

Iamblichus and the Foundations of Late Platonism

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THE ROLE OF *AESTHESIS* IN THEURGY

Gregory Shaw

[T]he henad communicates even to the body an echo of its own quality: in this way the body becomes not only animate and intellectual, but also divine.

Proclus, *Elements of Theology*¹

Philosophy is united with the art of sacred things since this art is concerned with the purification of the luminous body, and if you separate philosophical thinking from this art, you will find that it no longer has the same power.

Hierocles, *In Carmen aureum*²

Iamblichus' *On the Mysteries* is a sharply polemical treatise written by a platonic philosopher and theurgist exasperated at the profound misunderstanding of his former teacher, Porphyry, concerning their common tradition.³ The divine way of life that had been the inheritance of Platonists and Pythagoreans was being lost, according to Iamblichus, due to mistakes in metaphysical thinking and—more significantly—the exaggerated importance given to abstract thought over the direct experience of the gods.⁴ Porphyry's errors were emblematic of a growing trend among Greek philosophers who had lost touch with the priority and the depth of divine symbols and rituals. While rational reflection was certainly valued among

¹ Proclus ed. Dodds (1963; 1992) 114.28–29; Proposition 129: οὕτω γίνεται τὸ σῶμα οὐ μόνον ἔμψυχον καὶ νοερόν, ἀλλὰ καὶ θεῖον.

² Hierocles; I. Hadot, tr. M. Chase (2004) 48: 26.24–28.

³ Many instances can be found in Iamblichus' *On the Mysteries* (E. Clarke, J. Dillon, and J. Hershbell 2003). All references will follow the Parthey pagination preceded by *DM* (*de Mysterioris*). See for example the derisive tone of Iamblichus at 49.9–13, where he says that Porphyry's assumptions about gods and daimones is "so far removed from outlining the proper features of their essences that one is unable even to conjecture anything about them at all" Cf. *DM* 156.3–5; 26.12–14.

⁴ P. Athanassiadi (2006) says that Iamblichus felt his tradition was threatened by "l'hérésie de l'intellectualisme" (213). It was precisely against this heresy that Iamblichus directed his efforts, seeking to protect the revelatory core of Platonism from those who would reduce it to a framework of abstractions.

Pythagoreans and Platonists, it had long been their practice—especially among Pythagoreans—to subordinate their philosophic discourse to the esoteric wisdom conveyed by divine symbols received from the ancients.⁵ Therefore Iamblichus' spirited promotion of theurgy should not be seen, as some have argued, as an attempt to introduce something new to his tradition—for example, an effort to compete with Christianity—but rather to preserve something old, the integrity and sanctity of his received way of life.⁶

In *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus made explicit what had been implicit in his tradition: the intimate experience of divinity recognized and shared by both philosophers and the larger community, but in the late 3rd century CE this was threatened by the intellectual habits of the Greeks. Iamblichus defended the esoteric element of his tradition, namely, that the goal of the philosophic life is realized not by becoming good human beings but by becoming gods. In this Iamblichus followed Porphyry's teacher Plotinus who said precisely the same. "Our concern," he says, "is not simply to avoid error but to be god (*alla theon einai*) ... for it is to gods, not to good men, that we are to be made like."⁷ Under the rubric of *theurgy* Iamblichus extended this understanding to all forms of worship where human beings receive the gods.

That Porphyry disdained theurgic rites as unworthy of a Platonic philosopher was symptomatic of how misguided the Greeks had become. Beguiled by the hubris of discursive power, philosophers like Porphyry believed their ability to think abstractly freed them from the constraints of the material realm. In Iamblichus' view, their conceptual constructs and lack of piety had precisely the opposite effect: it cut them off from the divinity of the world and communion with the gods. *On the Mysteries* is his attempt to demonstrate the importance of the reception of the gods in theurgic ritual and particularly through the transformation of the soul's subtle body, the *ochêma*, through acts of divination and sacrifice.

⁵ S. Rappe (2000) explicates with great nuance and insight the neoplatonic belief that wisdom "could not be transmitted by rational thought or language" (xiii). Neoplatonists, then, engage in intense rational reflection that aims not to outline dogmatic truths but to awaken the non-discursive and symbolic in a ritual mode. She highlights the essential contribution of Iamblichus to this "symbolic mode of discourse" (13).

⁶ The notion that theurgy was an attempt to compete with Christianity continues to appeal even to eminent scholars such as Pierre Hadot. He dismisses the ritual element of theurgy as "superstitious and puerile," "an unfortunate attempt to compete with Christianity;" P. Hadot, tr. M. Djaballah (2009) 38. As to the trend among the "Greeks" toward rational hubris and intellectual instability see *DM* 259.5–14.

⁷ Plotinus, tr. Armstrong (1966) *Ennead* I.2.6.3; I.2.7.27–28.

Specifically, Porphyry had asked how gods become present in divinations where the theurgist loses self-consciousness, and Iamblichus replies with a striking example. He writes:

This is the greatest evidence; for many, even when fire is applied to them, are not burned, since the fire does not touch them on account of their divine inspiration. And many who are burned do not react, because at this time they are not living the life of a [mortal] creature. And some who are pierced with spits have no awareness of it, nor do others who are struck on the back with axes; still others whose arms are cut with knives do not feel it at all. *Their actions are in no way human, because what is inaccessible becomes accessible under divine possession*:⁸ they cast themselves into fire and they walk through fire, and they walk over rivers like the priestess at Kastabala. From these examples it is clear that those who are inspired are not conscious of themselves, and they lead neither the life of a human being nor of a living animal so far as concerns sensation or appetite; they exchange their life for another more divine life, by which they are inspired, and by which they are completely possessed. (DM 110.4–111.2)

Obviously, being pierced with knives, hacked with axes, and exposed to fire are not on the itinerary of Platonic philosophers. But the example of those possessed in this fashion dramatically makes the point, both for Porphyry and for us, that human beings are capable of profound shifts in awareness and orientation. There is abundant evidence that ecstatic phenomena similar to those described by Iamblichus are taking place even today in cultures that encourage them.⁹ Ecstasy, moving out of one's habitual orientation, was an essential element in all of theurgy, and Iamblichus reveals the subtle mechanics involved in these ecstatic states. In his view, awareness is removed from our physical bodies only by entering another body, invisibly present in the physical and activated in moments of ecstatic release. This subtle body was described by Iamblichus as the vehicle of the soul (*ochêma tês psuchês*), and it is through this vehicle that the soul animates the physical body and through which it receives the presence of the gods. It is through the *ochêma* that the soul enters embodied life, and it is through this same *ochêma* that the soul receives the gods and becomes divine. If the Platonic philosopher was to become an embodied god, as Plotinus encouraged, it was by means of the *ochêma*.

