

# READING NEOPLATONISM

Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of  
Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius

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## Introduction. Representing a Tradition: Exegesis, Symbol, and Self-reflection

*Reading Neoplatonism* touches on issues as diverse as Plotinus' critique of essentialism and Proclus' references to theurgy. What brings these strands of thought together, and how can a scholar justify tracing these disparate phenomena back to a single source? In this book, I claim that the wide variety of textual strategies we find in the Neoplatonic tradition arises largely as a means of circumventing the hesitations that the tradition as a whole has about discursive thinking. There is a diachronic movement to the book: I begin at the start of the Neoplatonic tradition and end with the last Platonic successor, Damascius.

What makes Neoplatonism a unified tradition, and what kinds of resources enabled Neoplatonists to maintain the continuity of this tradition? Formally, Neoplatonists remained allied over the acceptance of Plato's dialogues as constituting something like a foundational discourse. Yet obviously there is a great deal more to the tradition that brought about its cohesion, above all its metaphysical structures and its associations with pagan religiosity. In short, Neoplatonism was a textual tradition as well as a living school; its adherents practiced a minority religion that struggled to define and maintain itself against an increasingly intolerant mainstream ideology.

But if the Neoplatonists rely on the writings of Plato for their metaphysical enterprise, the central feature of this enterprise is nevertheless its insistence on the faculty of intuition, nous, for the truth of its deliverances. Therefore, the Neoplatonists faced issues very much like our own as they continued to identify themselves with their philosophical tradition. They had to account for the question of transmissibility: how is intuitive wisdom communicated, especially

within the context of a philosophy that repudiates language but continues to practice speculative metaphysics? Linguistic theory was just as significant for the Neoplatonists as it is for modern philosophers, as they worked with such issues as the origins of signification and designation and the problematics of translation.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the Neoplatonists were confronted as we are with an amazing history of competing philosophical schools, with an eclectic scholasticism formed and reformulated throughout the centuries of theorizing that preceded them.

Yet there are factors that show up in virtually any Neoplatonist text, factors that help us to gauge a text's distance from our own modern way of conducting philosophical discourse. I have attempted to identify as one such factor the Neoplatonic insistence on the limitations of discursive thinking and, therefore, on the textual conveyance of non-discursive methodologies. To be sure, due to current research in this area, no scholar would now dispute that there is a strong doctrinal component to Neoplatonist metaphysics and that Plotinus, above all, argues cogently and forcefully for what can rightfully be called his philosophical system. Such doctrines as the theory of emanation, the causal role of the One with respect to the two other primary hypostases, and the relationship between body and soul, as well as aspects of human psychology such as virtue and free will, all constitute a definite philosophical teaching that purports to describe, more or less accurately, what reality is like and what human beings are like.<sup>2</sup> Plotinus also attempts to sketch, hint at, and otherwise indicate a method that one might say oversteps speculative metaphysics as such. The *Enneads* and the texts that follow in its train represent a disciplined attempt to foster, to awaken, or at least to acknowledge what the Neoplatonists conceived to be a sometimes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. M. Hirschle, *Sprachphilosophie und Namenmagie im Neuplatonismus* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> On the doctrinal aspects of Plotinus' philosophical system and for his strength as an exponent of original philosophical doctrine, see the highly persuasive monograph of Gerson 1994.

Gerson views Plotinus as an innovative, systematic philosopher, who attempts to provide ontological solutions to "inadequacies in the accounts of Plato and Aristotle" (Gerson 1994, p. 67) concerning such issues as, for example, the role of the One as a causal principle, or the need for an explanatory principle that transcends the intellect.

dormant capacity in human beings, for *theoria* or vision, for insight and self-awakening.<sup>3</sup>

These texts are written to convey to the reader a wisdom that must simultaneously be discovered either outside the text or beyond the text. But how is it that this tradition concerns itself with what could be called a non-discursive pedagogy, especially given that the tradition itself, as we shall see, places such tremendous weight on textual exegesis? The answer to this question ought to go beyond the merely empirical observation that Neoplatonic philosophical discourse can take several different forms: theurgic ritual, radical Skepticism, visionary journeys, or visual exercises. That much will be obvious to any reader of the tradition.

Decoding these texts involves seeing them as something like meditation manuals rather than mere texts. The non-discursive aspects of the text – the symbols, ritual formulae, myths, and images – are the locus of this pedagogy. Their purpose is to help the reader to learn how to contemplate, to awaken the eye of wisdom, to, in the words of the Chaldean Oracles. “Open the immortal depth of the soul: open all [your] eyes up in the heights.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, these texts constitute a language of vision.

In the remaining pages of this introduction, I consider in more detail the very concept of the exegetical tradition as practiced by the Neoplatonists. The Neoplatonists answered for themselves such questions as how to invoke Platonic authority for their own metaphysical doctrines, how to evaluate the literal meaning of Plato’s texts, and how to interpret Plato’s figurative language, by means of a hermeneutics that first elaborated these seemingly transparent concepts. For example, the word “symbol” (*symbolon*) has certain ritual affiliations that informed the Neoplatonists’ readings of texts as well as

<sup>3</sup> Plotinus, for example, thinks that there is an innate capacity in all human beings, by which they can enjoy “contact with god” (*Enneads* V.1.11.14), although this faculty is largely dormant. Cf. *Enneads* V.1.12.1: “But how is it that although we have such great possessions, we are not aware of them?”

For Plotinus, the task of the philosopher will not be to deliver a discursive exposition concerning the principles of reality, but rather to remind his reader to “turn the act of awareness inward, and insist that it hold attention there” (*Enneads* V.1.12.15).

