

Lessons from the Body

Alchemy and Spiritual Exercises in the First *Lesson on Excellence* of Zosimos of Panopolis

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Abstract: This chapter first demonstrates that Zosimos of Panopolis, the first identifiable writer of Greek alchemical commentaries, was most likely writing in the function of a client scholar. It then points to striking parallels between the images found in the first *Lesson On Excellence* and those found in eschatological narratives, thus providing evidence for seeing in the *Lesson* more than the allegorical transcription of metallurgical recipes. Read together with other passages from his work, the *Lesson* shows that Zosimos also saw alchemy as a soteriological practice by which one could extract his or her soul (considered as immaterial) from its body and the material world. It concludes by noting that Zosimos' description of alchemy is close to what Pierre Hadot called spiritual exercises and that his philosophical outlook was not different from that of many other late antique scholars.

The ears of corn nodding down to the ground, the lion's puckered brow, the foam gushing from the boar's mouth, and much else besides—looked at in isolation these things are far from lovely, but their consequence on the processes of nature enhances them and gives them attraction. So any man with a feeling and deeper insight for the workings of the whole will find some pleasure in almost every aspect of their disposition, including the incidental consequences. Such a man will take no

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less delight in the living snarl of wild animals than in all the imitative representations of painters and sculptors; he will see a kind of bloom and fresh beauty in an old woman or an old man; and he will be able to look with sober eyes on the seductive charm of his own slave boys. Not all can share this conviction—only one who has developed a genuine affinity for nature and her works.

Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 3.2²

ARE THESE THE MUSINGS of a “cuddly and wandering little soul,” as Marcus Aurelius’ spiritual father might have said,³ or are they the incoherent thoughts of a morbid pessimist who only saw corpses in the most refined dishes and for whom sex was a mere rubbing of flesh and an excretion of humors?⁴ As P. Hadot argued, what scholars perceived as the contradictory valuation of the cosmos in the *Meditations* was not the intimate expression of a sick or confused man. Marcus Aurelius’ cold, “scientific” descriptions were school exercises; reminders that these natural scenes—however beautiful or terrible they might have seemed—had to be considered as indifferent as far as the good and one’s will were concerned. They were occasions in which one could rehearse a certain type of spiritual exercise, the type that exploited the persuasive effects of natural science.⁵

A similar argument can be made with the works attributed to Zosimos of Panopolis, one of the most revered authors of Greek, Arabic, Syriac, and Latin alchemy.⁶ Zosimos was probably active between the late third century and the beginning of the fourth century.⁷ Unlike Marcus Aurelius, Zosimos sought to

² The translation is according to Hammond 2006. All other translations in the chapter are mine.

³ *Hadrianus in Augustan History* 25.3.

⁴ Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 6.13.

⁵ P. Hadot 1987:119–133.

⁶ These traditions are still untapped. The Greek texts among them are currently edited by the Belles Lettres. For a recent edition of a Syriac text of Zosimos not represented by the Greek tradition, see Camplani 2000. For a recent study of the Arabic tradition of Zosimos, see Hallum 2008.

⁷ Zosimos quoted Julius Africanus (Berthelot-Ruelle 1888:2.169.7), who was active ca. 200 and who died before 240 CE. As *terminus ante quem*, Mertens 1995:xvi argued that Zosimos wrote before 391 since his mention of the “libraries” (*bibliothékais*) of the Ptolemies imply that they were still standing (see Zosimos *Authentic Memoirs* I 8.82–85). This suggests that Zosimos wrote before the destruction of the Serapeum and of its library in 391. Proposing to shorten the dating bracket further, Mertens argued that the negative mention of Mani (alluded to by Zosimos *Authentic Memoirs* I 14) suggests that Zosimos probably wrote shortly after 302, when a rescript sent to the governor of the province of Africa in 302 forbade Manicheanisms (this rescript is only found in the *Comparison of Mosaic and Roman Laws* 15.3 and was not included in the Theodosian code). Unfortunately, anti-Manichean polemics and legislation were repeatedly published after the rescript (see e.g. *Justinian Code* 1.5.11; Photius *Against the Manicheans*). It is also possible that

prepare the self for its immaterial life after the destruction of the body. As in the *Meditations*, however, his depiction of embodied life was sometimes particularly negative. He enjoined his addressee Theosebeia to transform herself back into the primordial and immaterial human, perhaps describing this process as that of "spitting over matter."⁸ By looking into oneself, Zosimos wrote, one could "contemplate the son of God, who becomes everything for the love of the holy souls, in order to extract the soul from the world of destiny toward the incorporeal."⁹

