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THE NEOPLATONIC TRANSMISSION OF ANCIENT WISDOM

Gregory Shaw

If there is any community between us and the gods, it is constituted most of all through this virtue (wisdom), and it is in accordance with it that we are assimilated to them.... It is reasonable to assert, therefore, that wisdom makes those who possess it godlike. (Iamblichus, *To Asphalius, On Wisdom*)¹

Goods that are indivisible can be present to more than one person at the same time, and no one has a lesser share in their regard on account of possession by others.... (Proclus, *Comm. Alc.*)²

WISDOM AND RELIGIOUS COMPETITION

It may be helpful to begin by pointing out that scholars today do not believe in ancient wisdom. To be more direct, we do not believe in wisdom at all. We know that Neoplatonists believed that wisdom allowed them to become divine and reveal the gods in their very bodies,³ but we do

1. Modified translation from Iamblichus, *The Letters*, ed. and trans. John Dillon and Wolfgang Polleichtner, WGRW 19 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 13.

2. Translation from Proclus, *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*, ed. and trans. L. G. Westerink and William O'Neill, PTT 6 (Dilton Marsh: Prometheus Trust, 2011), 193.

3. The second-century Platonist Calvenus Taurus put it this way: "the purpose of the souls' descent is to reveal the divine life, for this is the will of the gods: to reveal themselves. *For the gods come forth into bodily appearance and reveal themselves in the pure and faultless lives of human souls.*" See Iamblichus, *De Anima*, ed. and trans. John F. Finamore and John M. Dillon, PhA 92 (Leiden: Brill 2002), 54,20–26. The translation of this passage is my own, but I have consulted the translations by Finamore and Dillon as well as that by Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (London: Duckworth, 1977), 245.

not believe that anymore. Today we do not believe in wisdom, and we do not believe in gods—in or out of our bodies—but we are highly skilled at describing how ancient philosophers and theologians believed in gods, wisdom, and the divine life.

However, rather than assume our lack of understanding in these matters, we assume theirs. Our reasoning works as follows: since we *know* that there is no wisdom in the deep and deifying sense described by the Platonists, we conclude that, when they extolled the virtues of wisdom, they were involved in sophisticated forms of self-deception—“illusions” as Sigmund Freud put it, speaking for the “wisdom” of our age—yet we are nevertheless convinced that the rhetoric of ancient wisdom served a real purpose and value, one that we recognize as valid: *it gave them social and political power*. So scholars today ask how philosophers and theologians of antiquity maintained their prestige and power by using the trope of “ancient wisdom.” Once we have reframed the rhetoric of wisdom for what we think it really is, a *strategy of persuasion to gain power*, we are in a position to see how these different rhetorical strategies—these theologies of wisdom—were in competition. We explore ancient religions through the values that shape our own worldview: politics and consumerism.

In the fourth century, the Neoplatonist Iamblichus observed that ancient wisdom was at risk of being corrupted by a habit of thought he recognized among his Platonic contemporaries. It was not power politics or consumerism but the destructive habit of misplaced concreteness, one that replaces reality with abstract formulations and ignores the presence of gods in the physical world. For example, Porphyry said that gods cannot be contacted in material rituals because, in his conceptualization, gods dwell beyond the cosmos and are far removed from the material world (see Iamblichus, *Myst.* 23.9–13).⁴ To this Iamblichus replies, “This opinion spells the ruin of all holy ritual and theurgic communion between gods and men, since it places the presence of superior beings outside the earth. It amounts to saying that the divine is at a distance from the earth and cannot mingle with men, and that this lower region is a desert, without

4. References come from Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, ed. and trans. Emma C. Clarke, John Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell, WGRW 4 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003). My translations are based on this translation. Following Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell, all references here will follow the pagination in Gustav Parthey's edition of the text (*Jamblichi De Mysteriis liber* [Berlin: Nicolai, 1857]), preceded by *Myst.* (*De Mysteriis*).

gods” (*Myst.* 28.6–11).⁵ Porphyry’s way of thinking eventually won the day, as should be evident from our own culture, poetically described by T. S. Eliot as a spiritual wasteland. In this habit of thinking, which is our own, what is important is not the indescribable reality and beauty of the world or the traditions and rituals that engage it; what is important to us is our thoughts, our theories, and our reflections. Lamenting such self-absorbed intellectualism, Iamblichus criticized the thinkers of his own era. He says:

The reason everything has fallen into a state of decay—both in our words and prayers—is because they are continually being changed by the endless innovations and lawlessness of the Greeks. For the Greeks are naturally followers of the latest trends and are eagerly carried off in any direction; they possess no stability. Whatever they receive from other traditions they do not preserve; even this they immediately reject and change everything through their unstable habit of seeking the latest terms.⁶ (*Myst.* 259.4–10)

Our contemporary reframing of “ancient wisdom” as a strategy to achieve social power is a perfect example of this kind of thinking. We reduce “wisdom” to a discursive strategy or a rhetorical trope, something with which we are quite familiar. Like Iamblichus’s Greeks, our academic culture places the highest value on our thinking, theories, and interpretations.

According to Iamblichus, however, ancient wisdom was not a doctrine, a theory, or a belief. It was not a credo or a dogma and thus was not part of a rhetorical strategy competing with other dogmas. For the later Platonists like Iamblichus, Proclus, and Damascius, ancient wisdom was not even ancient in a chronological sense; it was *ontologically* prior. It opened the soul to an awareness that *precedes* discursive activity. As conceived by these Platonists, ancient wisdom is therefore as much present in our world as it was in antiquity. They describe it as an awareness that is not divided

5. The translation is by Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 101. I have modified his translation.

6. A similar criticism of the Greeks in contrast to the Egyptians is found in the Hermetic corpus: “For the Greeks, O King, who make logical demonstrations, use words emptied of power, and this very activity is what constitutes their philosophy, a mere noise of words. But we [Egyptians] do not [so much] use words [λόγων] but sounds [φωναίς] which are full of effects” (*Corp. herm.* 16.2). Adapted from André-Jean Festugière, trans., and Arthur Darby Nock, ed., *Corpus Hermeticum*, 4 vols. (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1954–1960; repr. 1972–1983), 232.

and fixed but fluid, spontaneous, and always being discovered.⁷ From the time of Plato, this wisdom was realized only through catharsis, purging the soul of mental and emotional habits (*Phaed.* 79B–D). As Proclus put it, once we attain to wisdom, we are “united with the ineffable principle of all things” (*Theo. Plat.* 1.3.22–24). It is incapable of being grasped intellectually, but we can nevertheless embody and express it. It is a kind of “innate gnosis,” not a discursive knowing; it is more a breathing than a thinking awareness.⁸ To paraphrase Plotinus, using insider’s language that we may find frustrating, “he who has experienced it knows what I mean” (*Enn.* 1.6.7.2–3).⁹ I want to explore how Neoplatonists understood this wisdom and see what it might mean to those of us who not only find it hard to fathom but cannot imagine that it was more than a “discursive strategy.”

The ancient wisdom of the later Platonists is not “thinking” as we understand it; it is noetic and nondualistic, which is to say, it precedes and sustains discursive thinking. Recognizing this, they disciplined their thinking into patterns able to reveal what Iamblichus calls the “more ancient” principle within us.¹⁰ The delicacy and challenge of this tradition is that it is precisely through discursive thinking that later Platonists were able to create receptacles for wisdom that is not discursive but con-

7. Iamblichus says that opposed to “discursive knowledge,” which is always divided, our connection with the gods is unitary: “prior to the knowledge that knows another as being itself other, there is a unitary connection with the gods that is spontaneous (αὐτοφυής)” (*Myst.* 8.1–5). That is, *before we become self-conscious or think at all* we are enveloped in the gods and have an “innate awareness” (σύμφθτος κατανόησις) of them (*Myst.* 9.8–10). Recovering this innate awareness is to recover “ancient” (i.e., innate) wisdom. νόησις derives, as Socrates says in the *Crat.* 411E, from νεῦ + ἔσις, the soul longing for the new and *generating* world. Iamblichus maintains that our innate gnōsis of the gods comes through our longing (ἐφέσιν) for the Good (*Myst.* 8.1) and to share in its generous ἐνέργεια—demiurgy.