<sup>4</sup> *Chaldean Oracles*, fragment 112.

the Neoplatonic texts themselves. Likewise, since the question of Plato's own teaching methods is under dispute for some of the Neoplatonists,<sup>5</sup> their notion of what constitutes Platonic doctrine can also be opaque. Even the concept of a text as a neutral medium for conveying doctrine receives scrutiny. Thus, there are esoteric texts, sacred texts, public texts and ritual texts, and all of these texts presuppose the appropriate context for their decipherment.

### **Platonic Exegesis before Plotinus and after Damascius**

Even if we confine a study of Neoplatonic textuality to its exegetical nature, and see Neoplatonism as literally a series of footnotes on Plato, this textuality is still fraught with difficulties, as any student of Plato will observe. There is neither space nor necessity to rehearse here the familiar difficulties raised by Schleiermacher and advanced by the Tübingen school concerning the allusions to extratextual wisdom embedded within Plato's texts, the "things of more value than the things . . . composed" (*Phaedrus* 278d9).<sup>6</sup> Instead, I would like to frame Neoplatonism by looking at the history of ancient Platonic exegesis.

Ancient philosophers tended to see themselves as exegetes of previous texts or doctrines and the Neoplatonists were no exception.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of this traditional claim to orthodoxy is found in *Enneads* V.1.8, Plotinus' doxography concerning his doctrine of the three primary hypostases, the soul, the intel-

<sup>5</sup> For example, in the so-called *Anonymous Prolegomena to the Study of Plato's Doctrines*, the sixth-century Neoplatonist Olympiodorus suggests that Plato teaches by emphasizing the contrast between divine and human intelligence, or by means of maieutics, or by helping the student cultivate self-knowledge. English translations by L. G. Westerink (Amsterdam, 1962).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Krämer, *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics*, for a history of the notion of the Unwritten Doctrines. Krämer and Reale suggest that Unwritten Doctrines are principles that form a foundation for the metaphysics adumbrated in the main corpus of the Platonic dialogues but that were, for various reasons, never explicitly espoused as foundational. I do not pursue this line of inquiry in this book for the simple reason that I am concerned here with non-discursive thinking. Since these principles were discursively formulated, according to Krämer and others who take this line of approach, it seems to me to make little difference as to whether they were orally transmitted or inscribed in the dialogues of Plato.

<sup>7</sup> On Plotinus as exegete of Plato, see Charrue 1978, Dörrie 1974, and most recently Gatti in Gerson 1996, pp. 10–38.



lect, and the One: “our present doctrines are an exegesis of those [ancient teachings], and so the writings of Plato himself provide evidence that our doctrines are of ancient origin. (V.1.8.11–15).”<sup>8</sup> Plotinus elaborates this programmatic statement regarding the exegetical nature of his teaching elsewhere in his works. In particular, Plotinus raises the question of how the methods of the Platonic exegete differ from the methods employed by members of other schools. Because intellectual knowledge resists discursive formulation, Platonic exegesis turns out to be, perhaps surprisingly, fundamentally extratextual. In the following passage, Plotinus is expounding the difficulties surrounding an inquiry into the nature of intellectual knowledge: “We have failed to arrive at understanding because we think that this knowledge consists in theorems, or in drawing conclusions from premises; but that kind of thing has nothing to do with knowledge here. Now if someone wishes to argue about these matters, he is permitted to do so for the time being. As for the knowledge [in intellect] which Plato has in sight when he says, ‘It is not one thing, distinct from that in which it exists . . .’” (V.8.4.48–53).

Plotinus suggests that one can interpret Plato only by relying on an intuition that fully assimilates the doctrine in question; one must, according to Plotinus, become the exegesis. If Plotinus’ Platonic exegesis implies a paradoxical devaluation of the text, it is because the status of the text is always in question throughout the long history of the Platonic tradition. Throughout this history, the one question repeatedly asked is, what were the doctrines of Plato and how does one recognize Platonic teaching? By looking at this question of what constitutes Platonic dogmatism in the history of exegesis, we gain a vantage point from which to view the texts of Neoplatonism.

We know that the Middle Platonists practiced an unusual form of textual exegesis, in which so-called items of doctrine found within the text were marked with an obelisk to signify their doctrinality, and then imported wholesale and without any dialogic contextualization, into a series of dogmata, or teachings, that were thought to contain the most important aspects of Plato’s philosophy. Any reader who has had the occasion to plod through the somewhat disengaged

<sup>8</sup> On this passage, see the commentary of Atkinson 1983, p. 192.

*Didaskalikos* of Alcinous or analog handbooks<sup>9</sup> recognizes at once the artificiality of excerpting what are purportedly Platonic tenets from the dramatic and disputational arena in which those same tenets were originally framed. The credibility of the *Handbook of Platonism* is further strained since it purports to be a literal summary of Plato's principal doctrines and yet attributes to Plato innovations in the areas of ethics and logic that were never even conceived by him.<sup>10</sup> At any rate, the point of this example is to remind the reader of one extreme version of textual literalism, in which philosophy is thought to consist of a list of tenets, even if in some cases that list is supplemented by anachronistic material culled from the current philosophical vocabulary.