In the following, I argue that Zosimos' understanding of alchemical practice as described in the first *Lesson on Excellence* can be characterized as a form of late antique spiritual exercise the goal of which is to bring the soul back to its pre-fallen state. It is also important to point out that this argument does not imply that Zosimos considered alchemy exclusively as a soteriological practice.¹⁰ The first section introduces Zosimos and suggests one possible social environment for his work. The next two sections look at external and internal references in Zosimos' first *Lesson on Excellence* in an attempt to explain the soteriology he advocated. To anticipate on my findings: (1) Zosimos was most likely a "client scholar;" and (2) he referred to eschatological narratives describing the world of the afterlife in his first *Lesson on Excellence*; (3) I will conclude that Zosimos saw the solution to the soul's embodiment in the study of physical transformations.

1. Zosimos and Alchemy in Late Antique Egypt

The use of the term "alchemy" to discuss Greek texts from late antiquity is worth an explanation. The history of alchemy and chemistry sometimes separates texts into two exclusive categories, those of "practical" proto-chemistry and those of "spiritual" alchemy. Considering that the output attributed to Zosimos concerns the production of luxury goods as well as the liberation of spirit from matter, I see no point in keeping with this distinction here. In the following, "alchemy" (close to ancient Greek *khêmeia* or *khumeia*) refers to a group of "dyeing techniques" (*baphai*) aimed at the production of imitation luxury goods whether their practice was motivated by soteriological concerns or not.

Zosimos' name itself could have been used by later pseudepigraphs. The very fact that some of his writings were called "authentic" cast doubt on their authenticity.

⁸ See Festugière 1949:367–368.

⁹ Zosimos *Authentic Memoirs* I 64–67.

¹⁰ That is not according to the definition given in P. Hadot 1987:60 but according to the one given in P. Hadot 1995:22: "des pratiques, qui pouvaient être d'ordre physique, comme le régime alimentaire, ou discursif, comme le dialogue et la méditation, ou intuitif, comme la contemplation, mais qui étaient toutes destinées à opérer une modification et une transformation dans le sujet qui les pratiquait."

The two oldest extant Greek alchemical manuscripts, dated ca. 300, were found in Egypt, perhaps together with some of the recipe books edited by K. Preisendanz in the *Greek Magical Papyri*. Some of the papyri were probably written by the same person who wrote the two alchemical manuscripts.¹¹ Works attributed to Zosimos would be roughly contemporary to these texts, if we can trust that it was not also the object of pseudo-epigraphy. Complicating the issue of identifying the date and milieu where Zosimos worked, there is almost no late antique evidence showing individuals practicing anything close to alchemy. Even the term *kheimutês* (and other spellings), a close equivalent to the modern “alchemist,” is only attested for the first time in the *Chronicle* of Malalas (sixth century).¹²

There are, however, a few sources external to the corpus mentioning counterfeiters and people who compared theological or physical ideas with metallurgical procedures. Proclus, who shared with alchemical writers the notion that each celestial sphere is associated with a different metal,¹³ also argued against “those who attempt to make gold” on the basis that “nature creates the unified [or one-of-a-kind] species of gold before the mixture of species they [i.e. the “alchemists”] speak about.”¹⁴ Almost all of these sources appear to have rhetorically amalgamated the “corrupt” ideas of their targets with the “debased” metals they dealt in.¹⁵ Aëtius of Antioch, a theologian accused of counterfeiting gold, was nonetheless described as a goldsmith by an ecclesiastical historian sympathetic to his doctrinal position.¹⁶ One wonders if some of these theologians were not actually involved in preparing and selling precious metals in order to survive, or, as several alchemical authors wrote, in order to

¹¹ See Brashear 1995:3401. Note that the “Theban magical library” hypothesis is based on short description found in an auction catalogue. Considering how the business of archaeology was conducted in the nineteenth century, these indications are unfortunately unreliable. For a different point of view, see Zago 2010.

¹² Malalas *Chronicle* 16.5.2.

¹³ See Proclus *Commentary on the Timaeus* I 43.1–20 and *Commentary on the Republic* III 94.10–20. The same idea is attributed to a Mithraic doctrine in Origen *Against Celsus* 6.22.

¹⁴ Proclus *Commentary on the Republic* II 234.16–19: οἱ χρυσὸν ποιεῖν φάσκοντες ἐκ μίξεως τινῶν εἰδῶν, τῆς φύσεως πρὸ μίξεως ὧν οὗτοι λέγουσιν τὸ εἶδος ἐν τοῦ χρυσοῦ ποιούσης. The word *hen* here could be possibly read as the equivalent of *monoeides*, with which Plato described gold (*Timaeus* 59b2) and which meant there “monospecific,” i.e. of a kind with only one species.