⁸ Αἱ τε ἐνέργειαι αὐτῶν οὐδαμῶς εἰσιν ἀνθρώπιναι· τὰ τε γὰρ ἄβατα βατὰ γίγνεται θεοφορούμενα ...

⁹ F. Smith (2006) provides a wealth of examples as well as a perceptive analysis of these phenomena and our attempt to study them.

The doctrine of the subtle body in Iamblichus has been carefully examined by John Finamore and, while I will focus specifically on its physical sensations in theurgy, his summary will help us proceed. Finamore says:

For Neoplatonists, the vehicle fulfills three functions: it houses the rational soul in its descent from the noetic realm to the realm of generation; it acts as the organ of sense-perception and imagination; and, through theurgic rites, it can be purified and lifted above, a vehicle for the rational soul's return through the cosmos to the gods.¹⁰

Finamore outlines the Platonic sources of this doctrine: the *Timaeus* (41e) where the Demiurge places souls in starry vehicles (*ochêmata*) and the *Phaedrus* (247b) where the chariots of souls are, again, described as *ochêmata*. Perhaps more significantly, as regards physical sensation, is Aristotle's theory (*De Gen. An.* 736b)—also noted by Finamore—that each soul has a pneumatic body made like the heavenly aether to serve as intermediary between the immaterial soul and the physical senses. As Finamore puts it: "... it is a small step for later philosophers to combine Aristotle's *pneuma* with ether, the element of the stars, and with the 'Platonic' *ochêma* onto which the Demiurge placed the soul."¹¹ Thus, for Iamblichus, souls have an eternal aetheric vehicle that animates the body with breath (*pneuma*) and coordinates sense impressions. The soul's vehicle is also associated with *phantasia*, and this follows Aristotle's belief that mental images are necessary for engaging the world. The imagination, like the *ochêma* itself, functions as a kind of intermediary between material and immaterial realms.

If it is through the *ochêma* that the soul becomes a god, it necessarily plays a critical role in theurgic divination. Fortunately, Iamblichus provides quite a few clues about how this transformation happens, but it is easy to misunderstand what he says. As scholars we are far more the heirs of Porphyry than of Iamblichus, and to grasp the theurgic function of the *ochêma* we naturally look for discursively coherent descriptions. Porphyry did just that. He asked Iamblichus for a *diarthrôsis*, a precise articulation of the divination of the future—a request which seems reasonable to us—but Iamblichus objects to the question and chastises Porphyry for assuming that divination could be understood as if it were a natural phenomenon or human technique capable of discursive analysis.¹² He says:

¹⁰ J. Finamore (1985) 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² *DM* 99.10–100.6; *diarthrôthênai* at 99.9.

For, according to the gist of your question, you believe something like this about foreknowledge: “that it can come into being,” and is among “the things existing in nature.” But it is not one of the things coming into existence, and it does not behave at all like a natural change, nor is it an artifact invented for use in daily life, nor is it, generally, a human achievement at all.

(*DM* 100.2–5)

To return to Finamore’s definition of the *ochêma*, it is the third function that is the most challenging: “[that the *ochêma*] can be purified and lifted above, a vehicle for the rational soul’s return through the cosmos to the gods.”¹³ Finamore has examined the relevant passages in Iamblichus and Proclus that describe how the *ochêma* ascends to the gods. He gives a more generous explanation than Iamblichus who bluntly reproved Porphyry, telling him—and by extension all who think as he does—not merely that his assumption about theurgic divination is mistaken but that *his very way of thinking is mistaken* and keeps him alienated from divinity and any hope of understanding the phenomenon.

For those of us who sift evidence and provide rational accounts of ancient philosophy Iamblichus’ rebuke is sobering. Even to begin to understand the later Platonists we need to recognize the profound challenge they pose to our accustomed habits of thought. Plotinus says discursive thinking itself is a kind of sorcery that puts us under the spell of our “thoughts,”¹⁴ and Iamblichus tells Porphyry he needs a mental talisman to protect him from the habit of trying to understand theurgical phenomena in discursive categories.¹⁵ Yet as scholars we think and write discursively. For us it makes sense that the purified *ochêma* allows the soul to ascend through the cosmos and rejoin the gods. After all, Iamblichus explicitly says the soul makes an ascent (*anagôgê*);¹⁶ we have seen diagrams of the planetary spheres, and we can visualize the *ochêma*’s purification—moving up through these spheres—as the soul rises out of this world. But the clarity of this schema, inviting us

¹³ J. Finamore (1985) 1.

¹⁴ *Ennead* IV.4.43.16. Cited by S. Rappe (2000) 104.

¹⁵ The term Iamblichus uses is “greatest talisman / counter-spell,” μέγιστον ἀλεξίφάρμακον; *DM* 100.8–101.2. Plato uses ἀλεξίφάρμακον in a similar way to indicate an antidote to mistaken views. Those who would be lawgivers must possess the writings of the *divine lawgiver* and use these as a talisman (ἀλεξίφάρμακον) against all other speeches (*Laws* 12.957d).