What strikes me about such works as the *Didaskalikos* is the boldness by which they are produced, an audacity occasioned by the handbook approach that displays an insensitivity to the hesitations Plato himself expressed over the written method of conveying doctrines as well as to the literary form of the dialogues. If the Middle Platonists shared with the Neoplatonists that peculiar amalgam of Hellenistic and Peripatetic philosophy that formed the basis of their scholastic disputes, they most certainly did not share the Neoplatonists' heartfelt, passionate scrutiny concerning the true meaning of almost every word in Plato's texts. This overconfidence in the transparency of the text, a rashness signified by the exegete's dogmatizing obelisk, can be strikingly contrasted with the diffidence that one sees at the very end of the Neoplatonic era. Glancing at the Platonic commentaries and handbooks produced in the sixth century, in the school of Olympiodorus, one notices a veritable obsession with the issue of Plato's own hesitations as evinced in his texts.

Olympiodorus devotes chapter 10 of his *Prolegomena to the Study of Platonic Philosophy* to the refutation of an *ephectic*, or non-dogmatic, Plato:

<sup>9</sup> As, for example, Apuleius' *De Platone et eius dogmate*. See Dillon 1993 and Whittaker 1990 for the most recent and authoritative texts and translations of the *Didaskalikos*.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Alcinous attributes to Plato what amounts to the entire system of Peripatetic ethics. See *Didaskalikos* and Dillon's commentary on chapters 5 and 6. Perhaps "credibility" is the wrong word, since the purpose of the *Handbook* remains unknown. There seem to be Peripatetic sources in use throughout and a particularly close connection to the Peripatetic ethics of Arius Didymus.

Plato also superseded the philosophy of the New Academy since that school gave precedence to *akatalepsia*, while Plato demonstrated that there do exist cognitions grounded in genuine knowledge. Nevertheless, some assert, assimilating Plato to the *ephectics* and to the Academicians, that he too maintained the doctrine of *akatalepsia*.

These remarks are curious, for we have no indication that a Skeptical reading of Plato was current or even conceivable at this time. In fact, as the context makes clear, the Skeptics are represented in this passage as a prior philosophical school; chapters 7 through 10 present a concise history of philosophy that is remarkably free from any notions of philosophical currency attributable to the views that fall under its purview: “there has been no shortage of philosophical *haireseis* (schools) both before and after Plato, yet he surpassed all of them by his teaching, his thought, and in every possible way” (*Prolegomena* 7.1).

Olympiodorus performs the exegete’s role throughout his refutation of a non-dogmatic Plato, turning first to the grammatical item, Plato’s use of what Olympiodorus terms the “hesitating” adverbs, such as “probably” (εἰκος), “perhaps” (ἴσος), and “as I imagine” (τάχ’ ὡς οἶμαι). Nevertheless, Olympiodorus manages to sustain a superficially pedantic tone in the four pages he devotes to this end, eschewing any close reading of the dialogues, briefly glossing *topoi* such as recollection, and importing issues that have no foundation in Plato, as, for example, his refutation of the *tabula rasa* theory of the soul (10.27).

In short, Olympiodorus’ schoolroom lesson has little interest as a document of sixth-century Skepticism: one wonders, for example, if Olympiodorus was familiar with any of the writings of Sextus Empiricus or was more likely using the brief paragraph in Diogenes’ *Life of Plato* to inform his topic.<sup>11</sup> Nor indeed has it much value as an exegetical text, as we have seen. Its importance, if it can be said to have any, lies rather in the particular fascination that Plato’s teach-

<sup>11</sup> The word *ephektikos*, used of Plato in *Prolegomena* 10, is found in Diogenes Laertius. At any rate, Sextus at *PHI* 221 does not in fact define Plato as a Skeptic. An alternative possibility is that the Neoplatonists were familiar, not with the works of Sextus Empiricus, but with those of Aenesidemus. We know that Aenesidemus’ book survived until the time of Photius because of Photius’ synopsis of the ten modes associated with Aenesidemus.

ing seems to have held for the school of Ammonius, the teacher of Olympiodorus and of Damascius.

We know from Olympiodorus' commentaries on the *Gorgias* and on the *Phaedo* that Ammonius had written a treatise devoted to *Phaedo* 69D<sub>4</sub>–6 in which he proved that this passage did not call into question or cast doubt upon the immortality of the soul.<sup>12</sup> For now, we note that Olympiodorus transmitted his obsession with the dogmatic Plato to his own student, the Christian Neoplatonist Elias, who again discusses the Ephectics as a distinct philosophical school in the preface to his *Commentary on the Categories*. In this charming rendition of Plato as a champion of truth against its arch detractors, the Ephectics, who deny that anything can be known, and the Protagoreans, who assert that everything is true, Elias too alludes to the immortality of the soul to illustrate his theme:

[The Ephectics] suppressed the refutation of a premise. And this school is also known as the Three-footed, since they answered with three alternatives: when asked the definition of soul, whether it was mortal or immortal, they answered, "it is either mortal or immortal or neither or both." The school is also known as "aporematic," because it maintains a state of aporia and does not permit solutions.

