας καὶ φιλοσοφίας ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι. ἐπεὶ γὰρ ἀπόκρυφος φύσει ἡ περὶ τοῦ παντός ἀλήθεια, καὶ δυσθήρατος ἱκανῶς· ζητητέα δὲ ὅμως ἀνθρώπῳ καὶ ἐξιχνευτέα μάλιστα διὰ φιλοσοφίας. διὰ γὰρ ἄλλου τινὸς ἐπιτηδεύματος οὕτως ἀδύνατον· αὕτη δὲ μικρά τινα ἐν αὐσμάτα παρὰ τῆς φύσεως λαμβάνουσα [...] ζωπυρεῖ τε αὐτὰ καὶ μεγεθύνει καὶ ἐνεργέστερα διὰ τῶν παρ' αὐτῆς μαθημάτων ἀπεργάζεται.

whole perception of the soul and its capacity for experience. This is the philosophy that Iamblichus refers to in *Protrepticus* 61.1¹³.

3. Understanding theurgy

The notion of theurgy in the thought of Iamblichus is based on pure philosophy: its methods, its power to transform the soul, how it purifies and liberates its vision, how it can tap into the path to draw us closer to the divine, are all understood through the method and potential to transform the soul found in Platonic philosophy. The notion of theurgy which we find in *De Mysteriis* thus runs parallel to the notion of true philosophy found in the *Protrepticus*¹⁴. In *Protrepticus* 70.10 we find:

From this course of reasoning it is evident that Philosophy brings to us a release from human chains and deliverance from the generation, and leads to that which truly is, and to a knowledge of Truth itself and the purification of souls. But if in this above all things there is true felicity, we must cultivate philosophy most zealously, if we wish to be truly happy¹⁵.

¹³ *Protr.* 61.1: τότε φιλοσοφήσομεν ζῶντες ἀληθῶς καὶ θεώμενοι θεωρίας ἀμηχάνους τὸ κάλλος, ἀτενίζοντες τῇ ψυχῇ πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἀραρότως καὶ θεώμενοι τὴν τῶν θεῶν ἀρχήν, εὐφραϊνόμενοι καὶ χαίροντες συνεχῶς ἀπὸ τοῦ θεωρεῖν, ἡδόμενοι χωρὶς πάσης λύπης. οὕτως οὖν ἐπιόντες εἰς πᾶσαν εὐδαιμονίαν εὐρίσκομεν ἡμῖν συμβαλλόμενον τὸ φιλοσοφεῖν.

¹⁴ Liefferinge 1999: 33 ss. rightly noted this close relationship between the notion of philosophy we find in the *Protrepticus* and the notion of theurgy we find in *De Mysteriis*. Pointing out these parallels, he proposes that the notion of theurgy would thus be linked with the practical aspect of philosophy, of which it would be a natural continuation. On the other hand, she notes correctly that philosophy in *Protrepticus* 58.16 is conceived of as a theoretical activity (ἡ θεωρητικὴ ἐνέργεια). We consider that expressions such as this exclude a clearly defined delimitation between theoretical philosophy, exclusively dedicated to contemplation, and practical philosophy, dedicated to activity. The activity brought into play by theurgy is contemplative, and used precisely as a basis for contemplation. On the other hand, contemplation is a certain type of activity, not passivity as opposed to activity, but rather a particular type of activity. We do not consider therefore that in Iamblichus theurgy is understood as a derivation of practical philosophy. On the contrary, we prefer the hypothesis that it is Platonic philosophy in its entirety which serves as the framework for his exegesis and dignifying of theurgy.