¹⁵ See Martelli 2014a. For similar mentions in early heresiology, see Irenaeus *Against the Heresies* 1.21.3–5 and “Hippolytus” *Refutation of all Heresies* 5.19–21, with Charron 2005 and Burns 2015. It is also likely that polemical (and anti-Paulinian) distortions of performative allegories can be found in a peculiar passage from the *Pseudo-Clementines Homilies* (2.26), where Simon the Samaritan is accused of a human sacrifice of sorts: having created a fetus inside a glass vessel out from *pneuma*, Simon is said to have made a drawing of his “homunculus” and to have returned it back into the air.

¹⁶ See Philostorgius *Ecclesiastical History* III 14–20, with Prieur 2005.

"vanquish poverty, this incurable ill."¹⁷ It seems, in any case, that the modern term alchemist—i.e. somebody recognized in his own social milieu for his or her professional practice and study of alchemical recipes—does not apply to late antique evidence.

Like the other authors of alchemical texts in the alchemical corpus, Zosimos was called a *philosophos*.¹⁸ Jung called him a Gnostic. This is a decent etic label considering the close similarities between his writings and some of the Nag Hammadi treatises as well as the alchemical allegories used by the Sethians of Irenaeus.¹⁹ Still, calling him a Gnostic in the restricted sense of the word would be missing the fact that his ideas were more widely diffused than this label often implies. His mention of Christ, as the one "who becomes everything," recalls the saying attributed to the Valentinians, according to whom the Savior "is the All."²⁰ These, moreover, are similar to the "son of God" equated with the cosmos in Hermetic texts²¹ and to the idea of Christ-Logos as "all things as one" found in Clement of Alexandria and later in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.²²

Zosimos was also influenced by Hermetic literature.²³ As with Greek alchemical literature, the social environment of "Hermetism" is mostly unknown. Even though the *Corpus Hermeticum* suggests that Hermetic literature was not just a personal "literary mystery," it is still unclear if some of those who read and copied this literature were recognized as part of a distinct sect and if the modern term "hermetist" refers to any ancient social reality.²⁴ Like ancient "alchemists," "hermetists" in the fourth century were probably not recognized as such.

Zosimos does not appear to have been part of an exclusivist sect or a group that favored a certain tradition over others. He cited and interpreted many different authors or pseudo-epigraphs, including Hesiod, Hermes, Nicotheos "the Hidden,"²⁵ and Pseudo-Democritus.²⁶ He also gave Christ an important role in his

¹⁷ See Zosimos *Authentic Memoirs* I 188 and Berthelot-Ruelle 1887–1888:2.212.21. The alchemical treatise entitled *Dioscorus to Synesius* attributes this saying to Democritus; see *The Philosopher Synesius to Dioscorus* 5. See also Berthelot-Ruelle 1887–1888:2.211.10–11, 285.3, 414.9.

¹⁸ See Mertens 1995:ix.

¹⁹ For a systematic overview of the evidence, see Mertens 2002. See also Stolzenberg 1999, Charron and Painchaud 2001, Fraser 2004, Charron 2005, Fraser 2007, and Burns 2015.

²⁰ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 1.3.4.

²¹ *Corpus Hermeticum* IX 8, X 14.

²² See Ramelli forthcoming (a).

²³ See Mertens 2002, Fraser 2007, Camplani 2000, and Van Den Kerchove 2012:281–282, 314–315.

²⁴ See Van Den Kerchove 2012. For a different interpretation, see Bull (2018).

²⁵ See Jackson 1990.

²⁶ In all of his literary output, Zosimos quotes Maria (76 instances), Democritus (74 instances, excluding those where he might have been referred to by the expression "the philosopher"), Hermes (60), Agathodaimon (37), Ostanos (19), Plato (10), Aristotle (9), Pebichios (9), Moses (6), Apollo (6), Chu-, Che-, Chimes (5), Isis (3), Hesiod (3), Nicotheos (2), Pammenes (2), Aratos (1), Poimenandres (1), Bitos (1), Salomon (1), and Membres (1).

soteriology but named him only once.²⁷ His description of an alchemical drug as a Mithraic mystery might also show that he had specialized knowledge of Mithraic symbols.²⁸ Intellectually speaking, however, it would not be entirely accurate to describe Zosimos as a universalist. He rejected traditions implying commerce with demons, which, as he claimed, presided over Egyptian temples (see below).