8. Iamblichus says “an innate gnosis (ἔμφθτος γνώσις) of the gods co-exists with our very nature” (*Myst.* 7.11–12). See Carlos Steel’s explanation of this innate gnosis in Proclus: “Breathing Thought: Proclus on the Innate Knowledge of the Soul,” in *The Perennial Tradition of Neoplatonism*, ed. J. J. Cleary (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 298.

9. Plotinus is speaking of our experience of Beauty, but since, for Platonists, wisdom is the pinnacle of human beauty, deference to the experiential still applies.

10. Iamblichus explains that contact with the gods through divination comes through a “certain divine good” that is “older” than our nature and “preordained” (*Myst.* 165.13–14). That is, like ancient wisdom, this “more ancient divine good” has an “ontological” not a temporal priority.

cealed—and often betrayed—by discursive thinking.¹¹ It is no wonder that Iamblichus praises Hermes as his guide and inspiration, for Hermes captures perfectly the ambiguity of the role of thinking for Platonists (*Myst.* 1.3–2.3). Hermes is a trickster, a revealer, a psychopomp, and a liar.¹² For these Platonists, every revelation is false when taken literally, when frozen into truth. The purpose of their voluminous writing, therefore, was not to describe or explain the divine but to lead readers into its hidden activity. Their doctrines were not meant to be believed; they were incantations to free us from discursive habits. Philosophy was mystagogy.¹³

THE *NOMINA BARBARA* AND DEIFICATION

The way in which mystagogic wisdom should be transmitted comes to light through a specific issue on which Porphyry and Iamblichus disagree: the “meaning” of the *ὀνόματα βάρβαρα/ἄσημα ὀνόματα*, the names of gods invoked in theurgic chants that are foreign and unknowable to us. In his *Letter to Anebo*, Porphyry asks:

What is the point of [chanting] meaningless names [*ἄσημα ὀνόματα*]? And why, of these meaningless names, do you prefer the barbarian [*βάρβαρα*] to our own? For a listener looks to their meaning, so surely what matters is that the concept remain the same whatever word is used.

11. Sara Rappe explores the tension among Platonists between their voluminous discursive endeavors and their acknowledgement that the wisdom they seek is incapable of being discursively grasped; see Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ix–xvii.

12. According to Plato, Hermes is the god of speech and father of all things (*Pan*); he makes them circulate and “is twofold, true *and* false” (*Crat.* 408C1–4). That Iamblichus’s Hermes is the Egyptian Hermes identified with the god Thoth supports this as well for Thoth, like Hermes, was a god of trickery, revelation and paradox; see Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 23–24.

13. This was not an aberration of Plato’s thinking but its continuation. In the *Seventh Letter* (341C–D), Plato characterizes the most important aspect of his philosophy in virtually identical terms. For philosophic arguments as incantations/spells, see Plotinus: “We must call up yet another incantation [*ἐπ’αἴσιον*] to find some relief for the soul’s labor pains. Might there be some relief from what we have said already if we sang it over and over again? What spell [*ἐπωδή*] can we find that has something new in it?” (*Enn.* 5.3.17.15–21). For Plato as mystagogue, see Proclus, *Theo. Plat.* 1.5.16–1.6.3.

For the god invoked is surely not Egyptian by birth, and even if he were, he would not use Egyptian or any human language.¹⁴ (*Aneb.*)

These questions sound eminently reasonable. They should. We are Porphyry's children; we think the same way. Words and names to us are conventional; they arise within the specific context of different cultures. Thus, as Porphyry says, different languages use different words for the same concept. Most scholars of religion would agree with Porphyry's suggestion that these names of gods have no *intrinsic* connection with the divine but are "imaginary forgeries ... devices created by our own passions and attributed to the divine" (*Myst.* 258.7–10). Porphyry, as we have seen, had already removed gods from the material world, so it is hardly surprising that he would also separate the gods from their culturally derived names.¹⁵

Iamblichus has a radically different understanding of the names of the gods. The divine names invoked by theurgists are symbols and *συνθήματα* (divine signatures) simultaneously revealing and veiling the gods. For theurgists, they serve as ritual foyers to deifying activity. Just as the gods of theurgy are revealed through their signatures in the material world, so they are revealed in the divine names employed by sacred races like Egyptians and Assyrians. Iamblichus thus replies to Porphyry's question:

The situation is not as you suppose. For if the names were established by convention [*κατὰ συνθήκην*], it would make no difference whether some names were used instead of others. But if these names are tied to the nature of reality, those names which are more adapted to it would no doubt be more pleasing to the gods. (*Myst.* 257.3–8)

Iamblichus employs a "mystical reason" (*μυστικὸς λόγος*, *Myst.* 256.4) to explain the intrinsic connection of the sacred names and sounds used in

14. Porphyry's question begins at *Myst.* 254.11–12, but I have supplemented what Iamblichus leaves out of Porphyry's remarks with Eusebius's record of Porphyry's letter (Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 5.10.8). See Porphyry, *Lettre à Anébon L'Égyptien*, ed. and trans. Henri Dominique Saffrey and Alain-Philippe Segonds (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2012), frag. 77, pp. 71–72. It is quite clear that Iamblichus replies to this question in the *De mysteriis*.

15. In our culture today, we have simply extended this porphyrian trajectory by erasing all notions of divinity whatsoever. We think that if something is not literally and physically real then *we made it up*; it is a "forgery," a projection of our own emotional needs.

hieratic discourse. The names of gods *are* the gods in audible form, properly received and vocalized; they are symbols that unite theurgists to their divine principles within—so long as they are prepared to receive them. Through the chanting of these names, theurgists enter the ἐνέργεια (activity) of the gods by which the cosmos comes into existence. For them, it is less an “understanding” than it is an “embodying-chanting-breathing” of the gods. Thus, Porphyry’s interest in the *meaning* of names entirely misses the point. He is more interested in our concepts and explanations *about* the gods than he is in experiencing and embodying them. Addressing Porphyry’s attachment to the discursive, Iamblichus says:

It is necessary to remove all concepts and logical deductions from divine names... It is the *symbolic* character of divine resemblance, noetic and divine that must be assumed in these names. And, indeed, although it is unknowable to us [ἄγνωστος ἡμῖν] this very fact is its most sacred aspect: for it is too exalted to be divided into knowledge. (*Myst.* 255.5–11)

Iamblichus reveals how these names are theurgically potent; they awaken the divinity within. He says: “We preserve in their entirety the mystical and ineffable images of the gods in our soul; and we raise our soul up through these towards the gods and, as far as is possible, when elevated, we experience union with them” (255.14–256.2). When theurgists chant the names of the gods (their audible images), they enter into undivided union with them, which is to say, they participate in their unifying and demiurgic activity. Theurgists then no longer “think” about the gods; they embody the gods.

To ensure that these rites remain pure, Iamblichus emphasizes repeatedly that union with the god is not initiated or understood by us, for the soul—as discursively oriented—is incapable of understanding union. That the ἄσχημα ὀνόματα are meaningless is therefore not a deficiency but a virtue; they possess the power to awaken us to the divine images in our souls “too exalted to be divided into knowledge.” What is often overlooked in studies of later Neoplatonism or of Platonism generally is the fact that it is a mystagogic tradition, an initiation to participation in divinity, and the first requirement in Platonic mysteries is catharsis, a purging of the soul. This requires an acute awareness of our emotional and discursive habits: our fears, hungers, our instinctual contractions and expansions. In short, it requires a kind of discipline entirely forgotten in contemporary forms of education. Without undergoing catharsis, we cannot understand

their texts let alone their theurgic rituals. Yet we believe the Platonists were somehow “like us,” immersed in the same emotional and discursive habits, and so their “wisdom” has been reframed in terms we can understand.¹⁶

DIVINE NAMES, COMPETITION, AND EMPIRE-BUILDING

Later Platonists would have given little serious attention to competition among theologies. Neoplatonic theurgy was imagined within a polytheistic and pluralistic cosmos: the varieties of culture and geography corresponding to the diversity of theurgic societies. This was consistent with Iamblichus’s metaphysics where the utterly ineffable One can be “known” only in the Many, the henophany of each culture both veiling and revealing its ineffable source. To privilege any one of these henophanies over the others, to proclaim that it alone is true, is an assertion that would have been treated with contempt by theurgic Neoplatonists.¹⁷ Anyone convinced that he or she possessed the truth or the true doctrine would thereby demonstrate their utter ignorance of Platonic mystagogy and wisdom,¹⁸ one that must always remain hidden and that, by definition, *cannot* be the possession of a single religion or culture. From Plato, they knew that the One is