¹⁵ *Protr.* 70.10: ἐκ δὲ τῆς τοιαύτης ἐφόδου φαίνεται ἡμῖν φιλοσοφία ἀπαλλαγὴν τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων δεσμῶν παρέχειν καὶ λύσιν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ περιαγωγὴν ἐπὶ τὸ ὄν καὶ γνῶσιν τῆς ὄντως ἀληθείας καὶ κάθαρσιν ταῖς ψυχαῖς. εἰδὲ ἐν τοῦ τω

This conception of philosophy as the way to purify and liberate the soul converges with the concept of theurgy found in *De Mysteriis* 10.7:

Not do the theurgists <pester the divine intellect about small matters>, but about matters pertaining to the purification, liberation and salvation of the soul. Neither do they <concern themselves diligently with things which are difficult and yet useless to human beings>, but rather to things which are, of all things, of most benefit to the soul. [...] those men who ascended to the intelligible and the divine¹⁶.

Iamblichus discovers the key to understanding theurgy in his notion of true philosophy as the route to the purification and liberation of the soul. This path to the transformation of how the soul sees determines his hermeneutics of ritual practices.

That theurgy acts on the gods is a concept strongly refuted by Iamblichus as one of the greatest misunderstandings which jeopardize a true understanding of the effectiveness of ritual¹⁷. This acts on human perception and capacity to receive the immense power of the divine. Just like philosophy, theurgy seeks to free the soul from the caverns of its own passions as a way to experiencing the divine¹⁸.

Just like the philosopher, the theurgist has been released from passions, and his soul adapted to the coexistence of the divine and the ordered: “They received from it every virtue, and become perfectly good and orderly; they are freed from passions, and from every unruly impulse, and are purified from godless and impious habits”¹⁹. In *Protrepticus* 69.24 those who truly love knowledge, and have been freed from the passions by

μάλιστα ἐστὶν ἡ ὄντως εὐδαιμονία, σπουδαστέον περὶ αὐτήν, εἴπερ ὄντως βουλόμεθα μακάριοι εἶναι.

¹⁶ *Myst.* 10.7: Οὐδὲ περὶ σμικρῶν οἱ θεουργοὶ τὸν θεῖον νοῦν ἐνοχλοῦσιν, ἀλλὰ περὶ τῶν εἰς ψυχῆς κάθαρσιν καὶ ἀπόλυσιν καὶ σωτηρίαν ἀνηκόντων· οὐδὲ χαλεπὰ μὲν διαμελετῶσιν οὗτοι ἄχρηστα δὲ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἀλλὰ τοῦναντίον τὰ τῇ ψυχῇ πάντων ὠφελιμώτατα· [...] ἐπὶ δὲ τὴν νοητὴν καὶ θεῖαν φύσιν ἀνενεχθέντες.

¹⁷ Trouillard 1972 : 175 points out that: “La théurgie n’est pas la magie [...] Comme telle, d’après Jamblique, elle n’est pas une action de l’homme sur les dieux, mais des dieux sur l’homme”. In this regard, see Lieffering (1999 : 38 ss.).

¹⁸ See e. g. *Myst.* 3.24.10: τί γὰρ δήποτε καὶ ἔχει τὸ πάθος οἰκεῖον εἰς τὴν θεωρίαν τῶν ὄντων; τί δ’ οὐ μᾶλλον ἐμποδίζει πρὸς ἀληθεστέραν κατανόησιν; (For why should passion be suitable for the contemplation of real beings? Why is this not rather a hindrance to genuine observation?)

¹⁹ *Myst.* 3.31.13: οὗ δὴ καὶ πᾶσαν ἀρετὴν δέχονται, καὶ χρηστοὶ τοῖς ἡθεσιν ἐπιτελοῦνται καὶ κόσμιοι, παθῶν τε ἀπαλλάττονται καὶ πάσης ἀτάκτου κινήσεως, τῶν τε ἀθέων καὶ ἀνοσίων τρόπων καθαρεύουσιν.

philosophy, are similarly referred to as “valiant and orderly”²⁰. Iamblichus includes himself here in the image of the philosopher we find in the *Republic* 500d: “Then the lover of wisdom associating with the divine order will himself become orderly and divine in the measure permitted to man”²¹.

The task itself of the path to transformation proposed by philosophy, ordering the soul in accordance with the order and equilibrium proper to the divine, leads to an understanding of the operational capacity of theurgy. Both philosophers and theurgists become *κόσμιοι*, orderly men. Both achieve that order in the soul which leads to its contact with and likeness to the divine.