And they oppose the Protagoreans. The Protagoreans maintained that truth prevailed, saying that what each person believes is actually true. But Plato takes both schools to task in his own terms, refuting the Ephectics in the *Theaetetus* thus:

"Do you maintain that nothing can be known as a result of knowing [this fact] or as a result of not knowing it? For if you do so knowingly, then behold, there is knowledge. But if not knowingly, then we shall not accept what you say, since you don't know [what you are talking about] when you say that nothing is knowable." Plato refutes the Protagoreans in the *Protagoras*, as follows: "Are we right or wrong when we say that you are wrong, Protagoras? If we are right, then you are wrong, and therefore, there is falsehood. But if we are wrong while you are right, there again falsehood exists. Therefore, whether you are right or wrong, you are wrong." (Elias *In Cat. Profemium* 109.24–110.8)

These dialogues are used to invent a dilemma concerning the existence of propositional truth. In what follows, we see that Elias is

<sup>12</sup> We also know that the subject of Plato's dogmatism or Skepticism was frequently raised in the introductions of the Aristotelian Commentators, possibly due to the influence of Ammonius. See the introduction to *Prolegomena*, p. lxiii.

concerned once more to portray Plato as a dogmatic philosopher, and so to rescue him from what he sees as a pair of unattractive, sophistic alternatives. In the next passage there is an almost verbatim echo of the *Prolegomena's* interest in the grammar of doubt: "Some have thought that Plato too belonged to the [Ephetic] school, above all since he used adverbs that indicated doubt, as when he said, 'I think,' 'Perhaps,' 'Maybe,' and 'I guess.'" This quotation from Elias repeats many themes found in the *Prolegomena*; perhaps the prefaces to these works were stamped out of a single mold. Whether this material became some kind of scholastic siglum, a seal of orthodoxy, or had perhaps a propagandistic purpose, is a question worth exploring, but one that must be postponed for the present.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, it is enough to notice not only that Ammonius, Olympiodorus, and Elias all belonged to the Commentator tradition and therefore that their works could well be sets of lecture notes, school disputations, or textbook material, but also that their work on Plato was rather mediocre.<sup>14</sup> According to Damascius, these teachers were entrenched Aristotelians; posterity has disposed of their Platonic Commentaries, which had to compete with the more brilliant works of Proclus and Damascius. We should not expect to find great insights or staggering hermeneutics on the subject of Platonism in these prefaces or textbooks.<sup>15</sup>

Instead, we do find a consistently developed theme, which has to do with the dogmatic reading of Plato's dialogues. Although it is not clear how thoroughgoing these authors proved to be in their scrutiny of Plato's dialogic epistemology, one fact seems trenchant: they associated Plato with an ambivalent dogmatism. That is, their concern to defend the dogmatism of Plato arose out of their sensitivity to the qualified, possibly hesitant nature of his assertions, and no doubt to the negotiable character of truth that inevitably arises in the dia-

<sup>13</sup> On the contents of the Proemia to the Aristotelian Commentators on Plato, see the work of Phillippe Hoffman 1987a.

<sup>14</sup> Still useful on the subject of Olympiodorus is R. Vancourt, *Les derniers Commentateurs Alexandrins d'Aristote. L'École d'Olympiodore* (Lille, 1941).

<sup>15</sup> Damascius *Life of Isidore*, p. 110: "Ammonius was extremely diligent and proved to be of the utmost assistance to the various Commentators of his generation. But he was a rather entrenched Aristotelian" (my trans.). For a comparison between the *Prolegomena* and the *Didaskalikos* of Alcinous, see Segonds's *Introduction*, p. vii (*Prolégomenes à la philosophie de Platon*, texte établi par Westerink et traduit par Trouillord avec la collaboration de A. Segonds (Paris, 1990).

logue form and is marked by the adverbs of hesitation. Olympiodorus casually inserts the Neoplatonic interpretation of Socrates' denial that he is a teacher: "again [Plato] says, 'I teach no one,' " in the sense of "I do not impart [my own] teachings to anyone," and caps this gloss with a paraphrase of the *Theaetetus* and the *Seventh Letter*. In reply to these worries, Olympiodorus and Elias cull sentences from the dialogues that reveal a bias toward what they might regard as true teaching. For example, Olympiodorus ends his refutation of Plato's Skepticism with a paraphrase from the *Gorgias*: "If you do not listen when you yourself are making assertions, then you will not be convinced if someone else is the speaker. How could we consider [the author of this sentence] to be a Skeptic?" (*Prolegomena* 11.25).

To summarize this discussion, Ammonius and his school are at least somewhat ambivalent in their assessment of Plato's dogmatism; they clearly distinguish the style and teaching methods that he cultivates from ordinary dogmatism. At times, they hint that Plato's teachings involve an appeal to a kind of intuitive wisdom, based on introspection, on divine or innate knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Finally, this hermeneutics of ambivalence is peculiarly associated with one particular exegete, Ammonius, and his immediate students and philosophical descendants. We have evidence that Olympiodorus and Elias were students of Ammonius, and we have very strong verbal agreements within the prefatory material to the Commentary works that these philosophers authored.<sup>17</sup> With these conclusions in mind, let us turn to consider Damascius, the last Platonic successor and the figure with whom I end this study.

We know from the *Life of Isidore* that Damascius at some time had studied with Ammonius (*V.I.* 111.10: "Damascius records that Ammonius had expounded Plato to him").<sup>18</sup> However remote his intel-

<sup>16</sup> *Prolegomena* 10.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. p. 61 of Segonds' commentary on the *Prolegomena*, and the references cited there. See also the following passages. I am extremely indebted to Professor Harold Tarrant of New Castle College for these references. See now Tarrant's translation of Olympiodorus' *Commentary on the Gorgias* (Leiden, 1998). Indeed, it is Tarrant's work on the exegetical works of the Alexandrian school that has made possible my own very limited inquiry. Hermias, *In Phaedrum* 20.7; Proclus *In Alc.* 21.10–24.10; 95.25–96.22; Olympiodorus *In Alc.* 24.11–20; 33.21–34.2; 212.14–18; Olymp. *In Phae.* I 8.3; 6; 14; Olymp. *In Gorg.* 60.11–15; 188.15–17.