¹⁶ Throughout the *DM* Iamblichus argues that the presence of the gods—through their theophanies or their *sunthêmata*—lift the soul to the divine realm: 42.12; 81.12; 114.8–9; 292.7–12, et al. In sum, the apotheosis of the soul in theurgy is imagined as an “ascent” (*anagôgê*) to the gods. But it is precisely how we are to understand this theurgic “ascent” and how Iamblichus understood it that is the focus of this essay.

to take the ascent literally, causes us to miss something fundamental and theurgic. As Iamblichus says to Porphyry: “[W]hat you are trying to learn is impossible” because Porphyry—like us—wants to understand divination in rational terms.¹⁷ The continual challenge of the later Platonists is that they use discursive language as a glyph, leading *not* to rational conclusions, but to a non-semantic awareness that, in Iamblichus’ terms, was activated in theurgy.¹⁸ So, rather than stay with the discursive clarity of seeing the soul ascend through the cosmos, I think we would have a more accurate sense of the theurgic function of the *ochêma* if we see it, not as a vehicle of ascent but as a vehicle of descent, where the gods reveal themselves in and through the embodied soul. In this way the *ochêma* would fulfill the goal of Platonic life, transforming us into gods: not as elevated and inert statues lifted above the pollution of the world but as deities living and breathing in sublunary flesh.¹⁹

The embodied and lived aspect of theurgic divination can be seen in Iamblichus’ remark to Porphyry after explaining the revelations at the sanctuaries of Asclepius. He says:

But why go through such occurrences one by one when *events that happen every day* (καθ’ ἡμέραν αἰεὶ συμπιπτόντων) offer a clarity greater than any explanation (κρίττονα τοῦ λόγου)? (DM 109.1–3)

¹⁷ ὁ ἐπιχειρεῖς μαθεῖν ἐστὶν ἀδύνατον (DM 99.10–100.1). And, of course, for scholars it is assumed without question that neoplatonic divination is a product of *human* culture. One of the most brilliant scholars of late antique magic and religion puts it this way: “Whatever our ancient sources may claim about the greater powers that enabled it to work—gods, demons, the cosmos itself—*divination is an utterly human art* ...” S. Johnston (2005) 10 (my italics).

¹⁸ Iamblichus says that while *henôsis* does not take place “without knowledge,” such knowledge is only useful if it takes us *beyond* knowing, for “divine union and purification go beyond knowledge” (DM 98.7–10). S. Rappe (2000) explores this non-semantic aspect of Neoplatonism, so difficult and so often over-looked. She writes: “... it had already become a standard topos for Plotinus that his designation for the absolute principle, ‘the One,’ was not semantically significant ... for Damascius, the ineffability of the One engulfs the metaphysical enterprise, infecting it with non-sense, with in-significance” (209).

¹⁹ This, of course, is the crux of the issue. I believe that exoterically we think of the *ochêma* as going up, but this metaphorical ascent releases the divine presence in us that becomes more real, more present, and more embodied. In becoming “like the divine” mortals contact the immortal and by participation are made divine, filled with piety and wonder. And in this transformative experience of the mortal “going up” to immortality, at a distinctively theurgic and pivotal moment, the perspective shifts: it is no longer the mortal reaching up to immortality but the other way around. The divine takes on a mortal body and this descent is entirely dependent on providing a receptacle, a porous *ochêma* to receive the divine light. The ascent and the descent of the soul, while discursively distinct, are esoterically simultaneous and co-present. I wish to thank Peter Durigon for this insight.

The Asclepian sanctuaries, the oracles at Delphi, Claros, and Didymos, and the example of ecstasies immune to pain from knives and fire all demonstrate the effects of theurgic possession. But Iamblichus seems almost dismissive of these extraordinary examples and “far-famed oracles.”²⁰ He seems more interested in the divination that was the *everyday experience* of those who live in communion with the gods.

The daily practice of Iamblichus was prayer. He says plainly that no theurgic ritual can take place without it²¹ and that in prayer the *ochêma* is purified. He explains:

The extended practice of prayer nurtures our intellect, greatly enlarges our soul's receptacle of the gods, reveals to us the life of gods, accustoms our eyes to the brightness of divine light, and gradually perfects our capacity for intimate union with the gods ... It gently elevates our habits of thought and gives us those of the gods ... It increases divine love and inflames the divine presence of the soul; it cleanses (ἀποκαθαίρει) all contrary tendencies of the soul and removes from its aethereal and luminous vehicle (αἰθερώδους καὶ αὐγοειδοῦς πνεύματος) everything inclined to generation ... It makes those who pray, if we may express it, the companions of the gods (ὁμιλητάς τῶν θεῶν).²²

To bear the light of the gods we must become godlike. In theurgic prayer the soul is released from the oppositions of embodied life: our divided *dianoia* is replaced by unified *noêsis* and the contrary tendencies of the pneumatic body are also unified, which is to say our pneumatic body is made spherical, like the bodies of the heavenly gods. As Iamblichus puts it:

The aethereal body [of heavenly gods] is exempt from all contrariety and is free from every change ... it is utterly liberated from any centripetal or centrifugal tendency because it has neither tendency or *because it is moved in a circle*.²³

In his *Timaeus* commentary Iamblichus says the Demiurge creates the soul with a vehicle “produced from the entire Aether (*pantos tou aitheros*) ... [and] possessing a creative power.”²⁴ But, unlike the heavenly gods, in the exercise of this power, we become self-alienated (*allotriôthen*).²⁵ When we

²⁰ *DM* 124.1–2.

²¹ *DM* 238.11–12: ἔργον τε οὐδὲν ἱερατικὸν ἄνευ τῶν ἐν ταῖς εὐχαῖς ἱκετειῶν γίγνεται.

²² *DM* 238.13–239.10. (modified).

²³ *DM* 202.10–203.1 (modified).

²⁴ *Frag.* 84.4–5; J. Dillon tr. and ed. (1978) 196.