Leaving ethnic/linguistic, religious, and intellectual categories aside, I find it more interesting to situate Zosimos socioeconomically as a scholar working in close association with a richer (or more influential) patron. Lucian of Samosata provides an extensive description of these "client scholars", who, through relatively informal (or at least noncontractual) means, came to "live with" status-conscious patrons in order to teach them or their family, entertain them, and to grant them access to all that *paideia* had to provide, "magic" and "divination" included.²⁹ Lucian's satire obviously contains exaggerations, but it could not have been entertaining if it did not dramatize and distort real experiences. Zosimos appears to have written his alchemical treatises in a similar context.

2. Theosebeia's Household

In his treatise *On the Vaporization of the Divine Water that Fixes Mercury*,³⁰ Zosimos described a reception organized by Theosebeia (his addressee) in which a retainer called Paxamos and identified as a *strouktôros* cooked a fowl in a sort of *couscoussier*. To Zosimos' amazement, the steam not only cooked the bird but also conveyed its color to it. He saw in this process a parallel with alchemical "tinctures" (*baphai*), and this reminded him of the design of an apparatus he had earlier seen in a book from Theosebeia's library. In the rest of this short treatise, Zosimos dealt with the process of vaporization and fixation in alchemical processes.³¹

The Greek *strouktôros* transliterates the Latin *structor*, meaning a servant or slave responsible for setting the dinner table.³² In some cases, however, the role implied more sophistication. The first course of Trimalchio's dinner in Petronius' *Satyricon* (35–36 and 39) provides us with some idea of the kind of literary/philosophical games played by *structores*. Trimalchio's *structor* designed

²⁷ Zosimos *Authentic Memoirs* I 13.121–126. Festugière (1949:270n10) and Reitzenstein (1904:105n4) considered this passage as a Christian interpolation. See however Mertens 1995:6n80.

²⁸ *Authentic Memoirs* XIII. As Mertens pointed out, the "encephalic alabaster stone" mentioned by Zosimos was most probably a code name for the egg (see Berthelot-Ruelle 1888:2.18.2–3, 20.19–21). There is a Mithraic monument from Housesteads (UK) depicting the birth of Mithras coming out of an egg instead of the traditional stone. See Vermaseren 1956, catalogue number 860.

²⁹ See Lucian *The Dependent Scholar* 27.14–17 and 40.12–18.

³⁰ *Authentic Memoirs* VIII.

³¹ See *Authentic Memoirs* VIII 1–10.

³² See Mertens 1995:26n2.

a meal course hidden in a spherical vessel inscribed with the twelve zodiacal signs. He set an appropriate piece of food on top of each sign (e.g. two fishes over Pisces), placed a piece of turf in the middle of the vessel, and laid a honeycomb on the turf. Finishing the scene, he ordered an Egyptian slave to serve bread out of a silver oven while circumambulating the spherical vessel. The vessel and its "sorry morsels" (*viles cibos*), however, were only meant as an intellectual appetizer. Once opened, the vessel revealed the udders of fattened sows, a hare with wings ("to look like Pegasus"), and fishes splashed by peppered *garum* flowing out of wineskins held by four Marsyas. As Trimalchio made clear (*Satyricon* 39), the entire meal represented life and death and was meant for lovers of literature: the spherical dish, as shown by the piece of turf, represented the earth, "round like an egg," and the honeycomb represented the goods that can be found in it; "the world turns like a mill," Trimalchio concluded, "and always cause[s] some evil, causing humans to be born or to die." While Trimalchio did not interpret the meaning of the Egyptian slave carrying bread "around" (*circumferebat*) the hosts with a silver oven, it was most likely meant as a representation of the moon. Trimalchio's *structor* perhaps also wanted to complete the flattering *tableau vivant* with the hosts themselves, who stood for the planets—that is to say, gods surrounding this Dionysian grotto.³³

Theosebeia's use of an unusual and specialized servant suggests that she was relatively wealthy. Zosimos' surprise at the work of the *structor* and the fact that he noted his title as a novelty also suggests that Theosebeia might have come to Egypt from the Latin-speaking world, or, at least, from a social environment alien to that of Zosimos.³⁴ The mention that Theosebeia owned a library, a fact noted *en passant* by Zosimos, also supports the hypothesis that she came from a wealthy family.³⁵

Zosimos, however, did not describe Theosebeia like a Greco-Egyptian Trimalchio or as the "uneducated book-collector" of Lucian of Samosata. Theosebeia held alchemical initiations³⁶ and it is perhaps in preparation for these initiations that she consulted with Zosimos together with Neilos the "priest" and Paphnutia the "virgin," who are known only through Zosimos' criticism.³⁷

³³ See also Plutarch *On the Delays in Divine Vengeance* 565f–566b. On the image of the "crater of Dionysios" standing for the Earth, see Edwards 1992:56.