<sup>18</sup> Zintzen, *Damascii vitae Isidori Reliquiae*, 1976 fr. 128. From Suda IV 761, 3, s.v., φρενοβλαβεῖς.

lectual affiliation with the Alexandrian school, Damascius makes a point of reporting on and recording the activities of this group in the *Life of Isidore*, so that we can safely assume his familiarity with its exegetical methods. This path of inquiry has at least enabled us to track the exegetical puzzle of a non-dogmatic Plato back into the Late Athenian Academy, via the shadowy figure of Ammonius. And it has confirmed the fact that Neoplatonism is partially informed by ancient difficulties surrounding the interpretation of Plato.

What I hope I have accomplished by framing the Neoplatonist tradition with this cursory look at Middle Platonism and the Commentators is to suggest that the issues of textual practice, of dogmatism and exegesis, were very much alive for the ancient students of Plato, just as they are for us today. Just as it has become fashionable for some modern students of Plato to refuse to attribute to Plato any of the interlocutors' statements as constituting a doctrinal position, so some strands within the Commentator tradition emphasized the difficulty of ascertaining the existence of any theses Plato might have held with conviction. An even earlier exegetical style evinced in Middle Platonism completely ignored the dialogic presentation of the doctrines that it literally ascribed to Plato, in a way that might remind one of the criticism practiced earlier in our own academic tradition. Although Neoplatonists practiced a distinctive method of exegesis, this is not to confine Neoplatonism to its role as an exegetical school. In fact, the Neoplatonists promulgated a number of doctrines deliberately designed to support the notion of a tradition outside the texts as well as a transmission of wisdom outside the literal teachings of Plato.

### **The Symbol**

One question concerning the relative place of texts within the tradition of Neoplatonism and, particularly, the Neoplatonic valuation of texts is bound up with the dispute between theurgy and philosophy in the third and fourth centuries.<sup>19</sup> At the center of this dispute are the place and significance of the symbol, or *sunthema*, the ritual object by means of which theurgic elevation was thought to take

<sup>19</sup> On this dispute, see Sheppard, Shaw, and Smith.

place.<sup>20</sup> Thus what I am interested in is not so much a contemporary discussion of the place of the symbolic within exegesis, that is, a philosophy of hermeneutics in the abstract. Rather, what I propose to look at is the place of the *symbolon*, or *sunthema*, the ritual object in Neoplatonism, as a way of grounding a discussion of symbolism, and how to read it in the exegesis of Neoplatonic texts. Although chapter 5 applies contemporary linguistic theory to what I there call Plotinus' metaphors, I would like in this introduction to suggest that the role of metaphor in the *Enneads* of Plotinus is linked to the larger question of symbolism as construed by the Neoplatonists.

I define "symbol" as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first. . . . Interpretation is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning.<sup>21</sup>

This quotation, from Ricoeur's *The Conflict of Interpretations* indicates a theory of exegesis that goes exactly *against* the spirit of Neoplatonic symbolism, or so I would argue. For the theurgists, a *symbolon* is not a meaning at all, nor is a *symbolon* subsidiary to, derivative of, or referential to a literal meaning. Instead, the *symbolon* is a divinely installed switch, so to speak, that operates within the context of ritual. Symbols function as crossroads, as junctures that allow the soul to trace its path back to its origins. For Neoplatonists, the process of interpreting symbols involves a complex mixture of traditional lore and radical self-reflection.

What does it mean to interpret the symbolic expressions of Neoplatonism, and how should we proceed when we encounter a symbol or, as we would say, a metaphor, within the text? By looking at the tradition as a whole in the light of these questions, we gain a foothold by which to perform an exegesis that may coincide more exactly with the terms of Neoplatonic theory. Moreover, this approach reveals, somewhat unexpectedly, a certain unity in a tradition that is normally thought to have been ruptured by the split between theurgy and philosophy in the third and fourth centuries.

To take one example, we know that Iamblichus composed a work

<sup>20</sup> See Coulter for a history of the word *symbolon*.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 12.



entitled “A Compendium of Pythagorean Teachings,”<sup>22</sup> of which one book comprised the *Protrepticus*, or “Exhortation to Philosophy.” This work, still extant, is a kind of exegesis of the Platonic tradition, as well as a discourse on how to read the texts of philosophy in general, and how to read Pythagorean symbolism in particular. Thus in chapter 21 of the *Protrepticus*, we find a catalogue of the so-called Pythagorean *symbola* as well as a method of decoding them according to Neoplatonic principles of exegesis. In this text also we find Iamblichus remarking that the entire philosophical tradition in which he finds himself participating (the Pythagorean, which was for Iamblichus the pristine form of Platonism)<sup>23</sup> employs symbols as its primary method of teaching: “the whole of Pythagorean teaching is unique in that it is symbolic” (*Prot.* 34, p. 247).<sup>24</sup> What characterizes this tradition, according to Iamblichus, is its reliance on symbolic modes of discourse. Iamblichus’ *Protrepticus* culminates in his gradual revelations concerning the meaning of Pythagorean symbolism, as if to suggest that they constitute in themselves an initiation into the contemplative life.<sup>25</sup>

The final method for exhortation is the one [that makes use of different kinds of] symbols: the kind unique to this sect and not revealed to other schools; the public kind shared with the other schools. . . . Accordingly we will introduce in our discourse certain exoteric explanations, those shared with all philosophy . . . and then gradually mix in the more authentic teachings of the Pythagoreans . . . and this method will lead us imperceptibly from exoteric conceptions . . . into the heights, elevating the thoughts of everyone who approaches with genuine effort. (*Prot.* 29, p. 132, with omissions)