²⁵ Simplicius ed. M. Hayduck (1882) 223.26; he also says that according to Iamblichus the embodied soul is also “made other to itself” (*heteroiousthai pros heautên*), 223.31.

animate bodies we lose our spherical form and become trapped in the oppositions of material life: the divisions, collisions, impacts, reactions, and changes that Iamblichus says are the unavoidable experiences of embodied life.²⁶ In theurgic prayer we balance these oppositions in the pneumatic body; we receive the *noêsis* of the gods. As Iamblichus puts it: “our *ochêma* is made spherical and is moved circularly whenever the soul is especially assimilated to the *Nous*.”²⁷ The *ochêma* has a critical function in this assimilation. It is the vessel in which we become gods and the vessel where gods take possession of our bodies. As Iamblichus puts it: “the god uses our bodies as its organs.”²⁸ But to become an organ of the god the *ochêma* must be purified and filled with light, a process that the 6th century Platonist Damascius compares to photonic saturation. He says:

Like a sponge, the soul loses nothing of its being but becomes porous and rarified or densely compacted. Just so does the immortal body of the soul ... sometimes it is made more spherical and sometimes less; sometimes it is filled with divine light and sometimes filled with the stains of generative acts ...²⁹

Damascius contrasts divine light with the “stains of generative acts,” the same distinction Iamblichus makes when he says that prayer cleanses the *ochêma* of “everything that tends to generation.”³⁰ It might seem they are suggesting that the *ochêma* must escape from generation, but this is not the case.³¹ For Iamblichus, the ascent of the soul is realized as the descent of the god: in the alchemical vessel of the *ochêma* the god becomes flesh. The soul’s descent and ascent are not opposed but mysteriously linked. Iamblichus says: “There is no opposition between the descents of souls and their ascents ... Freedom from generation is in harmony with our concern for generated life.”³² Iamblichus approves the view of 2nd century Platonists who taught that the “purpose of the soul’s descent is to manifest the divine life, that the will of the gods is to reveal themselves (*ekphainesthai*) in human souls.”³³ This theophanic view of human existence was not novel

²⁶ These are experiences in the material realm according to Iamblichus; *DM* 217.

²⁷ *Frag.* 49.13–15 Dillon (1978) 152.

²⁸ *DM* 115.4–5.

²⁹ Damascius ed. C.A. Ruelle (1889), II.255.7–10. *μανούμενη* = made porous / rarefied; *πυκνουμένη* = closed / compacted.

³⁰ *DM* 238.8.

³¹ As Jean Trouillard put it, to purify the *ochêma* of its “corporeality” is not to reject the body; J. Trouillard (1957) 103.

³² *DM* 272.7–11.

³³ See Iamblichus, *De anima* tr. and commentary J. Finamore and J. Dillon (2002) 54.20–26.

with Iamblichus. It was the recognized tradition of pre-Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic philosophers: while remaining mortal they became gods.³⁴ But in Iamblichus' era the hieratic purpose of this tradition—rooted in non-discursive experience—was being lost due to the intellectualism and metaphysical dualism that disparaged embodied life.

In theurgy the opposition between divine and human was transformed in the unity of theurgic ritual. Iamblichus explains:

All of theurgy has a two-fold character. One is that it is a rite conducted by men that preserves our natural place in the universe [i.e. we remain human]; the other is that it is empowered by divine symbols and is raised through them to be joined on high with the gods This latter aspect is rightly called "taking the shape of the gods."³⁵

To take this shape, the *ochêma's* imaginative receptacle (*hupodochê*) had to be enlarged through prayer to contain the light of the gods. The quality of the light indicated the presence of the entity received and Iamblichus provides a lengthy taxonomy, from the bright and uniform light of the gods to the cloudy light of daimones, to identify the entities that appear in theurgic divination.³⁶ He describes the technique of drawing in the light (*phôtagôgia*), and it is through these illuminations that the soul joins the god.³⁷ He explains:

Phôtagôgia somehow illuminates with divine light the aethereal and luminous vehicle of the soul (*aitherôdes kai augoeides ochêma*), from which divine visions (*phantasiai theiai*), set in motion by the gods, take possession of our imaginative power.³⁸

Phantasia was instrumental in attaching the soul to a mortal body through its attraction to sensate images and, again, *phantasia* was instrumental in leading the soul back to its union with the gods in *phôtagôgia*. For Iamblichus, *phantasia* has a dual function: it mirrors sensate phenomena and our concepts about it, and it is the medium for the appearances (*phas-mata*) of the gods. Quoting from Iamblichus on *phantasia*, Priscian says:

³⁴ As the evidence gathered by D. O'Meara (2003; 2005), 32–36, clearly demonstrates.

³⁵ *DM* 184.1–8.

³⁶ This taxonomy is discussed in *DM* II.3–9 where Iamblichus outlines at least 140 kinds of light images received by the *phantasia*. These epiphanies are thoroughly examined by E.C. Clarke (2001) 100–118. See also S. Johnston (2004) 16.

³⁷ S. Johnston (2004) reviews the role of light among Platonists and Iamblichus in particular and notes that the goal of the theurgist was *sustasis*, (standing with) the divine. Since for Iamblichus god was revealed as light, *sustasis* was experienced as illumination (10–11).

³⁸ *DM* 132.9–11.

[*Phantasia*] rouses up images from sense-perception (*tês aithêseôs*) to opinion and extends images from the *Nous* down to opinion as it receives these images (*phantasmata*) from wholes.³⁹ And *phantasia* is uniquely characterized by this two-fold assimilation: as both producing and receiving likenesses that are appropriate, either to noetic or to materially generative activities, or to those in the middle, fitting the outside with the inside and establishing the images that descend from the *Nous* upon the lives extending down around the body.⁴⁰

In *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus warns that “divine imaginations” (*theiai phantasiai*) should not be confused with images caused by human conjecture or illness,⁴¹ but it is not entirely clear how to understand this distinction.

