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Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy

Algis Uždavinys

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Symbols as ontological traces of the divine

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In Neoplatonism, divine symbols have a transformative and elevating power. Like the noetic rays of the divine Sun they are regarded as demiurgically woven into the very fabric of Being; they are directly attached and unified to the gods, which are themselves the symbolic principles of Being. One should be wary of the Greek term *sumbolon* (“symbol”), which has so many different meanings, sometimes far removed from the realm of metaphysics. What is important is the

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underlying theological and cosmological conception of the divine principles and powers that appear and become visible through certain images, things, numbers, sounds, omens, or other traces of presence.

The iconoclastic Amarna theology, established in Egypt during the reign of Akhenaten (1352-1338 B.C), sought to abolish mythical imagery; yet even in this theology, the sun-disc, Aten, is the One in whom millions live; the Light of Aten creates everything and by seeing this light, the eye is created. As Jan Assmann says:

God creates the eyes in order that they might look on him as he looks on them, and that his look might be returned and that light might assume a communicative meaning, uniting everything existing in a common space of intervision. God and men commune in light.²

The symbolism of light and sound are analogous, so that the light by which God and man commune is the constant with the divine names by which God communicates, which is to say, by which God creates. The divine names constitute the whole “cultic” universe and ensure its cyclic dynamics: procession and return, descent and ascent. The hieratic realities articulated by the ineffable (or esoteric) symbols and tokens (*ta aporrhēta sumbola kai sunthēmata*) of the gods are none other than the “divine words” (*medu neter*, hieroglyphs) that constitute the entire visible world. If the universe is a manifestation of divine principles, as the Egyptian term *kheperu* indicates, then all manifested noetic and material entities are nothing but the multiform images, symbols, and traces of the ineffable One shining through the intellective rays of *deus revelatus*, the demiurgic Intellect. The Neoplatonic theory of the symbolic is only the late conceptualization—within the Hellenic philosophical tradition of onto-semiotics—of those ancient metaphysical doctrines, such as the Ramesside theology of *bau* powers,³ that constitute the theurgic foundation of ancient civilisations and mythically express the dialectic of the One and the Many.

² J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, p.185.

³ Ramesside theology developed during the Ramesside Age, XIX-XX Dynasties, 1295-1069 B.C. (see Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 2002, pp.192-207).

The gods create everything by means of representations (images which reflect their noetic archetypes) and establish the hidden “thoughts” of the Father through the symbolic traces or tokens (*dia sunthēmātōn*) that are intelligible only to the gods themselves and have the uplifting *heka* power, to say it in the Egyptian terms. As Peter Struck pointed out:

Here the material world is fabricated by representations, but it is meaningful (that is, has a semantic dimension) through its being a *sunthēma/sumbolon*. The image (*eikōn*) marks the material world in its status as a fainter reproduction of a higher principle, but the world seen as symbol indicates its status as a manifestation—that is, something that works according to the logic of the trace, with the capacity to point us back up to the higher orders that produced it.⁴

Sumbola and *sunthēmata*, understood in this particular metaphysical sense, are not arbitrary signs, but ontological traces of the divine, inseparable from the entire body of manifestation (*ellampusis*): the cosmos, as the revealed divine *agalma* (statue, shrine), is itself the Symbol *par excellence* of the noetic realm and the Creator. It represents that which is above representation and is an immanent receptacle of the transcendent principles.

Therefore the demiurgic *Logos* is both the sower and distributor of all ontological symbols or, rather, symbols constitute its manifested totality and these symbols, when gathered, awakened, re-kindled, lead up to the noetic and supra-noetic unity. As John Finamore observes, ‘the *sumbola* become passwords or tokens in the soul’s ritual ascent.’⁵ This is not simply some “bookish” learning; that is to say, a case of development or “increase” in our thinking (if thoughts, *ennoiai*, themselves are not regarded as a special sort of *sunthēmata*). Rather what is really at issue is the manner by which the ritual accomplishment (*telesiourgia*) of ineffable acts and the mysterious power of the

⁴ P. T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p.221.

⁵ J. F. Finamore, ‘Plotinus and Iamblichus on Magic and Theurgy’, *Dionysius* Vol.XVII, 1999, p.83.

unspeakable symbols allow us to re-establish the theurgic union with the gods (Iamblichus *De mysteriis* 96.13 ff).

Hence, through the proper actualisation (and recollection) of these divine symbols, the hypercosmic life of the soul is re-actualised. The ascent (*anodos*) through invocations (*klēseis*), symbolic contemplations, and rites (*erga*), results in revelation of the blessed sights (*makaria theamata*) and activity (*energeia*) which is no longer human.

The anagogic power of secret names and tokens

The Greek term *symbolon* (derived from the verb *sumballein*, meaning “to join”) initially denoted a half of a whole object, such as *tessera hospitalis*, which could be joined with the other half in order that two contracting parties—or members of a secret brotherhood—might have proof of their identity. Therefore the symbol appears and becomes significant only when two parties make an intentional rupture of the whole, or when the One manifests itself as plurality, that is, when Osiris or Dionysus is rendered asunder. In this original sense, the symbol ‘reveals its meaning by the fact that one of its halves fits in with or corresponds to the other.’⁶

When viewed in accordance to the “vertical” metaphysical assymetry, one half of imagined *tessera hospitalis* represents the visible thing (the symbol proper) and another half stands for the invisible noetic or supra-noetic reality symbolised by the lower visible part. The initiation and spiritual ascent consists in joining these two separate parts. That means re-uniting the manifested *symbolon* (as a trace) and the hidden principle, which is thereby “symbolised.” In this way Osiris (or Dionysus) is re-assembled, and the symbol itself is dissolved in the symbol-transcending unity (*henōsis*). According to Damascius:

The object of the initiatory rites (*tōn teletōn*) is to take souls back to a final destination (*eis telos anagein*), which was also the starting point from which they first set out on their downward journey, and where Dionysus gave them being, seated on his Father’s throne, that is to say, firmly established in the integral Zeusian life (*In Phaed.* I.168.1-4).