Iamblichus goes on to discuss the importance of the distinction between esoteric and exoteric doctrines, pointing to the Pythagorean separation of mere auditors from the actual followers of Pythagoras, as well as to the Pythagorean rule of silence and non-disclosure to the uninitiated. What follows is an utterly fascinating interpretation of 39 Pythagorean *akousmata*, or sayings that are available to the general public but whose meanings are divulged only

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Larsen 1972 Chapitre II, “Synagoge Pythagorica,” and the Budé edition of the *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, Notice, pp. 5–7. Five books belonged to this collection.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Larsen 1972, pp. 70–90; O’Meara 1989; and for a still briefer survey of the relevant material, chapter 6 below.

<sup>24</sup> Cited by Larsen 1972, p. 88 ft. 101.

<sup>25</sup> Larsen 1972, p. 103. Iamblichus *Prot.* 29, pp. 130–1.

according to Pythagorean teaching. The general tendency within this interpretation is to remind the student of the priority of developing an accurate conception of wisdom, and in this sense the text becomes quite self-referential, as in the following interpretation of the Pythagorean saying, “Avoid the highways and take the short-cuts” (*Prot.*, p. 137):

I think this saying tends in the same direction. For it exhorts one to keep away from the vulgar and merely human life, and thinks it better to follow the detached, divine life, and it asserts that one ought to ignore *communis opinio* and value instead one’s own thoughts, which are secret, etc. (*Prot.*, pp. 137–8)

So in this book, we can imagine Iamblichus providing the student with a kind of counter-*Didaskalikos*, an esoteric handbook that invokes symbols rather than tenets.<sup>26</sup> A thorough exhortation to philosophy, it includes a series of precautions, embodied in the *akousmata*, concerning the form, accessibility, and practice of genuine wisdom. Iamblichus here warns the would-be student that wisdom is not publicly available in the sense that the true purport of its deliverances can be discovered only when one is willing to venture beyond the texts that commonly circulate.<sup>27</sup> Although this example concerns itself once more with exegesis and reliance on the literal text, it also introduces the crucial concept of the symbol.

This concept is so crucial because it has come to signify a breach in the Neoplatonic tradition, manifested in the polemics between Plotinus’ disciple Porphyry and the Syrian philosopher Iamblichus, concerning the place and function of ritual *askesis* in the philosophic life. We know about this dispute from Iamblichus’ work *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians*, which is prefaced with the following words: “the teacher Abammon’s reply to a letter of Porphyry and solutions to the difficulties [posed] in it” (*DM*, Scholion). The book opens with Iamblichus’ adopting the persona of an Egyptian prophet who will

<sup>26</sup> Not that Iamblichus is writing in the tradition of the *Didaskalikos*, of course, since he is writing in the tradition of Aristotle’s *Protrepticus*. See Larsen on the Protreptic tradition.

<sup>27</sup> On the initiatory uses of Pythagorean maxims, see I. Hadot 1978, who discusses the place of Simplicius’ *Commentary on the Manual of Epictetus*. According to Hadot, the importance of the Pythagorean *Sentences* as well as the maxims of Epictetus’ *Handbook* is due to the method of moral education in this epoch. On the question of precepts, moral rules, and the value of *Sententiae*, see Seneca, Epistle 94.

attempt to answer Porphyry's difficulties concerning the practice of theurgy. As is well known, behind Iamblichus' insistence, contra Porphyry, on the ritual efficacy of certain symbols for the purpose of uniting the individual soul with the gods, lies a psychological tenet. Iamblichus follows Aristotle in holding that the human soul is fully embodied; he denies Plotinus' doctrine that the highest part of the soul always remains undescended, permanently attached to the intellectual realm.

From this conception of the soul, Iamblichus argues that knowledge or intellection necessarily fails to allow the individual soul to free itself from its human limitations: "not even gnosis [grants] contact with the divine. For gnosis remains barred [from its object] because of a certain otherness" (*DM* 7, p. 42). Again Iamblichus maintains that "thinking does not connect theurgists with divine beings, for what would prevent those who philosophize theoretically from having theurgic union with the gods? Rather . . . it is the power of ineffable symbols comprehended by the gods alone, that establishes theurgic union"<sup>28</sup> (*DM* 96, 13). Lack of space prohibits more details here about the dispute between Porphyry and Iamblichus.<sup>29</sup> What is important is that this dispute has suggested to some scholars that the theurgic Neoplatonism of Iamblichus and its associated religiosity represent a foreign and divergent philosophy from that of Plotinus' school. Perhaps too this scholarly judgment has resulted in a way of reading Plotinus' *Enneads* that ultimately overlooks its ritual affiliations and its symbolism as subordinate to or superseded by discursively expressed doctrine.<sup>30</sup> In fact, recent studies of Iamblichus and Plotinus have suggested that both philosophers employ mathematical symbolism not just to represent features of the intelligible world but also as part of a contemplative language intended to convey a sense of the unitive knowing celebrated as the hallmark of the tradition.<sup>31</sup>

This brief excursus on the nature of Neoplatonic symbolism allows us once more to consider what a proper Neoplatonic herme-

<sup>28</sup> Translation of Gregory Shaw. Shaw 1995, p. 84.

<sup>29</sup> Readers should consult Shaw 1995, pp. 13–15; Wallis 1972, pp. 107–10; Dillon 1987, and especially Finamore 1985 on this topic.