To receive the gods and restore our luminous *ochêma*, the mirror of imagination must be turned, but the turn is not from the outer world to the inner. Noetic images are *not* immaterial “objects” accessible by mental abstraction.⁴² The imaginative turn required in theurgy is not toward a different kind of object; it is, rather, a different way of seeing altogether. In a theurgic context the image is not simply “what” one sees but more importantly “the way in which one sees”⁴³ This determines whether our vision engages an imaginal world of noetic entities as described by Henry Corbin,⁴⁴ or remains personal imagination, mere projections of the psyche. One might compare these two imaginations to Coleridge’s distinction between the primary imagination, in which one enters god’s “eternal act of creation,” and mere fantasy, made up of abstractions of sensate experience.⁴⁵ If Iamblichus’ distinction of divine and human imagination is not based on whether the image is material or immaterial but rather on our orientation to the image, it may be easier to understand his otherwise puzzling description of how we see the gods. He says:

³⁹ From “wholes,” that is to say, from the noetic realm, which is defined as undivided unity.

⁴⁰ Priscian tr P. Huby (1997) 23.16–23 (translation modified slightly).

⁴¹ *DM* 160.8–12.

⁴² For Neoplatonists, *noêsis* is clearly distinguished from discursive thinking (*dianoia*). *Noêsis* is non-representational; it is *not* a conceptual representation of the Platonic Forms; see Rappe, op. cit., 101–102.

⁴³ I borrow this phrase from J. Hillman (1997) 7.

⁴⁴ H. Corbin (1969), *passim*. In terms of Sufi angelology, Corbin grasps clearly the theurgic function of these noetic entities. As he puts it: “... each sensible thing or species is the ‘theurgy’ of its Angel” and it is the turning to one’s angel that transforms the sensible into a theurgic symbol. H. Corbin (1980) 115–116.

⁴⁵ S. Coleridge (1817): “[ON THE IMAGINATION OR THE ESEMPLASTIC POWER] fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM (my italics).”

The presence of the gods gives us health of body, virtue of soul, purity of mind and, in a word, elevates all things in us to their proper principles It brings all things in the soul into proportion with the *Nous*, makes light shine with noetic harmony, and *reveals the incorporeal as corporeal to the eyes of the soul by means of the eyes of the body* (τὸ μὴ ὄν σῶμα ὡς σῶμα τοῖς τῆς ψυχῆς ὀφθαλμοῖς διὰ τῶν τοῦ σώματος ἐπιδείκνυσιν).⁴⁶

The gods appear in forms that correspond to our aesthetic perceptions; aesthesis gives them a body. This suggests that our sensate experience, far from being an obstacle to contacting the gods, was a necessary medium. While αἴσθησις is correctly translated as sense perception, according to Onians it is rooted in the Homeric αἶω which means “I breathe,” and derives from its middle form, αἶσθω, meaning “I gasp, breathe in.”⁴⁷ Sense experience is as intrinsic to the animation of our bodies as breathing; aesthesis *is* a kind of breathing and is thus intimately connected with our pneumatic body. For Iamblichus aesthesis is an essential function of the soul.

Priscian says that according to Iamblichus imagination translates noetic impressions into sensate and divided images. He explains:

Although imagination receives impressions from all the superior activities [noetic wholes], it represents them in images divisibly and in sensible forms (αἰσθητὰ) that refer back to sensible objects (αἰσθητὰ); therefore, while imagination receives impressions from superior activities, at the same time, it is moved by sensible forms.⁴⁸

For Iamblichus, to animate a body is to clothe noetic forms in matter, to bring them forth in sensate imagery. The human soul identifies with its animal life; it lives entirely in sensation: embodiment is literally “breathed in.” In this process, the *ochêma* becomes dense and the imagination filled with habits of animal life. Because our impulses trap us in the oppositions of the sublunary world, theurgists must cleanse the pneumatic body of those habits that Damascius calls the “stain of generative acts.” But how? The discursively obvious answer is to reject the life of sensation, and this is how we have interpreted theurgic *anagôgê*, making it a literal ascent and escape from material life. But for Iamblichus, the answer is that the soul’s apotheosis is realized as the descent of a god into flesh and was achieved by careful attention to the physical body. Reflecting this theurgic practice in 5th century Alexandria, Hierocles says:

⁴⁶ DM 81.10–82.1 (modified).

⁴⁷ R.B. Onians (1989) 74–75.

⁴⁸ Priscian tr. P. Huby (1997) 24.4–9; see also, *Iamblichus, De anima* J. Finamore and J. Dillon (2002) 240–241. My translation draws from both with modifications.

We must take care of the purity relating to our luminous body (*augoeides*), which the *Oracles* call “the light vehicle of the soul” (*psuchês lepton ochêma*). Such purity extends to our food, our drink, and to the entire regimen of our mortal body in which the luminous body resides, breathing life into the inanimate body and maintaining its harmony. For the immaterial body is a kind of life, which also engenders life within matter; it is thanks to this last life that that part of myself that is the living mortal being is made complete ...⁴⁹

The life of the theurgist aimed at nothing short of the transformation of his or her body into the body of a god, in eating, drinking, and in prayer. Prayer perfects the pneumatic body, making it porous and rarified, which gives us the capacity to receive the gods. Our bodies become their organs: the gods reveal themselves (*ekphainesthai*) through us.⁵⁰

It is important to remember that Platonists and Pythagoreans are not dualists; there is no opposition between noetic and sensible worlds. Their universe is asymmetrical, not symmetrical. Noetic wholes remain present in sensible particulars just as primary numbers are present in their multiples: for Pythagoreans the immaterial is always present in matter.⁵¹ Iamblichus' contribution to his tradition was in making this metaphysical law explicit. Theurgy is its ritual *praxis*: the ritual reception and expression of the supernatural *in nature*. The noetic whole is recovered, not by abandoning particulars—including our own bodies—but by realizing, in theurgy, *that we are creating them continually*. According to Iamblichus this noetic/theurgic demiurgy is the essential function of the soul: “to mediate divisible and indivisible, corporeal and incorporeal beings, to receive universal ratios (*logoi*) and serve the work of creation.”⁵² To abandon sublunary life in order to “ascend” to the gods is a failure to make this demiurgic—and theurgic—turn in which sensate particulars are recognized as creations of one's own demiurgic will. The soul's encounter with the gods, then, does not abandon aesthetic experience, for there is no other way to recover our divinity. If we miss this, we miss the heart of Iamblichean theurgy.