⁶ J. A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976, p.61.

When symbols are reassembled into a completed whole, this means, in Egyptian terms, both that the microcosmic Eye of Horus (or *imago dei*) is restored and the macrocosmic theophany of *pantheos* (the Lord of All, *neb tem*, the All-Worker) is reaffirmed as the transcendent unity. Within this kind of ancient cosmology, the descending and ascending rays of manifestation are considered as a multi-levelled hierarchy of *sumbola* and *sunthēmata* that constitute the universal “language” of Being and its existential body. Robert Lamberton says:

Just as there are various modes of perception that correspond to the successive modes of being, extending from the total, unified perception exercised by a god down to the passivity of our sense-impressions in this world, so there are different levels of language that correspond to these modes of perception—a hierarchy of systems of meaning, of kinds of utterances—that extend from a creative, divine “language” (not, presumably, recognisable as such by us) down to the “language” that exists on the final fragmented level of the senses. ...Each lower language is actually the “interpreter” (*hermēneus*) of the higher one, in that it renders it comprehensible at a lower level, at the expense of its (opaque, inaccessible) coherence.⁷

The secret names of the gods are anagogic symbols: they function both as *epōdai* (recitations, elevating spells) and as the gnostic passwords for entry into the other-worldly realm, they effect the soul’s subsequent transformation, and noetic rebirth. Therefore the “symbolic life” is the life of knowledge which enables one’s recollection, reintegration, and return to the *archetypus mundus*. The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* says:

As for him who knows this spell (or symbolic utterance), he will be a worthy spirit in the realm of the dead, and he will not die again in the realm of the dead, and he will eat in the presence of Osiris. As for him who knows it on earth, he will be like Thoth...” (*BD* 135).⁸

⁷ R. Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p.167 & p.169.

⁸ *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, tr. R. O. Faulkner, ed. C. Andrews, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001, p.123. About the links between Egyptian theology and Neoplatonism see: A. Uždavinys, *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth: From Ancient Egypt to Neoplatonism*, Dorset: Prometheus Trust, 2008.

By knowing the proper words of power (*hekau, sunthēmata*), the Osiris-like initiate or the “deceased” might proceed to the throne of the integral archetypal Osiris and be united (as the *ba* of Osiris) with the *ba* of Ra. The process of transformation, *sakhu*, literally means “making an *akh*” (the shining noetic spirit, divine *nous*). This ritualised transformation is designated as “going forth by (or into) day” (*pert em hru*), that is, ascending to the noetic realm and “going out” from the Duat (the alchemical body of Osiris or Nut) into the intelligible “day” of Ra and appearing as Ra. So in the *Pyramid Texts* the paradigmatic royal initiate ascends on the wing of Thoth, flying up as a falcon and alighting on the divine throne like a scarab, saying:

My seat is with you, O Ra... I will ascend to the sky to you, O Ra,
for my face is that of falcons, my wings are those of ducks... O
men, I fly away from you (*PT 302*).⁹

Thereby one’s *ba* (as a symbol) is made *akh*-effective in the Isle of Fire (the solar realm of Platonic Forms). The theurgic texts to be ritually recited as a means of ascent themselves are regarded as *akh* that are “pleasing to the heart of Ra.” The Egyptian initiatory rite is based on the mutual *akh*-effectiveness of father and son, as the two halves of the Greek *sumbolon*: ‘*akh* is a son for his father, *akh* is a father for his son,’ both counted before Thoth, the lord of hieroglyphs (*medu neter*) and wisdom.

The ultimate goal (*telos*) of this “symbolic wisdom” is to make the Eye of Horus sound and whole, that is, to restore one’s primordial “golden” nature, like the pure mirror (*ankh*) which reflects the intelligible light of Ra and is “sacrificially” reintegrated into the realm of *akh*. This means one’s spiritual and alchemical transmutation in the “tomb” built (in the ideal archetypal sense) by the gods themselves, including Seshat, the goddess of writing.

Everything has two designations, one in the realm of terrestrial *sumbola*, another in the realm of the gods whose names are viewed as anagoric passwords known only to the initiate. At the same time, every element in the domain of the temple liturgy, be it a priest, a thing, or a

⁹ *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, tr. R. O. Faulkner, Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1969, p.92.

place, becomes the “name” (*ren*) of a deity whom it reveals or interprets. Likewise, every offering (designated as the Eye of Horus) represents a substance that restored truth (*maat*) and unity (*sema*) or reassembled something that had fallen apart. As Assmann says, it is the symbol of a reversibility that might heal everything, even death:

There is a close connection between cultic commentaries, with their principle of sacramental explanation, and initiatory examinations, with their principle of secret passwords that relate to the divine realm... In the initiatory examinations, there is a secret language, and the initiate demonstrates his mastery of it. He who knows the secret language belongs to the secret world to which it refers, and he may enter it. In the cultic commentaries, there is a sacramental explanation of the ritual by means of which the cultic acts are transposed into the context of the divine realm.¹⁰

In the context of the Hellenic Mysteries and Orphic-Pythagorean tradition, the symbol may be a deity’s secret name, an omen or a cultic formula (that may include the divine cultic epithets, themselves regarded as *sunthēmata*). These symbols allow the initiate to pass into the realm of the gods like the Egyptian pharaoh who takes the night-journey ‘as the representative of all human beings’¹¹ and sails through the Netherworld with the *Ba* of Ra in the solar barque. The acquired Apollonian¹² wisdom enables one to perceive the hidden divine “thoughts,” the immaterial archetypes, or Ideas.