Platonic philosophy points us towards the mediations which may facilitate this ordering of the soul and widening of its field of vision: the contemplation of universal harmony and balance, and the attraction exerted by the beauty of the world, lead to a gradual unifying of the soul and little by little its penetration into the divine quality of the real.

Iamblichus extends this power to order the soul, which is inherent in the contemplation of universal harmony and beauty’s power of attraction, to how he understands the symbolic power of ritual practices. The operational capacity, the conception and significance of the symbolic mediations displayed by theurgy are interpreted in terms of the mediations mentioned in Platonic philosophy. Inspired by them, he develops a powerful exegesis of symbolic ritual practices, giving them an epistemic value and importance in accordance with how wisdom is considered to be the path to purification and freedom facilitated by opening the soul to the divine²².

The symbol imitates the composition of the universe, formed in the order and harmony of the intelligible, and acquires its power to order and re-balance the internal movements of the soul, its power to make the soul resemble the divine. This process of divine imitation and likeness through mediation which can draw near to the soul and prepare it, purify and order it, serves as the basis for understanding the symbol²³. The mystagogy

²⁰ *Protr.* 69.24: οἱ δικαίως φιλομαθεῖς κόσμιοί εἰσι καὶ ἀνδρεῖοι.

²¹ Pl. *R.* 500d: Θείῳ δὴ καὶ κοσμίῳ ὃ γε φιλόσοφος ὁμιλῶν κόσμιός τε καὶ θεῖος εἰς τὸ δυνατόν ἀνθρώπῳ γίγνεται.

²² Lieffering 1994: 207 notes that: “Même s’il n’a pas été rangé dans la polémique anti-chrétienne, Jamblique est parfaitement conscient de la confusion qui règne dans le paganisme et de l’impulsion que ce désordre assure au christianisme montant”. She points out correctly (1999: 125 ss.) that *De Mysteriis* is: “une œuvre de récupération du culte païen en déclin”.

²³ Cf. Hermoso Félix 2012: 147-291.

concealed in the symbols which Iamblichus refers to in *De Mysteriis* 7.1.7, imitates the initiation which the universal harmony and its intelligible nature can transmit to the soul:

For this people <Egyptians> imitating the nature of the universe and the demiurgic power of the gods, display certain signs of mystical, arcane and invisible intellections by means of symbols, just as nature copies the unseen principles in visible forms through same mode of symbolism, and creative activity of the gods indicates the truth of the forms in visible signs. Perceiving, therefore, that all superior beings rejoice in the efforts of their inferiors to imitate them, and therefore wish to fill them with good things, insofar as it as possible through imitation, it is reasonable that they should proffer a mode of concealment that is appropriate to the mystical doctrine concealment in symbols²⁴.

This mystagogy, or initiation, consists of an alchemy of the soul's gaze, a re-ordering or re-balancing which awakens its capacity to experience the divine.

In the same way, the attraction which beauty exercises on the eye of the soul, and its potential for facilitating its entry into the intelligible quality of the real, into the experience of the ineffable beauty of the divine, defines the basis for understanding the process which the symbol initiates. The symbol's power of attraction, its capacity for unifying the perception of the soul, leading it to the divine, is based on the transforming dynamic which enables the ascent of the soul by way of beauty, a favourite concept in Platonic philosophy. Beauty can draw close to the soul and be accessible to its perception in the fragmented situation it finds itself in, gradually deepening its receptive capacity to a more profound beauty. Beauty awakens the desire of the soul for the divine, taking its measure and extending it gradually, in a gentle and persuasive way.