<sup>30</sup> See chapter 5 below for this scholarly controversy and for an attempt to read the *Enneads* in light of theurgic practices.

<sup>31</sup> Bussanich 1997; Shaw 1995; Shaw 1993.

neutics would be like. On the one hand, Neoplatonic texts can be considered in terms of their own exegetical functions; they represent a pedagogical tradition that nevertheless repudiates, as we have seen, a literal interpretation of the text. On the other hand, these same texts are also the main vehicle of expression for a tradition that explicates its original insights in terms of a theory of non-discursive thinking. It is not simply the conventional contrast between primary and secondary meanings or the literary contrast between literal and metaphorical utterances that is at stake in a Neoplatonic hermeneutics. Rather, what this book attempts, in its chapters on metaphor, Orphic and Pythagorean symbolism, and Proclus' theurgic discourse, is an interpretation of Neoplatonic texts within the framework of the tradition's own pronouncements about the meaning of symbols. And this attempt lands us in an ancient hermeneutic circle. For many of these symbolisms invoke a context of tradition and suggest that to be appreciated, the symbols must be expounded by and for those who belong to the tradition. We saw this in the case of Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*. In this sense, perhaps Ricouer's way of describing the hermeneutic circle, "you must understand in order to believe but you must believe in order to understand,"<sup>32</sup> has some relevance for Neoplatonism.

As examples of this Neoplatonic promotion of tradition, one may cite the almost uniform invocation of Pythagoras' divine initiation and the consequent prestige of mathematical symbolism, or again, the frequent allusions to the Orphic theogony as anchoring Neoplatonic cosmological speculation in divine revelation. In fact, the very institution of *Diadoche*, the transmission of the Neoplatonic mantle within the revived academy, is once more part of this prestige accorded to tradition.<sup>33</sup> Celebration of the master's birthday, hagiographic bibliographies, and general veneration of the teacher as the most authoritative source of wisdom are all purposefully deployed by the Neoplatonists (witness Porphyry's hagiographic *Life of Plotinus* attached as preface to the *Enneads*) to remind the reader of the appropriate context for interpretation.

<sup>32</sup> Ricouer, *Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 298.

<sup>33</sup> See Lim 1995 and Fowden 1989 and the references that they cite.

## Reflection

Still, we today do not belong to the Neoplatonic tradition; we cannot be initiated into the inner circle of Plotinus' listeners, and we have no one to instruct us in theurgic practice. If the context for Neoplatonic exegesis is the (at least partially fabricated) notion of tradition, in reality the symbols and doctrines encountered in these texts are presumably thought by their authors to be accessible. Their meaning is to be recovered, in Plotinus' words, by self-inquiry (Plotinus insists that "knowing something in the strict sense amounts to knowing oneself" [V.3.61]) or by "turning within oneself and seeing the vision as one [with the self] and as oneself" (V.8.10.40). Throughout this book, I am concerned to discuss not only Neoplatonic textuality but also Neoplatonic pedagogy by means of the doctrine of non-discursive thinking. This pedagogy was foremost and always conceived by the Neoplatonists as a search for self-knowledge, a contemplative *askesis* that demands from its practitioner not just a familiarity with the texts of the tradition but also the effort to assimilate those texts.

The questions that remain to be asked are how such assimilation is thought to take place and whether or not the texts themselves provide clues to this process. Part of the appeal for Iamblichus and Porphyry of the Pythagorean tradition is that it allows them to envision philosophical speculation within the environment of the Pythagorean *modus vivendi*. Other Neoplatonists rely on the doctrine of contemplative virtues, grades or stations of wisdom by which one traverses the path that theory sets out. For example, although in the *Sententiae ad Intelligibilia Ducentes* (Sentences Leading to the Intelligible World)<sup>34</sup> Porphyry distinguishes among four classes of *arete*, it is clear that each kind – civic, kathartic, noetic, and paradigmatic – is a mode of training the mind, of transforming one's consciousness so that this assimilation can take place. In this treatise, Porphyry offers an excursus on the practice of contemplation, affording the modern reader a rare glimpse of Neoplatonic pedagogy.

The first grade, civic virtue, allows the student to govern the

<sup>34</sup> This treatise is more or less a compendium containing extracts from the *Enneads*, with some additions by Porphyry, particularly in the area of Neoplatonic ethics. The modern critical text is by E. Lamberz (Leipzig, 1975).

emotions and to integrate the personality around the practice of contemplation.<sup>35</sup> Kathartic, or contemplative, virtue results in *apatheia*, in the complete detachment of the self from its embodied condition and the refusal to identify with the body as defining the self.<sup>36</sup> The third class comprises the noetic virtues, those that permit the soul a deeper form of self-discovery: “without that which is prior to soul [e.g., nous] the soul does not see what belongs to it” (*Sent.* 32, p. 37). These virtues are defined in terms of the soul’s ability to direct its attention inwardly, to abide in a state of contemplation, and to become one with the object of contemplation. Attention, concentration, control of thoughts, and absorption in the object to which the mind is present are all governed by practice at this stage. Porphyry thus defines a very precise contemplative psychology as a gradual process of inner transformation, of identifying, purifying, and concentrating the faculty of awareness to cultivate wisdom, which is defined as the native work of this faculty (*Sent.* 32, p. 29).<sup>37</sup>

What this contemplative psychology, or *askesis*, shows us is that self-reflection is construed as a process of working with the mind and developing its powers of concentration. This training in concentration is part of the non-discursive methodology that complements the textual side of the tradition. Several chapters in this book address the psychology of contemplation and even suggest that the symbol, as it is found in Neoplatonic texts, often becomes a contemplative object, one whose meaning can be discovered only through an intense process of concentration, assimilation, and self-reflection. The process of interpreting the Neoplatonic symbol, and hence the Neoplatonic text, is entirely dependent on the act of self-reflection.