The Pythagorean *sumbola* are also *ainigmata* (riddles, obscure hieratic sayings). The prophetic utterances and sneezes, related to Demeter of Eleusis, are called “symbols” as well. Since understanding of the symbols as a sort of secret code of both demiurgy and theurgy stems from the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition, inherited and conceptualized by the Neoplatonists, Struck rightly emphasizes that ‘the power of the

¹⁰ J. Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, tr. D. Lorton, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005, p.353.

¹¹ T. Abt and E. Hornung, *Knowledge for the Afterlife: The Egyptian Amdua—A Quest for Immortality*, Zurich: Living Human Heritage Publications, 2003, p.24.

¹² “Apollonian” because the pharaoh is a hypostasis of Horus, who was equated with Apollo by the Greeks. According to the late antique Neoplatonic tradition, Apollo is the solar principle of integrity and oneness represented by the ideal king, who is, at the same time, the paradigmatic “prophet.”

symbol is born out of the power of the secret.’¹³ He says: ‘In both the mysteries and esoteric philosophy, symbols are passwords of authentication that just happen to be enigmatic, interpretable speech.’¹⁴

Animated theurgic hieroglyphs of the hidden Amun

The Greeks themselves, contrary to the modern scholarly tastes and prejudices, related the Pythagorean symbolism with the Egyptian theory of “divine speech.” The symbol as hieroglyph (the visible shape of the invisible Platonic Form), as gnostic password and word of power (*heka*), is inseparable from the Egyptian ways of thought. Therefore the ancient Hellenic writers correctly maintained that symbols (or secret names of the gods that work “symbolically,” *sumbolikōs*, and ensure union, *henōsis*) are especially an Egyptian mode of imitating the demiurgic activity of the gods. According to the Plutarch’s trustworthy remark:

Pythagoras, as it seems, was greatly admired, and he also greatly admired the Egyptian priests, and, copying their symbolism (*to sumbolikon autōn*) and esoteric teachings (*musteriodes*), incorporated his doctrines in riddles (*ainigmasi*). As a matter of fact most of the Pythagorean precepts do not at all fall short of the writings that are called hieroglyphs (*De Iside et Osiride* 354 ef).

Following a positivistic Egyptology *a la* Sir Alan Gardiner¹⁵ the majority of contemporary classicists have, I feel, misunderstood Porphyry’s claim regarding the symbolic (*sumbolikē*) aspect of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Porphyry the Phoenician says:

In Egypt he (Pythagoras) lived among the priests and learned the wisdom and language of the Egyptians, and three kinds of writing, epistolographic, hieroglyphic, and symbolic, of which some is ordinary speech according to *mimēsis*, and some allegorizes according to certain riddles (*kata tinas ainigmous: Vita Pyth.*11-12).

¹³ Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, p.102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.88.

¹⁵ Despite being an eminent Egyptologist, Gardiner regarded Egyptian religion as a ‘wilt-o’-the-wisp by reason of its mystery and in spite of its absurdity’ (A. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966, p.427).

Assmann ensures us that Porphyry was right in describing a variant of the Egyptian script as symbolic, because, in fact, there are four distinct forms of writing in Egypt: demotic, hieratic, hieroglyphic, and cryptographic (or symbolic). The latter one was considered as a secret code accessible only to the initiate and based on the priestly notion that this symbolic script (whose signs are laden with the symbolic knowledge) is an imitation of divine demiurgy: here the hieroglyphs are regarded as tokens of creation conceived by Ptah, the Memphite Demiurge, and recorded by Thoth. Consequently, they are imbued with the theurgic function as well. In addition, both script and sacred images in their unity are designated as “gods” (*neteru*). The symbols are gods made visible in stone, the manifest substance of immortality. As Assmann observes:

Iamblichus perfectly expresses the principle of “direct signification” that underlies the cryptography of the late temple inscriptions. ... This specifically Egyptian view is the foundation of the Greek’s mythical vision of hieroglyphs. The mistake of the Greeks was not that they interpreted hieroglyphic script as a secret code rather than a normal writing system. The Egyptians had in fact transformed it into a secret code and so described it to the Greeks. The real misunderstanding of the Greeks was to have failed to identify the aesthetic significance of cryptography as calligraphy. The question then arises whether their misunderstanding might not also have been encouraged by the Egyptian priests. It surely cannot be pure chance that the systematic complication of hieroglyphic script coincided with the Greek invasion and Ptolemaic foreign rule.¹⁶

The members (*hau*) of the animated body may be regarded as symbols that are to be spiritually reassembled into the image (*tut*) of Osiris, itself constituted by the *sunthemata*, which modern scholars conventionally designate by the word “amulet,” not forgetting to add (almost mechanically) the label “magical.” These alleged “amulets” might be viewed as the fundamental theurgic tokens or metaphysical symbols that appear in the form of certain basic hieroglyphs, such as *ib* (heart), *pet* (sky), *kheper* (scarab beetle), *sema* (union), *ta-uer* (the

¹⁶ Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, tr. A. Jenkins, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002, p.419.

symbol of Abydos and its lord Osiris), *bik* (falcon of Horus), *tiet* (Isis knot), *seshen* (lotus), *ankh* (life, mirror), the *djed* column of Osiris, *shen* ring (symbol of eternity, also mirrored in the shape of *ouroboros*), *djeneh* (wing), *shut* (feather), *mehyt* (the papyrus scepter), *uedjat* (the restored Eye of Horus), *sekhem* scepter, *uas* scepter, *menit* necklace and so on.