From this profound understanding of how beauty mediates in Platonic philosophy, Iamblichus develops his exegesis of the symbolic character of ritual practices. Just as the process of entering into beauty unifies the soul's capacity for experience, through symbols our unifying capacity is

²⁴ *Myst.* 7.1.7: Οὗτοι γὰρ τὴν φύσιν τοῦ παντὸς καὶ τὴν δημιουργίαν τῶν θεῶν μιμούμενοι καὶ αὐτοὶ τῶν μυστικῶν καὶ ἀποκεκρυμμένων καὶ ἀφανῶν νοήσεων εἰκόνας τινὰς διὰ συμβόλων ἐκφαίνουσιν, ὥσπερ καὶ ἡ φύσις τοῖς ἐμφανέσιν εἶδεσι τοὺς ἀφανεῖς λόγους διὰ συμβόλων τρόπον τινὰ ἀπετυπώσατο, ἡ δὲ τῶν θεῶν δημιουργία τὴν ἀλήθειαν τῶν ἰδεῶν διὰ τῶν φανερῶν εἰκόνων ὑπεγράψατο. Εἰδότες οὖν χαίροντα πάντα τὰ κρείττονα ὁμοιώσει τῶν ὑποδεεστέρων καὶ βουλόμενοι αὐτὰ ἀγαθῶν οὕτω πληροῦν διὰ τῆς κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν μιμήσεως, εἰκότως καὶ αὐτοὶ τὸν πρόσφορον αὐτῆς τρόπον τῆς κεκρυμμένης ἐν τοῖς συμβόλοις μυσταγωγίας προφέρουσιν.

impelled towards a greater intensity (τὴν ἡμετέραν σύνθεσιν ἀπὸ τῆς αὐτῆς ἀφορμῆς εἰς ὀξύτητα πλείονα²⁵). Just as beauty leads the soul to experience the divine, so also the symbol acts on the soul, leading it little by little to the divine likeness, opening it to the divine principle of the real. His understanding of the symbolic character of prayer is just one example of this exegesis of ritual practices:

Extended practice of prayer nurtures our intellect, enlarges very greatly our soul's receptivity to the gods, reveals to men the life of the gods, accustoms their eyes to the brightness of divine light, and gradually brings to perfection us up to the highest level of consciousness (of which we are capable); also, it elevates gently the dispositions of our minds, and communicates to us those of the gods, stimulates persuasion and communion and indissoluble friendship, augments divine love, kindles the divine element in the soul, scours away all contrary tendencies within it [...] brings to perfection, good hope and faith concerning the light, and, in a word, it renders those who employ prayers, if we may so express it, the familiar consorts of the gods²⁶.

4. Conclusion

Theurgy can thus be understood as a path to the likeness and union of the soul with the divine, through the mediation of ritual practices. These practices prepare the soul, freeing it from all that might hinder “the unitary connection with the gods”²⁷, transforming its gaze, widening its capacity to experience the divine principle of reality.

This notion of theurgy, which runs through *De Mysteriis*, is structured along the same lines as the understanding of true philosophy as the route to divine likeness: philosophy follows this route guided by the mediation of beauty, the contemplation of universal order and harmony. Theurgy follows this path through the symbolic character of ritual whose exegesis

²⁵ *Myst.* 3.15.20.

²⁶ *Myst.* 5.26.28: Ἡ δ' ἐν αὐταῖς ἐγχρονίζουσα διατριβὴ τρέφει μὲν τὸν ἡμέτερον νοῦν, τὴν δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς ὑποδοχὴν τῶν θεῶν ποιεῖ λίαν εὐρυτέραν, ἀνοίγει δὲ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ τῶν θεῶν, συνήθειαν δὲ παρέχει πρὸς τὰς τοῦ φωτὸς μαρμαρυγὰς, κατὰ βραχὺ δὲ τελειοῖ τὰ ἐν ἡμῖν πρὸς τὰς τῶν θεῶν συναφάς, ἕως ἂν ἐπὶ τὸ ἀκρότατον ἡμᾶς ἐπαναγάγῃ, καὶ τὰ μὲν ἡμέτερα τῆς διανοίας ἦθι ἡρέμα ἀνέλκει, τὰ δὲ τῶν θεῶν ἡμῖν ἐκδίδωσι, πειθῶ δὲ καὶ κοινωνίαν καὶ φιλίαν ἀδιάλυτον ἐγείρει, τὸν τε θεῖον ἔρωτα συναύξει, καὶ τὸ θεῖον τῆς ψυχῆς ἀνάπτει, ἀποκαθαίρει τε πᾶν τὸ ἐναντίον τῆς ψυχῆς, [...] ἐλπίδα τε ἀγαθὴν καὶ τὴν περὶ τὸ φῶς πίστιν τελειοῖ, καὶ τὸ ὅλον εἰπεῖν, ὁμιλητὰς τῶν θεῶν, ἵνα οὕτως εἴπωμεν, τοὺς χρωμένους αὐταῖς ἀπεργάζεται.