16. Either that or we declare that “all we can discuss as historians of religions is [their] rhetoric; *if there be any experience*, it remains beyond our reach” (Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity*, BERG 1 [Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013], 285, emphasis added). Yet we do presume to discuss their experiences when we interpret their texts. The problem is that we do not take the risk of entering their mystagogy, of being changed by their texts, and so we change the meaning of the texts to fit *our* assumptions. I am reminded of Socrates’s comment to Callicles: “You are lucky Callicles, in having been initiated in the Great Mysteries before the Little; I did not think it was permitted” (*Gorg.* 497C). Scholars today are like Callicles, for we presume to interpret mystagogic texts but skip over the challenge of catharsis, the lesser mysteries.

17. Thus, Julian’s effort to re-Hellenize the empire based on Iamblichean teachings was inevitably a distortion of Iamblichus’s less hegemonic vision. Yet it is one thing to serve as a sage like Iamblichus, surrounded by one’s students in Apamea; it is quite another to attempt to govern an Empire. The social context is inevitably important in shaping one’s metaphysical system. See Radek Chlup’s interesting comments on this issue among later Platonists in *Proclus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 255–78.

18. This is essentially the thesis of Polymnia Athanassiadi who refers to “l’hérésie de l’intellectualisme” against which Iamblichus directed his efforts; see *La Lutte pour l’orthodoxie dans le platonisme tardif: De Numénios à Damascius* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006), 213.

not revealed as “one” but as many, and so it is with all revelation.¹⁹ To hold to a single revelation would create a discursive idol and this, I believe, is why Iamblichus dismisses the Christians of his time who “do not deserve to be mentioned in discussions about the gods for they are ignorant of the distinction between truth and falsity ... [and] are unable to discern the principles from which these come to be” (*Myst.* 179.10–180.3). Any claim to possess the Truth betrays the very principle of theurgy understood as cosmogonic activity rooted in an *ineffable* source, one that necessarily expresses itself in *multiple* forms of demiurgic generosity. Theurgists would find claims to an exclusive possession of truth equivalent to the deranged assertion that “the sun shines only in my backyard”! Platonic mystagogy was a delicate hermetic discipline not well-suited to empire-building.

In his *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*, Proclus addresses the hunger for empire-building exemplified in Alcibiades and sees it against the larger metaphysical context in which the soul moves from a particular to a universal perspective by entering theurgic and philosophic mystagogy (149.17–150.22). Proclus explores how we can become godlike and attain universal power through wisdom. But, as is the case with Alcibiades, the soul that wants to attain universal power without catharsis falls into misguided and monstrous ignorance (and the same might be said for any culture or religion). Yet Proclus does not disparage Alcibiades’s *desire* for universal power. In fact, he believes that such desire has been “seeded” into all souls. *The problem is that we do not know how to properly express that desire.* In explicating this crucial aspect of Platonic pedagogy, Proclus refers to the “divine names” imbedded in the soul. He says:

To strive for power over all men is a sign of unlimited desire, but also of a grand conception and mental anguish that refers to the truly exalted and divine power which has filled all men with itself, is continuously present to all things and holds sway over all that lies within the world. The desire “to fill all mankind with one’s name” bears a surprising resemblance to

19. Adrian Mihai has recently argued that Damascius’s approving survey of various religious systems near the end of his *Princ.* (3.159.6–3.167.25) is not a defensive posture against Christian hegemony, nor is it missionary zeal, but an attempt to show that the multiplicity of expressions of divine revelation is “presque épistémologique,” as Damascius’s Neoplatonic metaphysics would require; see “Comparatism in the Neoplatonic Pantheon of Late Antiquity: Damascius, *De Princ.* III 159.6–167.25,” *Numen* 61 (2014): 457–83.

this. For the ineffable names of the gods have filled the whole world, as the theurgists say....²⁰ The gods, then, have filled the whole world both with themselves and their own names, and, having contemplated these before their birth, and yearning to resemble the gods, but *not knowing the way* [τρόπον] of achieving this, souls become lovers of command and long for the mere representations of those realities and to fill the whole race of men with their name and power. The conceptions of such souls are grand and admirable, but when put into practice they become petty, ignoble, and vaporous because they are pursued without insight [ἐπιστήμη]. Their aspirations are in accord with nature and appropriate, but their actions are unnatural; their grand ideas arise from ... what has been inseminated into us but their expression of it comes from oblivion and ignorance. (*Comm. Alc.* 150.4–23, slightly modified)