By putting these hieroglyphs on the eidetic *sah*-body (now habitually called “mummy”), a sort of alchemical Osirian statue is constructed and the symbolic composition of *heka* powers is arranged. The divinized royal initiate is theurgically united with the gods (symbolically identified as hieroglyphs and members of his metaphysical body) and turned into the reestablished *tut neter*, the overwhelming image of the ineffable God, revealed as a Statue of the reassembled pantheon. The initiate pronounces:

I am Ra, continually praised; I am the knot of the god within the tamarisk. ... My hair is Nun; my face is Ra; my eyes are Hathor; my ears are Upuat; my nose is She who presides over her lotus-leaf; my lips are Anubis; my molars are Selket; my incisors are Isis the goddess; my arms are the Ram (*Ba*), the Lord of Mendes; my breast is Neith, Lady of Sais; my phallus is Osiris; my muscles are the Lords of Kheraha; my chest is He who is greatly majestic; my belly and my spine are Sekhmet; my buttocks are the Eye of Horus; my thighs and my calves are Nut; my feet are Ptah, my toes are living falcons; there is no member of mine devoid of a god, and Thoth is the protection of all my flesh. ... I am the Lord of Eternity; may I be recognized as Kheprer, for I am the Lord of the Uereret-crown. I am he in whom is the Sacred Eye, and who is in the Egg, and it is granted to me to live by them. I am he in whom is the Sacred Eye, namely the Closed Eye, I am under its protection. I have gone out, I have risen up, I have gone in, I am alive. I am he in whom is the Sacred Eye, my seat is on my throne, I dwell in my abode with it, for I am Horus who treads down millions, my throne is ordered for me, and I will rule from it” (*BD* 42).¹⁷

There is no member of the divinized initiate (when he is transformed into *pantheos*) devoid of god. This idea is evident in Iamblichus as can be seen when he addresses the problem of how the

¹⁷ *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, tr. Faulkner, p.62.

gods may receive the allotment of multiple places at once, for example, how Athena (Neith) is allotted both Athens and Sais in Egypt. As Iamblichus says: ‘How would any part of the All be completely devoid of God? And how would any place survive entirely unprotected by the superior ones?’ (Proclus *In Tim.* I.145.5).¹⁸ Consequently, everything is theophany, and all manifested reality is “full of gods” (*panta plerē theōn*). The *Logos* which is in the Soul of All (*ho logos ho en tē psuchē pantos*: Proclus *In Tim.* II.309.11) knows everything and rules everything. The liberated *ba* of the theurgist is the *Ba* of the All.

Words and tokens give life to the realities by drawing into the manifest existence the powers that are named or revealed in images. The human figure (as a living statue) itself is *the* hieroglyph: its different positions (like Tantric *asanas* and *mudras*) represent the dynamic ritual of “writing,” which is tantamount to the manifestation of life (*ankh*). The written word might be imbued with the life of the thing represented like the animated hieratic statue or the human body, itself being viewed as a sort of “written word.” Hieroglyphs were virtually regarded as living things: demiurgic and theurgic tokens, able to embody the powers (*sekhemu*) and “textual” epiphanies of the gods. Hieroglyphs are receptacles of the divine powers, and like the statues whose shapes imitate the forms of hieroglyphs, these powers have ‘a magical life of their own.’¹⁹ Hieroglyphs function theurgically: not only within the written text, but within the text-like universe as a whole.

Though symbols by definition stand for something more than they depict or something other than they are as the manifested *kheperu*, the Egyptian hieroglyphic script scarcely suggests a division between “inner” and “outer.” At the same time, the Egyptian symbol clearly presupposes the hidden (*sheta*) dimension, or the hidden meaning (*huponoia*, as it is in the Hellenic hermeneutical tradition). Therefore, as Richard Wilkinson remarks, it is most apt to describe symbolism as ‘a primary form of ancient Egyptian thought’ and, moreover, to say that Egyptian thought was symbolically oriented to ‘a degree rarely equalled by other cultures.’²⁰

¹⁸ *Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta*, ed. & tr. J. M. Dillon, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973, p.119.

¹⁹ R. H. Wilkinson, *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1999, p.150.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.7.

The Egyptian universe of symbols simultaneously exhibits different meanings and shows different hermeneutical perspectives, even consciously encouraging the ambiguity and theological polysemy in their own symbolism. When we translate this metaphysical language of *medu neter* (the language that constitutes millions of *kheperu*: images, signs, symbols, breaths of life, heliophanies) into the Neoplatonic philosophical discourse, we can say along with Plotinus that ‘all things are filled full of signs’ (*sēmeiōn. Enn. II.3.7.12*), or rather that all things are signs and images of the vast ontological Text. The multiplicity of gods (*neteru*) is the multiplicity of symbols, images, and names of the hidden God (Amun), the One who is one in the many as *Ba* which assumes form in the many gods and, simultaneously, remains concealed from them. As Oiva Kuisma remarks:

Since all things are ultimately dependent on the One, each and every thing can be thought of as hinting at it either directly or via mediating stages. Every particular thing in the hierarchy of being is in this sense a sign, which points towards its causes, either because of similarity or because of analogy.²¹

Like the Neoplatonic term *to hen*, the Egyptian name Amun (meaning “hidden,” “invisible,” transcendent”) is merely an epithet which, nevertheless, might be regarded as the supreme *sunthēma* of the ineffable Principle, simply because every divine name is a name of this hidden God. He is called *Ba*, the paradigm of all life-bearing *bau* that constitute millions of forms (*kheperu*), millions of symbols, but really there is no name for him: ‘His hidden all-embracing abundance of essence cannot be apprehended.’²²

In the language of late Neoplatonism, the ineffable One, regarded as pure unity, is above *dunamis*, power, be it creative or revealing, because it is above division and above the first noetic duality (like Atum’s Heka, *hen on*, is above Shu and Tefnut in the Egyptian theology). But the One is also the source of manifestation (*ellamopsis*) and the source of duality of *dunamis*, which results in Being, regarded as “mixture” (*mikton*) that is posterior to the principles of Limit and Unlimited. This triad is

²¹ O. Kuisma, *Proclus’ Defense of Homer*, Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1996, p.54.

²² Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, p.197.

approximately analogous to the Memphite theological triad of Ptah-Sekhmet-Nefertum. Being as procession and return is the totality of *kheperu*, which affirm both the divine transcendence and immanence. As J. M. P. Lowry relates:

On the side of division *qua* division being would turn out to be simply nothing or matter: the pure *dunamis* as possibility. On the side of unity *qua* unity being would turn out to be everything simply or the One: the pure *dunamis* as *energeia*. Accordingly, Being can be neither the one nor the other but is the procession and return of the One.²³

Neoplatonic rites of metaphysical reversion

The Neoplatonists maintained that the lowest things are in the highest and the highest things in the lowest (*en te tois prōtois ta eschata kai en tois eschatois ta prōtista*: Proclus *Hier. Art.* 148). In the depths of its own nature, each manifested thing keeps the mysterious and hidden “symbol of the universal Father” (*to sumbolon tou pantōn patros*), the secret hieroglyph of Atum, like the unspeakable (*aporrhētos*) token of one’s essential apophatic identity with the One. Realisation of this identity was the aim of the Neoplatonic rites.

For Proclus, the terms theurgy (*theourgia*), hieratic art (*hieratikē technē*), and theosophy (*theosophia*, literally: “divine wisdom,” “wisdom of the gods”) are synonymous. They designate the spiritual path and method of ascent, revealed and established by the gods themselves. By means of this *theourgike technē*, the soul is purified, transformed, and conducted to the divine realm, as if carried “on the wing of Thoth.” The vindicated soul is separated from the mortal receptacle and re-united with the noetic principles. Symbolically (“in the most mystic of all initiations”: *en tē mustikōtatē ton teleton*: Proclus *Plat. Theol.* IV.9, p.193, 38) this separation from the gross body is represented by burying the initiate’s body with the exception of the head. As Hans Lewy observes,

The head is not buried, because the soul which abides in it does not undergo “death.” This sacramental act has an additional peculiar

²³ J. M. P. Lowry, *The Logical Principles of Proclus’ ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΩΣΙΣ ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΚΗ* as *Systematic Ground of the Cosmos*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980, pp.66-67.

feature: it is the initiate who at the binding of the theurgists buries his own body.²⁴

This separation, purification, and elevation to the realm of eternal, noetic “day” (as well as subsequent return to the ineffable One) is regarded as the existential and metaphysical rite of “homecoming.”

The initiatory priests and the practitioners of the telestic science (*hē telestikē epistēmē*)—those who deal with the divine *sunthēmata*—are called *telestai*. They purify both the body, as material receptacle of the divine rays, and the soul, as the immortal divine seed or the winged bird detached from the inanimate body and the related psychosomatic self-consciousness. As the *Pyramid Texts* say: ‘*ba* to heaven, *shat* (body in the sense of corpse, *khat*) to earth’ (PT 474). The priests similarly consecrate (*telein*) cult statues of the gods. Thereby the statues are animated, illuminated, and imbued with the divine powers (*sekhemu*). In both cases, the *telestai* call forth the gods or rather their *bau* (to say it in the Egyptian parlance) that “fill” the purified and properly prepared receptacles, either statues, or the divinized bodies, themselves turned into hieroglyphs.

Eventually, by his own eidetic and henadic nature, the *telestes* worships the Lord of All (*neb tem*), being unified with Him by the soul’s mystic *sunthēma* (or hieroglyph), inserted by the Father Himself *in illo tempore*. This unification is possible, because the Father himself has sown the secret symbols (*sumbolōis arrhētois tōn theōn*) in the soul, according to Proclus (*In Tim.* I.211.1). And these symbols are explicitly designated as *ta arrhēta onomata tōn theōn*, the unspeakable divine names (*In Alcib.* 441.27). In this respect, Proclus follows the Chaldean theurgists, namely, the famous fragment of the *Chaldean Oracles* (fr.108 = Proclus *In Crat.* 21.1-2).

In a sense, the paternal symbols, or the unspeakable divine names, are identical with the thoughts of the Paternal Intellect. These demiurgic thoughts are the noetic Forms, manifested as the Chaldean *Iynges*, as *voces mysticae*, or the hieroglyphic “building-blocks” that constitute the very textual fabric of our existence. Because of its noetic

²⁴ H. Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire*, Nouvelle édition par Michael Tardieu, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1978, p.205.

origins, the soul has an inborn (albeit temporary forgotten) knowledge of these world-creating, world-ruling, and, simultaneously, elevating names.

As Proclus argues, everything is unified by means of its own mystic *sunthēma*. By becoming one with this re-activated divine *sunthēma*, the telestic priest is theurgically united with the unknowable Source of all good.²⁵ When the essential hidden *sunthēma* is remembered, re-awakened, and re-sounded, the soul, mythically speaking, returns through the fiery ray to its noetic and supra-noetic Principle. But, esoterically, we might say that God returns to God, even if, ultimately, this “return” is only a sort of divine dream, or illusion, when viewed from the point of the all-embracing, ineffable God himself.