This hermeneutic conclusion should not come as a complete surprise. In modern hermeneutic theory, imagination and the phenomenology of experience are sometimes given priority over de-

<sup>35</sup> Porphyry *Sent.* 32, p. 23: “sophrosune is the agreement and harmony of the appetitive faculty with the rational faculty.”

<sup>36</sup> Porphyry *Sent.* 32, p. 25: “Being established in theoretic [e.g., kathartic] virtue results in apatheia.”

<sup>37</sup> Porphyry *Sent.* 32, p. 29: “The fourth class of virtues are the paradigmatic, which are seated in the intellect and are more potent than the psychic virtues and function as the causes of these.”

scriptive metaphysics.<sup>38</sup> Certainly the great modern exponent of symbolic hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur, has emphasized the links between reflection and interpretation. As he puts it: “reflection is the effort to recomprehend the *ego* of the *ego cogito* in the mirror of its object, its works, and ultimately its acts.”<sup>39</sup> And very few will fail to be aware that psychoanalytic models provide us with grounds for associating the act of interpretation with the practice of self-reflection.<sup>40</sup>

### **Conclusion: Non-discursive Methodology in the Tradition**

Let me try now to reiterate some of the themes touched on this introduction by way of summarizing the main argument of the book. The Neoplatonists rely on and defer to nous, a faculty or perhaps principle of intuition that, the majority of Plotinus scholars would now agree,<sup>41</sup> is characterized by self-reflection.<sup>42</sup> Not only does this principle ground the metaphysical insights that go into making up a body of philosophical truths, but this faculty is also the source of self-knowledge.<sup>43</sup> These two kinds of knowledge, philosophical insight and self-knowledge, turn out to be one and the same thing for the

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Sellers, *Delimitations. Phenomenology and the Demise of Metaphysics*. Bloomington, 1997.

<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols,” in *Conflict of Interpretations*.

<sup>40</sup> I am not here applying a psychoanalytic reading to Neoplatonic texts, even though, for the most part, this book is concerned with the third hypostasis, the level of soul. The reason for my concentration on this hypostasis is that the soul, according to Plotinus, is characterized by discursive thinking; the texts that become important in the following chapters are aimed primarily at directing the discursively operating mind to a different mode of thinking. Psychoanalytic interpretations of Neoplatonic doctrines would not be valid from within the perspective of Neoplatonism, since for the Neoplatonists, intellect is not, properly speaking, a faculty that belongs to the human psyche. Hence intellect cannot be understood primarily through studying the history of the individual mind or soul. See Blumenthal 1971 and Blumenthal 1996.

<sup>41</sup> See especially Gerson 1997 and 1994, p. 55: “For Plotinus, we might say that since Intellect is immaterial, it naturally follows that knowing is essentially self-knowing. Knowing implies infallibility and infallibility can only obtain when there is self-reflexivity.”

<sup>42</sup> Emilsson 1996 speaks rather of intellect’s “self-consciousness.”

<sup>43</sup> In using the word “faculty,” I do not mean to imply that the Neoplatonists conceived of intellect as a capacity purely or even substantially belonging to the individual human soul. Perhaps it is better to speak of the intellect as a principle rather than as a faculty.

Neoplatonists. However elaborate their metaphysics may sometimes appear, the structures reported and discovered by Neoplatonists are part and parcel with self-discovery.

What characterizes the faculty of insight is unitive knowing, non-separation of subject and object, or complete assimilation to and identification with the object of knowledge. And this form of unitive knowing is non-discursive. But what exactly is nous, and how does one gain access to it? Could it be that the Neoplatonists were uninterested in answering these questions and instead relied on the authoritative pronouncements of tradition to dispel or defer any anxiety about the existence of nous and the availability of intellectually grounded truth?

I doubt this. In addition to the metaphysical structures assumed and elaborated in the tradition, this tradition also transmitted a non-discursive methodology. We saw earlier that Iamblichus in his *Protrepticus* warns the student that wisdom is not publicly available, that it instead demands both initiation and *askesis* if it is to become available at all. To the questions, what is this *askesis*, and how did the Neoplatonists think one ought to practice it, we glimpsed possible answers in the contemplative virtues of Porphyry, who describes a gradual training that develops the mind's capacity for non-discursive, or unitive, thinking.

In the following chapters, I treat the non-discursive or non-doctrinal aspects of the texts – symbols, visualizations, and so on – as further elements of this tradition. That is, I show that the texts reveal an inclination to non-discursive methodologies and, further, that the symbol can and sometimes does function as the locus for inculcating this kind of method. In the first part of the book, in the chapters that center on Plotinus' thought exercises and metaphors, I try to reconstitute the kind of non-discursive methodology that I suspect is operating between the lines of the literal text. This methodology relies on self-reflection, on introspection, and on self-awareness, but of a highly specialized sort, one that I will now attempt to outline, but which I elaborate in more detail in chapters 3 through 7. Let me ask the reader's indulgence as I briefly list the features of this self-reflection and also suggest that the individual chapters provide greater clarification.

Non-discursive thinking does not involve thinking about anything, either by way of propositions or by way of theorems, and so on