⁴⁹ *In Carmen aureum* 26; I. Hadot, tr. M. Chase (2004) 37.

⁵⁰ In his discussion of divine possession Iamblichus says there are many different kinds of possession, reflecting distinctions among the gods who possess the soul as well as the degree to which the soul is able to unite with the deity: “And sometimes we share in the god's lowest power, sometimes in his intermediate, and sometimes in his primary power. And sometimes there is a mere participation, sometimes a communion, and sometimes even a union” (*DM* 111.9–11).

⁵¹ *DM* 232.12: *πάρεστιν άύλως τοίς ένύλοις τά άυλα*.

⁵² C. Wachsmuth and O. Hense, eds. (1884) *Stobaeus* I.365,25–366,5; see also tr. by John Dillon (1987) 893. This teaching, Iamblichus said, was shared by “Plato, Pythagoras, Aristotle, and all of the Ancients” (*Stobaeus*, I.366.6–8).

Edward Butler has recently explored the existential consequences of theurgy and their relation to Neoplatonic metaphysics.⁵³ He focuses on the singular importance of the introduction of henads into Neoplatonic discourse, which he describes as a revolutionary movement in the history of Greek philosophy.⁵⁴ Each henad, each god, is *above* Being, and is therefore not subject to the gradations of Being and Form. Conversely, from the perspective of Being, a particular entity: a plant, a stone, a human soul, as particular, is at the furthest extreme of universal Being, and its very particularity and density—putting it *below* Being—inversely corresponds to the One and henadic gods above Being.⁵⁵ Butler argues that theurgists were able to distinguish between the universal orders of Being and the more primary and existential orders of the henads, between the henadic *huparxeis* and their derivative *ousiai*.⁵⁶ Butler maintains that it is *precisely* in physical—and particular—rituals that the henadic gods may be engaged. This is consistent with what I have argued: to grasp the theurgic function of the *ochêma* we must see how it is revealed in and through the sensate particularity of aesthesis. As Butler puts it:

To turn toward its ultimate causes does not call for the soul to lift itself out of its particular context, even if its nearer causes—that is, in the hierarchy of Being—demand just this. Although we must be properly positioned with respect to the hierarchy of Being in order to perform it correctly, the point of ritual lies in the affirmation of that context itself, for *this completes the act of procession begun by the Gods*.⁵⁷

To deny the aesthetic is to deny divine procession. This is what Iamblichus feared in Porphyry's approach, for it severs us from the activity of the gods who reveal themselves aesthetically, "through the eyes of the body," and in the particularities of ritual. As Butler correctly observes, from a theurgic perspective "it is only in the particular that the universal is active and

⁵³ E. Butler (2007) *passim*.

⁵⁴ Butler (2007) cites Christian Guérard, the student of Jean Trouillard, who thusly characterized the role of henads in later Greek philosophy. 19: C. Guérard, (1982) 81. John Dillon has argued persuasively that Iamblichus is responsible for the doctrine of henads; J. Dillon (1993) 48–54. Now see the lucid argument that Iamblichus' use of *monoeides* was functionally equivalent to Proclus' use of "henads" by D. Clark (2010) 54–74. For further discussion, cf. the study of henads by S. Mesyats, included in this volume.

⁵⁵ E. Butler (2007) 9.

⁵⁶ E. Butler (2007) 5. These distinctions correspond to Rappe's distinction between the discursive (Butler's formal) and symbolic (Butler's existential).

⁵⁷ E. Butler (2007) 14, my italics.

authentic.”⁵⁸ Turning to the example of the names—the particular aural manifestations—of the gods, Butler tells us that Porphyry had wanted to know their conceptual meanings and to translate this into equivalent concepts; he wanted to lift names out of the density of their cultural and aesthetic contexts and find their universal significance. Iamblichus recognizes this approach but wants to honor primarily their audible and aesthetic expression. Butler explains:

The opposition here is not between intellectual insight and “irrationalism,” but rather between two different modes of signification, one that is universalizing while the other is purely of, by, and for the particular. Iamblichus discerned two modes of signification where Porphyry only perceived one.⁵⁹

The priority of aesthetic particularity in divine names was also recognized in the *Hermetica*. There Asclepius warns King Ammon:

For the Greeks, O King, who make logical demonstrations, use words emptied of power [because they have been uprooted from their cultic contexts], and this very activity is what constitutes their philosophy, a mere noise of words. But we do not use “words” (*logoi*) but “sounds” (*phônai*) which are full of effects.⁶⁰

In the case of the human soul and its *ochêma*, it is precisely through incorporating aesthetic experience in ritual that we may enter into the theurgic procession of the henads: we embody the gods only in the particularity of our flesh. Yet in our Porphyrian habit of universalizing, we have missed this and have focused almost entirely on the conceptual and disembodied. We have missed the existential consequences of the Iamblichean One and the doctrine of the henads.⁶¹ Although it is recognized that the Iamblichean One extends into matter, which allows theurgists to find traces of the One in material objects, we have not come to terms with the deeper significance of this doctrine. For, if the One penetrates material objects such as stones, plants, and animals, it is certainly the case that the One penetrates us! If a material object can become a *sunthêma* of the gods, a person most surely can. The mystagogues of Iamblichus’ tradition were seen as living

⁵⁸ E. Butler (2007) 15.

⁵⁹ E. Butler (2007) 16.