Lewy argues that a *sunthēma* which is uttered in the prayers, supplications, and invocations (*entuchiai kai klēseis*) disposes the Paternal Intellect in favour of the soul’s wish to be elevated; this *sunthēma* is identical with one of the symbols which the demiurgic Nous has sown throughout the universe and which are laden with the ineffable beauty of the Ideas.²⁶ These *sunthēmata*, like the divine sparks of the soul, or the internal fiery seeds, enable the rite of *anagōgē* (ascent) and *apathanatismos* (immortalization). Thereby the soul is lifted upwards by means of the solar (noetic) rays of Apollo or the Egyptian Amun-Ra. This ascent is regarded by Lewy as ‘the chief mystery of the Chaldean sacramental community.’²⁷

According to Proclus, every soul is composed of *noeroi logoi* (intellective reason principles) and *theia symbola* (divine symbols). The former are related with the intelligible Forms, reflected or manifested at the level of the soul, and, consequently, with *Nous*; the latter, with the divine henads (the fundamental supra-noetic unities) and the One itself. For Proclus, the One (*to hen*) is God, and the multiplicity of gods is the multiplicity of self-complete henads (*henades eisin outoteleis hoi theoi*: ET 114). He argues that there are two orders of henads, one consisting of self-complete principles, the other of irradiations (*ellampseis*) from them. These irradiations are like the Egyptian *bau* that constitute the

²⁵ L. J. Rosan, *The Philosophy of Proclus: The Final Phase of Ancient Thought*, New York: Cosmos, 1949, pp.213-214.

²⁶ Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, p.191.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.177.

descending divine series whose members (*bau*) appear at different levels of reality. They may be designated as symbols that function as a means of transformative ascent and re-union of the soul (itself regarded as the *ba* in the multiple sequence of divine *bau*). In this sense, the word *ba* means any noetic and psychic “manifestation” (as an image or a symbol of some higher principle), imbued with being, life, and intelligence, albeit in different degrees and proportions. In the descending chain (analogous to the Neoplatonic *seira*) of theogony, cosmogony, and demiurgic irradiation, for instance, Ra (the solar *Nous*) is the manifested *ba* of the ineffable Principle, Sekhmet is the *ba* of Ra, Bastet is the *ba* of Sekhmet, and every living cat (or rather its hidden *sunthema*, which may indwell the statuette or mummy of the sacred cat) is the *ba* of Bastet.

There are “millions” of such descending and ascending chains, the rays or “sounding breaths” of the intelligible Sun. The “horizontal” levels of these “vertical” rays constitute both the theophanic being itself (its eidetic orders, *taxeis*) and the hierarchy of divine *sunthemata*. However, a range of possible theological perspectives and possible meanings for any given symbol is very wide. So one may equally say that God’s *ba* is Ra “in the sky” (in the noetic realm), his body is Osiris “in the West” (in the psychic Netherworld, *Anima Mundi*), and his cult image is in southern Heliopolis (Thebes, the City of Amun, here standing for the entire terrestrial world).

The rite of metaphysical reversion (*epistrophē*) consists in the soul’s ability to identify itself with its hidden *sunthēma*, and through it with the higher cause.²⁸ However, the telestic priest uses in his rites many different visible, audible, and tangible symbols, including various metals, minerals, stones, plants, and animals, since all of them belong to one or another particular chain of manifestation and, therefore, may lead back to the initial monad.

Accordingly, the theurgic *sumbola* and *sunthēmata* do not merely stand for invisible and divine things, but are inherently connected with them: in a sense, they *are* “gods,” like the being-constructing hieroglyphs are “gods,” and for this reason the manifested reality is sacred both in principle and *de facto*. The *sumbola* of the noetic realm

²⁸ E. R. Dodds in Proclus *The Elements of Theology*, tr. E. R. Dodds, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p.223.

are immanently woven into the very fabric of the material world and constitute its unifying divine foundation.

Proclus compares the animated statues that contain both visible and invisible *sunthēmata* (also regarded as *pharmaka*—drugs, charms, secret means) of the gods to the entire sensible universe, which is constructed by the Demiurge like a statue and contains all kinds of visible and invisible *sumbola* of the noetic and supra-noetic realm. For Proclus, not only words are *sumbola*, but even myths are *sumbola*, which serve as a means of esoteric mystagogy (*arrhētos mustagōgia*). All these symbols are the constituent parts of the manifested cosmos, itself regarded as a divine statue (*agalma*), the well-ordered *sphaira* of light, having many different eidetic faces, levels of being, and chains of irradiation. As Anne Sheppard pointed out:

Thinking of it diagrammatically, we may say that the world was conceived as organised into both horizontal and vertical lines. The heliotrope, on the low level of plant life, is a *sumbolon* of the sun which is in the same *seira*, the same “vertical line,” but on a higher level of being, a higher “horizontal” line. The sun in turn is a *sumbolon* of higher realities in the same *seira* such as the god Apollo, and ultimately, as in Plato *Rep.* VI, of the transcendent Good which is the Neoplatonic One. The belief that such “vertical line” relationships hold between the natural world and the intelligible world, is equally essential both to theurgy and to Proclus’ metaphysics.²⁹

The symbol of the transcendent One, hidden in the soul, is regarded as the essential henadic aspect of the soul (called the “one of the soul”) by which the mystical union with the One is realized. In this sense, the soul-complex must be deconstructed and reduced to this essential *sunthēma*, the hidden and ineffable “flower” (*anthos*), which is tantamount to the self-subsisting unity beyond being and substance.