²⁷ *Myst.* 1.3.7: ἡ τῶν θεῶν ἐξηρητημένη μονοειδὴς συμπλοκή.

is based on an understanding of the transforming power of beauty, of the orderly potential of the contemplation of the universe. The operational effectiveness of the symbol, its divine nature and gradual character, its capacity for connecting with the soul and raising it up, its *raison d'être* and meaning, all take their inspiration from the nature of beauty itself, from the transforming power granted to it by Platonic philosophy.

Iamblichus thus uses the same basis as true philosophy, which Plato understands to be the way to open up the soul to the divine experience through the mediation of beauty, generating a profoundly serious framework of comprehension, order and selection of pagan rituals.

This sense of the relationship between philosophy and theurgy does not limit Iamblichus to using the philosophical methods of classification to project them onto the divine environment. This is not reduced to the assertion Daniela Taormina: “La réflexion philosophique fournit au théologien des critères cohérents et rationnels de classification du divin, et le théurge se sert des appropriations et des évocations d’après cette classification”²⁸. In any case, this is only the outermost layer of the relationship, its lowest and most superficial level. The true challenge lies in thinking what the relationship is between philosophy and theurgy from the notion of true philosophy outlined by Plato, where the classification modes are only its visible shell, just one aspect of its discursive level.

The relationship between philosophy and theurgy takes on its true dimension when it is understood as the convergence between the route to the freeing of the soul and its receptiveness to the divine, proposed by both. If Plato understands this philosophical itinerary from the language of the mysteries in central sections of his work²⁹, Iamblichus places the meaning and *raison d'être* of the symbols and ritual practices as the basis of the route to freedom of true philosophy. This symbiosis is perhaps the most fruitful in the history of philosophy. Not only does the realm of the symbol and ritual take on a greater firmness and solidity through the exegesis proposed by the philosophical path for approaching the divine. In addition, philosophy gains one of its most precious fields, the symbolic. As Charles-Saget remarks: “Jamblique est le premier philosophe qui ait ouvert à l’ensemble des symboles l’espace de la réflexion philosophique”³⁰.

Our understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theurgy demands a serious acceptance of the notion of true philosophy which Iamblichus takes as his own in the *Protrepticus*. The exegesis of the

²⁸ Taormina 1999: 139.

²⁹ For a detailed analysis of this issue Cf. Des Places 1981.

³⁰ Charles-Saget 1993: 113.

meaning of symbols and ritual practices is carried out from the transforming itinerary revealed in the work of Plato. In the work of Iamblichus we should not look for an analytical subject which attempts to take over the symbol from discursive thought, but instead the vision of the Platonic philosopher who has understood the importance of receptiveness, in tune with the sacred beauty of the world and its transforming potential, as an access route to all truly philosophical knowledge. This is the vision Iamblichus extends to the meaning of symbols and ritual practices. Both in beauty and in the symbol, the analytical subject is left behind, there is nothing to dominate, nothing to classify; reality is offered to those who have “really practiced being in a state of death”, to those who understand, like Socrates, that all they know is nothing compared with the divine. As Charles-Saget observed, Iamblichus as a true Platonic philosopher calls this into question: “la domination de la pensée dianoétique et analytique [...] C’était assurément un moyen d’écarter de l’espace philosophique ce sujet actif et méthodique qui ne peut que croire à une discursivité maîtrisée. Une telle attitude ne fut pas si rare. C’est au contraire un trait de la tradition platonicienne”³¹.

³¹ *Op. cit.* p. 114.

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