⁶⁰ *Corpus Hermeticum* XVI.2; 4 Vols., tr. A.-J. Festugière, ed. A.D. Nock (1954–1960; reprint, 1972–1983) 232. Also see my chapter “Naming the Gods” in G. Shaw (1995) 179–188. For similar reasons the *Qur’an* is untranslatable, for to uproot it from the sounds in which it was originally (and still is) recited would forfeit its transformative and revelatory power, its *wahy*.

⁶¹ Again, see J. Dillon (1993) 48–54.

sunthêmata; they were venerated as god-men. Pythagoras was believed to be Apollo himself who incarnated for the benefit of mortals.⁶² The magician and healer Empedocles announced plainly: “I walk among you a deathless god.”⁶³ Iamblichus was called *theios* by his students and by later Platonists. We tend to dismiss the title as a mere honorific but it points to the recognition that divinity was revealed in these men who were not other-worldly hermits but lived among their associates with great intimacy and intensity. For them, the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds was porous in ways we can scarcely imagine. Iamblichus believed the gods were here, in matter. He explains:

Primary beings illuminate even the lowest, and the immaterial are present in the material immaterially (πάρεστιν άύλως τοίς ένύλοις τά άυλα). And let there be no astonishment if we say that there is a pure and divine matter; for this matter issues from the father and creator of all and thus it is perfect and has the capacity (*epiteideian*) to be a receptacle (*hupodokhên*) of the gods ... Nothing hinders superior beings from being able to illuminate their inferiors, nor is matter excluded from participating in these higher beings; matter that is perfect and pure and well-formed is fit to be a receptacle of the gods⁶⁴ For there is no other way that the places on earth or the men who dwell here can have a share in the life of higher beings unless this sort of foundation were laid down in advance. We should believe the secret teachings that a kind of matter is given by the gods through blessed visions—which is similar in nature (*sumphuês*) with the divinities who give it. The sacrifice with this kind of matter ... ensures the perfect reception and representation of the gods.⁶⁵

In Pythagorean terms, matter is the indefinite Dyad, the principle of otherness (*heterotês*) that allows the One to *be* one and without which there would be no procession, no multiplicity, no reality. In his treatise *On General Mathematical Science* Iamblichus describes this Dyad as the material principle. He says:

Of the mathematical numbers the two highest are the One—which one must not yet call “being” on account of its being simple, the principle (*archê*) of beings and not yet that sort of being of which it is the principle—and the other is the principle of the Many which, of itself, provides division ... [which] we compare to a completely fluid and pliant matter (*eupladei hulê*).⁶⁶

⁶² Iamblichus *On the Pythagorean Way of Life* [VP], tr. J. Dillon and J. Hershbell (1999), 55.

⁶³ C. Kahn, (2001) 18; Fragment 112.

⁶⁴ *DM* 232.11–233.6.

⁶⁵ *DM* 234.4–11.

⁶⁶ *On General Mathematical Science* Iamblichus ed. N. Festa (1891) 15,6–14.

Without the Many, the One could not *be* one, as Plato's Parmenides taught.⁶⁷ This essential Pythagorean principle, that higher beings must be inverted—in some sense negated—and thus veiled, to reveal themselves, underlies all Iamblichean metaphysics and helps to explain his embrace of the senses in theurgic ritual.⁶⁸ In his discussion of Egyptian and Hermetic theology Iamblichus maintains that the material principle of divinity extends into sensible existence. He says:

God produced matter (*hulê*) out of the division of materiality from substantiality, which the Demiurge, receiving as a living substance, fashioned into simple unshakeable spheres and organized the last of this into generated and mortal bodies.⁶⁹

The immortal spheres of the heavenly gods as well as our mortal bodies are expressions of the Pythagorean law of inversion, but in the case of higher beings their inversion causes no disturbance. Their manifesting activity (*prohodos*) is never cut off from the return (*epistrophê*) to their essence. In geometric terms, their procession and return trace an unbroken circle, but for human souls the circle breaks: our creative activity shatters our essence. As Carlos Steel puts it: “[the human soul] experiences procession as an actual alienation from itself, its *prohodos* [divine unfolding] becomes *probolê* [alienating projection].”⁷⁰ Iamblichus describes this alienation starkly. He says:

What is immortal (*athanaton*) in the soul is filled completely with mortality (*anapimplatai tou thnêtou*) and no longer remains only immortal.⁷¹

The Pythagorean law of inversion functioned at all levels of existence. Our mortality and “self-alienation”⁷² was seen by Iamblichus as an expression of divine will. Yet theurgy turned this alienation around; it allowed theurgists to discover the unities hidden in the world—and in our own alienation—and thus to recover our continuity with the gods. To avoid the aesthetic,

⁶⁷ *Parmenides* 142–143.

⁶⁸ The theme of negation in Neoplatonic metaphysics, with a comparison to the productive negation in the work of Martin Heidegger, has been explored with great insight by P. Durigon (1998) in his unpublished dissertation, *Heidegger and the Greeks; Hermeneutical-Philosophical Sketches of Ignorance, Blindness and Not Being in Heidegger's Beiträge, Plato, Plotinus and Proclus*.

⁶⁹ *DM* 265.5–8.

⁷⁰ Carlos Steel (1978) 69.

⁷¹ Priscianus = Simplicius ed. C. Kalbfleisch (1907) 90.22–24.

⁷² Priscianus = Simplicius ed. C. Kalbfleisch (1907) 223.31: ἐτεροιοῦσθαι πρὸς ἑαυτήν.

sensate, and material realm, was to step out of this divine activity: from the procession of the One hiding/revealing itself in the Many to the self-alienation of souls animating bodies.⁷³ In theurgy the soul recovered its spherical *ochêma* not by escaping from nature but by acting with the supernatural powers hidden within it. As Iamblichus put it: “ineffable realities are expressed through secret symbols and *things greater than every image are captured in images*”⁷⁴ Only by finding the supernatural (*huperphuês*) in nature (*phusis*) could theurgists recover the divinity hidden in their own mortal lives.