Here Proclus explains the root cause of our striving for universal power and our failure to achieve it: it is because we do not know the “way” (τρόπον); we are possessed of the right idea, but do not know how to receive it, live it, express it. Alcibiades stands for all souls who fail to discover this way and who compete with other souls to acquire power. Alcibiades fails to enter the mystagogy, and Proclus’s critique applies just as much to imperial theologians or politicians who pursue vaporous “representations” of reality. Our problem with understanding Proclus’s critique is this: because of our fixation on things (whether physical or conceptual), we misconstrue the ineffable One of the Neoplatonists as if it were a Supreme Being. We imagine that the Platonists constructed a metaphysical nursery where they placed themselves in the warm lap of this Supreme Being. We imagine this Being as “somewhere else,” that the One—imagined as a single and supreme object—is dissociated from multiplicity and materiality. We imagine that Platonists hungered for a purity and unity far above our soiled and evanescent world. *But this is not at all what the Platonists hungered for.* As Plotinus warned us, we have been bewitched by our discursive thinking (*Enn.* 4.4.43.16.). Under this spell, we create grand concepts and glorious ideas and feel exalted by them. This is precisely the failure of Alcibiades and, I would argue, the Christian appropriation of Platonism in its striving for imperial power. We no longer know the way by which we can share in godlike and universal activity.

20. Proclus refers to the *Chaldean Oracles*, frag. 108, which states “For the Paternal Nous has sown symbols throughout the cosmos.” See Ruth Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles, Text, Translation and Commentary*, SGRR 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1989).

So, we might well ask, what is the alternative to our habit of wanting to grasp the whole conceptually, of titanicly trying to put that which escapes knowledge into knowledge, to present unity as duality? I have argued that our way of trying to engage the ineffable is misguided, that we are like Alcibiades when see ancient wisdom merely as a discursive strategy for building an empire. So, then, what might be the proper *τρόπον*? According to these Platonists, it is to engage the One not as a concept or as a Supreme Cause but as unifying activity. It is not, then, the concepts or metaphysical structure that matter; it is not ritual objects—dense or subtle—that should hold our attention. It is the *activity* triggered by these objects in whatever context in so far as it unites us and weaves us into the Whole. The focus is more on our breath and the sound of our voices than on the meanings we ascribe to these sounds. Yet, as embodied souls and therefore “self-alienated” by virtue of our rank in the cosmos, we live in meanings.²¹ It is within the vaporous house of meaning that we are challenged to find ways of receiving and expressing activities that escape meaning. According to Iamblichus and Proclus, the “one in us” (symbolized by the “name of the god that fills the whole world”) is known only as *activity*, by what it produces, and that, paradoxically, includes our self-alienated identity. So, for human souls, to be like the utterly unique and spontaneous One, we must *not* strive to be like our grand conception of it; we must become a completely new creature. It is only when we are *uniquely* rooted and live, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, from our own spontaneous and aboriginal Self, that we discover our *τρόπον* and enter the stream of divine activity that creates the world and our own self-alienated identity.²² The metaphysics of these Platonists, which seems to capture virtually all our attention,

21. As Iamblichus puts it, as embodied souls, we are “made other” (*ἐτεροιοῦσθαι*) to ourselves. “Self-alienation” (*ἄλλοτριωθῆν*) constitutes our existence. For citations, see Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, repr., Kettering, OH: Angelico, 2014), 102. The necessary self-alienation of the embodied soul is perhaps the most difficult and essential element of Iamblichean Platonism. I only allude to it here. The best study of this theme is the brilliant monograph by Carlos Steel, *The Changing Self: A Study on the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius, and Priscianus*, trans. E. Haasl (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1978).

22. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1993), 37. The French Neoplatonic scholar, Jean Trouillard, explored this paradoxical theme in one of his last publications, “Proclos et la joie de quitter le ciel,” *Diotima* 11 (1983): 182–92.

is purposeful only when it leads souls into this activity. This is the insight (ἐπιστήμη) that Proclus says we lack.