Hence, to be unified and to be divinized are the same, insofar as all gods, according to Iamblichus, Syrianus, and Proclus, are “self-subsistent hypostases” or *huparxeis* (pure supra-noetic entities) beyond being and

²⁹ A. D. R. Sheppard, *Studies on the 5th and 6th Essays of Proclus’ Commentary on the Republic*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1980, p.152.

substance.³⁰ At the lower levels of reality, the *sunthēmata* function as receptacles for the gods (for their *bau*), because ‘the gods illuminate matter and are present immaterially in material things.’³¹

Even spices, aromatics, sounds, and numbers may serve as the proper receptacles for the anagogic divine powers. The Demiurge and his assistant *neteru* themselves determine and conduct the theurgic rites that put the soul into correspondence and *sustasis* (conjunction) with the gods. Lewy argues that the term *sustasis* is often applied to the prayer (*logos*) which effects conjunction. He says:

Proclus reports that the Chaldeans communicated in their Oracles the “divine names” of the night, of the day, of the month and of the year which effected the “conjunction.” Thus we learn that “conjunction” was brought about by a recital of the “divine names” (that is, the *voces mysticae*) of the gods who were called upon to participate in it.³²

The ineffable statues of transcendent light

Though the Greek terms *eikōn* (image) and *sumbolon* may be used interchangeably in Neoplatonism, their more technically articulated distinction is based on the assumption that *eikōn* is to be regarded as a mirror-image (a direct reflection or representation of its archetype), whereas a *sumbolon* has no such direct resemblance, even if it mystically “fits together” with the corresponding divine reality or serves as its proper vehicle. According to Proclus, ‘symbols are not imitations of that which they symbolise’ (*In Remp.* I.198.15-16). However, neither images are plain imitations, because any image (related to its archetype as an effect is related to its cause) ‘by its very nature embodies simultaneously the characteristics of similarity and dissimilarity.’³³

³⁰ C. G. Steel, ‘Iamblichus and the Theological Interpretation of the Parmenides’, *Syllecta Classica* Vol.8: Iamblichus: The Philosopher, The University of Iowa, 1997, p.18.

³¹ G. Shaw, ‘Theurgy as Demiurgy: Iamblichus’ Solution to the Problem of Embodiment’, *Dionysius* Vol.XII, Dalhousie University Press, 1988, p.53 (cf. Iamblichus *De mysteriis* 232.14-16).

³² Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, p.229.

³³ S. E. Gersh, *ΚΙΝΗΣΙΑΚΙΝΗΤΟΣ A Study of Spiritual Motion in the Philosophy of Proclus*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973, p.85.

Proclus (or perhaps Iamblichus, paraphrased in Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*) argues that the Pythagoreans, before their *epistēmōnikē didaskalia* (strictly scientific instruction) usually reveal the subjects under consideration through similitudes and images (*dia tōn homoiōn kai tōn eikonon*). Then they introduced the same subjects through the esoteric symbols (*dia tōn symbolōn aporrhēton*). Thereby the soul's ability to comprehend the noetic realm is reactivated (*In Tim.* I.30.2 ff). In addition, certain causal principles of creation are represented "in images through symbols" (*en eikosi dia tinōn symbolōn*).

John Dillon confesses as being unable to draw any clear distinction between *eikōn* and *symbolon* in Proclus' metaphysics or "system of allegory." He says:

If one takes the most obvious Platonic example, the comparison of the Sun as *eikōn* with the Good as *paradeigma*, we have arrived at the point of difficulty. Why is the Sun an *eikōn* (*Rep.* 509a9), and not a *symbolon*?³⁴

In fact, the Sun indeed is the supreme visible *sunthēma* of both the One and the Demiurge. In such matters of metaphysical designation, we should be wary of one-sided rigidity in our classifications. As Proclus says, certain things may be understood 'in some such symbolic sense... without reading too much into them' (*In Tim.* I.200.2-3).

Since the language of metaphysics is at its best allusive (in both its symbolic and iconic mode), we can speak of the divine things only provisionally (*kata endeixin*). Neither the ineffable One, nor the henads (or *ta aporrhēta symbola*) can be the subject of a discursive philosophical argument. The theurgic symbolism of "divine names" is initially bound with a radical reversion (*peritropē*) of human language. As Sara Rappe asserts:

Thus Proclus and Simplicius both allow that any teaching about realities such as intellect and soul must take place by means of *endeixis*, by means of coded language. ... In Neoplatonic texts, the word *endeixis* is linked to Pythagorean symbolism and conveys the

³⁴ J. Dillon, 'Image, Symbol and Analogy: Three Basic Concepts of Neoplatonic Allegorical Exegesis' in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, ed. R. Baine Harris, Norfolk: ISNS, Old Dominion University, 1976, p.250.

sense of allusive or enigmatic language... As used by Damascius, the word *endeixis* suggests that the language of metaphysics must be acknowledged to be at most a prompting toward inquiry into something that exceeds its own domain as descriptive. The result of this inquiry tells us more about our own states of ignorance than about the goal of our search.³⁵

However, as a symbol of the unspeakable noetic fire, the *sunthēma* of the Sun is ‘the central mystery of Neoplatonic theurgy.’³⁶ In a threefold classification of reality, established by Proclus, the notion of an image is employed in connection with relationship within the noetic realm, though ‘the spiritual world contains images in a strictly relative sense, whereas images proper are confined to the sensible and mathematical realm.’³⁷ In short, the lower reality is present in the higher “archetypally as a cause” (*kat’ aitian archoeidōs*), and is manifested at its own level “accordingly to its *huparxis*” (existential essence). But the higher reality is present in the lower “by participation in a manner of an image” (*kata methexin eikonikōs*: ET 62).