In response to a question by Porphyry concerning the appearance of the gods Iamblichus makes it plain that to be called back to the gods is not to be lifted out of the body. He says:

The gods, in their benevolence and graciousness, generously (*aphthonôs*) shed their light upon theurgists, calling their souls back to themselves and orchestrating their union with them, accustoming them, *even while still in the body*, to detach themselves from their bodies (ἐθίζοντές τε αὐτὰς καὶ ἔτι ἐν σώματι οὐσας ἀφίστασθαι τῶν σωμάτων), and to turn themselves towards their eternal and intelligible first principle.⁷⁵

Iamblichus describes the gods acting generously (*aphthonôs*); significantly, this is precisely the term that Plato uses to describe the will of the Demiurge⁷⁶ in the creation of the world: the Pythagorean law of procession is generous, and this includes the animation of bodies. So, when souls are called back to the gods (*anakaloumenoi*)⁷⁷ they are not being called out of their bodies; rather, they are called to their innate awareness (*sumphutos katanoêsis*)⁷⁸ of the gods given to each soul eternally. This awareness,

⁷³ The Pythagorean term used by Iamblichus to describe the intimate continuity throughout the cosmos is *allêlouchia*. Translated as “indivisible mutuality,” E. Clarke, J. Dillon, and J. Hershbell (2003) 25, Iamblichus maintains that it is what seamlessly holds together both numbers (esp. as “magnitude”) and the orders of the cosmos (cf. *Protrepticus* 116.15, Pistelli (1887); *In Nicomachi Arithmeticam Introductionem* 7.10–18, Pistelli, (1894); *Theologoumena Arithmeticae* 3.8, De Falco (1922)). Yet for human souls *allêlouchia* is experienced in a passionate way (*meta pathous*; *DM* 196.8–10), reflecting the condition of the embodied soul under the sway of the sublunary realm. The Iamblichean approach, as opposed to the Porphyrian or Plotinian, is not to escape these *pathê* but to ritually coordinate them into a receptacle that would give a body to the god. The theurgic approach is comparable to that of tantra in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions in that theurgy stresses the continuity, integration, and transformation of “lower” impulses through ritual.

⁷⁴ *DM* 65.7–8: *ta de aneidea kráteitai in eidesi*, (modified translation).

⁷⁵ *DM* 40.14–41.8 (modified).

⁷⁶ *Tim.* 29e.

⁷⁷ I translate *anakaloumenoi* (*DM* 40.4) as “calling back” rather than as “summoning up”.

⁷⁸ *DM* 9.8–9.

Iamblichus says, is not a kind of “conjecture or opinion or form of syllogistic reasoning.”⁷⁹ It is received as divine imagination, shaped and revealed by our aesthetic life and in a pneumatic body that has balanced the attractions and repulsions of embodied experience.⁸⁰ Proclus describes this reception of the gods as follows:

The gods themselves are incorporeal, but since those who see them possess bodies, the visions which issue from the gods to worthy recipients possess a certain quality from the gods who send them but also have something connatural with those who see them. This is why the gods are seen yet not seen at all. In fact, those who see the gods witness them *in the luminous garments of their souls*⁸¹

Human souls are like the gods. We too are incorporeal, but due to our rank in the hierarchy of divinities we must become mortal and material to exercise our demiurgic power. The *photagogic* reception of the gods described by Proclus was thus, simultaneously both an encounter with a god and the recovery of our own divinity in the illuminated *ochêma*, the *Augoeides*.⁸² The theurgic reception of the gods in luminous imagination was the recovery of our own divinity.

Conclusion

In their introduction to *On the Mysteries*, the translators warn the reader of the difficulty of trying to understand something that cannot be conceptually expressed. They write:

We should remember that Iamblichus felt that his task of producing a written defense of theurgy was inherently impossible Throughout the work, he thus urges Porphyry to replace verbal discourse and learning with a superior kind of γνῶσις, that which comes with the experience of revelation.⁸³

If it was a challenge for Iamblichus, it is even more difficult for us. However, I think we can be sure that in light of Iamblichus’ positive view of matter and embodiment, and because the gods—as henads—are revealed precisely in

⁷⁹ *DM* 9.11–12.

⁸⁰ This is what I take to be the meaning of *aphistasthai* = to be detached, in the quotation above.

⁸¹ Proclus *In Rem. Pub.*, ed. Kroll (1903–1906) I 39.5–11.

⁸² Iamblichus refers to the *augoeides ochêma* (luminous vehicle) in the context of his description of the techniques of *phôtagogia*; *DM* 132.7–14.

⁸³ E. Clarke, J. Dillon, J. Hershbelle (2003) xlil–l.

their concrete particularity, he would have encouraged theurgists to receive the gods in their bodies. For Iamblichus, our aesthetic experience is not an obstacle to deification; it is, in fact, the only way to embody the god.

I would like to conclude with a short vignette from Eunapius describing a conversation between the *theios* Iamblichus and his adoring disciples. The “most eloquent” among them had the following exchange with his teacher:

“O Master ... a rumor has reached us through your slaves that when you pray to the gods you soar aloft from the earth more than fifteen feet to all appearance; that your body and your garments change to a beautiful golden hue; and presently when your prayer is ended your body becomes as it was before you prayed, and then you come back down to earth and associate with us.” Iamblichus was not at all inclined to laughter, but he laughed at these remarks. And he answered them thus: “He who thus deluded you was a clever man, but the facts are otherwise ...”⁸⁴

I believe we have been similarly misled. Far from trying to lift us up to the gods, ascending through the gradations of Being and the astral spheres, Iamblichus recognized the heavenly orders on earth. He saw the gods here below, hidden in our embodied and aesthetic life.

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⁸⁴ W. Wright, tr. (1968) *Philostratus and Eunapius Lives of the Sophists*, 365–367; translation slightly modified.

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