The realities of any higher level of being constitute the meta-language (regarded as an esoteric *theōria*) by means of which the realities of the immediately lower level are to be interpreted or contemplated. Likewise, in the hierarchy of poetic art, the highest poetry proceeds either by pure *sumbola*, which are antithetical and dissimilar to their metaphysical referents, or it proceeds ‘by employing *eikones* to refer to transcendent *paradeigmata*’.³⁸

When viewed in accordance to the schematic duality between “here” (*entautha*) and “there” (*eikei*), the contents of the lower reality are to be viewed “according to the esoteric or unspeakable doctrine (or contemplative vision)” *kata tēn aporrhēton theōrian*. This point of view implies understanding in the context of first-working causes (*en tois prōtourgōis aitia*) contrasted with the category of understanding *kata to phainomenon*, “according to the apparent sense.”

³⁵ S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp.210-211.

³⁶ G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, p.227.

³⁷ Gersh, *A Study of Spiritual Motion in the Philosophy of Proclus*, p.85.

³⁸ Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian*, p.215.

Consequently, the apparent sense of cosmic text and written philosophical, mythological, and liturgical text is to be regarded as a symbolic “screen” (*parapetasma*), which simultaneously reveals and conceals the underlying hidden meaning (*huponoia*). This is because the image of ultimate reality, constructed using tools of language (whose polysemous structure is analogous to the polysemous world it mirrors), inevitably distorts and fragments that reality. These limitations are partly resolved and transcended by rising up to the higher level of unity, that is, by restoring the fragmented Eye of Horus, the unified *imago dei*. As Lamberton says:

The highest and most perfect “life” of the soul is on the level of the gods: the soul utterly abandons its own identity, transcends its individual *nous* and attaches ‘its light to the transcendent light and the most unified element of its own being and life to the One beyond all being and all life’ (Proclus *In Remp.* I.177.20-23). Poetry that corresponds to this condition is characterized by the absolute fusion of subject and object. It is divine madness (*mania*), which is a greater thing even than reasonableness (*sophrosunē*) and fills the soul with symmetry.³⁹

In Neoplatonism, the gods themselves are beyond all representation. However, the divine names are both images and symbols of the invisible gods. H. D. Saffrey assumes that the equation of the divine names with the statues (*agalmata*) which became an important feature of the late Neoplatonic metaphysics, is due to the specific historical circumstances. The Platonists of Athens (the school of Syrianus and Proclus) presumably developed this theory of divine names as spiritual substitutes for the cult statues of the gods that began at that time to disappear from their temples.⁴⁰ Since the Neoplatonic philosophers started to celebrate divinity through the systematic metaphysical interpretation of Plato’s *Parmenides* and the creation of scientific

³⁹ Ibid., p.189.

⁴⁰ H. D. Saffrey, *Nouveaux liens objectifs entre le Pseudo-Denys et Proclus.- Recherches sur le Neoplatonisme apres Plotin*, Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1990, p.241.

theology, the worship allegedly was reduced to the *religio mentis*, an entirely intellectual process.⁴¹

However, it seems that Saffrey is subtly incorrect in this respect, because even in pharaonic Egypt hieroglyphs functioned as the “divine names” in the form of *agalmata*, be it visualized mental figures, written pictures or the divine statues made of stone and precious metals. The divine names are objects of adoration like the statues of the gods, because the demiurgic Intellect produces each name as a statue of the gods, according to Proclus:

And just as theurgy by certain symbols (*dia dē tinōn symbolōn*) invokes the generous goodness of the gods with a view to the illumination of statues artificially constructed (*tēn tōn technētōn agalmatōn ellampsin*), so also intellective knowledge related to divine beings, by composition and divisions of articulated sounds, reveals the hidden being (*tēn apokekrummenēn ousian*) of the gods” (*Plat. Theol.* I.29.124.12-125.2 Saffrey-Westerink).

In his *Commentary to Plato’s Cratylus*, Proclus speaks about the *eikastikē dunamis*, the certain power by which the soul has the capacity to make images and assimilate itself to the gods, angels, and daimons. For this reason the soul makes statues (*agalmata ... dēmiourgei*) of the gods and superior beings. Likewise, it produces out of itself (with the help of *lektikē phantasia*, linguistic imagination) the substance (*ousia*) of the names. Proclus says:

And just as the telestic art by means of certain symbols and ineffable tokens (*dia dē tinōn symbolōn kai aporrhēton sunthēmatōn*) makes the statues (*agalmata*) here below like the gods and ready to receive the divine illuminations (*ellampseōn*), in the same way the art of the regular formation of words, by that same power of assimilation, brings into existence names like statues of the [metaphysical] realities (*agalmata tōn pragmaton*: *In Crat.* 19.12-16).

⁴¹ H. D. Saffrey, ‘From Iamblichus to Proclus and Damascius’ in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality. Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, ed. A. H. Armstrong, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, p.253.

Accordingly, the names are images and symbols of the gods as well as intellective statues (*agalmata*) of the divine realities: primarily they are the names of the noetic Forms and secondarily the names of sensible forms. As the “vocal statues” (*agalmata phōnēenta*), these names are identical with the theurgic *sumbola* and *sunthēmata*. As Gregory Shaw points out:

Neither Iamblichus nor any of his Platonic successors provide concrete examples of how names, sounds, or musical incantations were used in theurgic rites. There is a great wealth of evidence from nontheurgical circles, however, to suggest that theurgists used the *asēma onomata* according to Pythagorean cosmological theories and a spiritualization of the rules of grammar.⁴²

By these incantations and contemplations that constitute the complex set of the hieratic “work” (*ergōn*), the theurgist tried to join the gods through his inner ascension and assimilation to the Demiurge, thereby (by means of the ineffable symbols) entering the solar barque of Ra.

⁴² Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, p.183.