³⁴ *Authentic Memoirs* VIII 2–3: ἐθαύμαζον μὲν πᾶσαν τὴν τοῦ παρὰ σοὶ καλουμένου στρούκτωρος ἐργασίαν.

³⁵ That this mention would be another piece of flattery is suggested by the fact that Lucian of Samosata was particularly annoyed by what he called "uneducated book collectors," the title of one of his satires. This topos is rehashed in *The Dependent Scholar*.

³⁶ This is known only through a Syriac manuscript. See the recent edition and translation of the passage in Martelli 2014b:11–13.

³⁷ On Neilos and Paphnutia the "virgin/girl" (*parthenos*), see Berthelot-Ruelle 1887–1888:2.190–191.

Zosimos' positioning with regard to Neilos (at least) is related to the polemics of his treatise *On the Letter Omega*.³⁸ This work is striking for its use of embedded dichotomies dividing Zosimos and his rivals over different alchemical techniques, their attitude toward fate, and their understanding of the nature of humanity. Zosimos' rivals, whom he called the "many" and who ridiculed his (lost) book *On Furnaces and Apparatus*, are said to be "without intellect" (*anoas*)³⁹ because of their reliance on "timely tinctures" (*karikai katabaphai*). These "tinctures" are alchemical processes dependent on the will of the "demons" (*daimones*, *On the Letter Omega* 2). These rivals ignore the "lessons of the body" (*sômatika paideutêria*), know nothing of "immaterial things" and hopelessly try to circumvent fate (4–5) with "the magic of the corporeal language" (7). Zosimos' rivals are like Epimetheus (6), who stands for the "external human" (*exô anthrôpos*; 12) also called Thoth and Adam, contrasting with the "pneumatic" and "inner human" (*esô ... anthrôpos*) called Phôs (8–10). In contrast, philosophers are comparable to Prometheus and Phôs (12), and refuse to rejoice in the gifts of fate. The "timely tinctures" of Zosimos' rivals are also comparable to the "demon-fearing practices" (*deisidaimonias*) of "bonesetter priests" (*hiereus ostodetês*), which are opposed to the practices of physicians. Through this last opposition, Zosimos associated his own practice with the way by which physicians apply bandages with braces to fractured limbs after having consulted "books with diagrams" (18). Zosimos did not claim that his rivals' techniques or those of the bonesetter priests were superstitious or inherently ineffective. He rather argued that the timely tinctures were unreliable and immoral because they implied reliance on demons, which Zosimos wished to avoid.

The treatise entitled the *First Book of the teleutaia apokhês by the Theban Zosimos* (which I will call the "Final Abstinence")⁴⁰ explicitly associates users of timely tinctures, and thus Zosimos' rivals in the treatise *On the Letter Omega*, with the priesthood of the Egyptian temples. The book narrates how the "divine techniques of the 'minerals' (*psammôn*)" (i.e. the different kinds of *baphai*) of Egypt were originally taken over by "local overseers" (*hoi kata topon ephoroi*) who instigated a racket over their practice. These overseers hid the original techniques and replaced them with "non-natural ones" (*aphusika*), which they delivered to "their priests" (*tois heautôn hiereusi*) to make sure that "their sacrifices" (*hai thusiai autôn*) would be perpetuated in exchange for success in these

³⁸ *Authentic Memoirs* I.

³⁹ Most likely related to those described as having not received Intellect in the *Corpus Hermeticum* IV.

⁴⁰ This book is usually called "The Final Count" or "Quittance," but it is unclear how the content of the work relates to a "count" or "quittance." My choice comes from the parallels between the content and title of this work and Porphyry's *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*. See Knipe 2011, Camplani and Zambon 2002.

techniques.⁴¹ The nonnatural and (unreliable) “timely tinctures,”⁴² are a part of the traditions of the Egyptian temples, while the natural and reliable “timely tinctures” are an independent set of recipes found in written documents.

Since Zosimos also criticized the rivals of *On the Letter Omega* for their “timely tinctures” (also associated with demons), it is likely that Zosimos’ rivals were Egyptian temple priests or that the cults they practiced were identified as Egyptian.⁴³ As recently argued, the reputation of the Egyptian priests for their expertise in *mageia*, broadly conceived, combined with the dwindling rights and revenues of the Egyptian priesthood under Roman rule probably convinced some priests to offer their services to rich or influential patrons.⁴⁴ Zosimos’ place among Theosebeia’s entourage and his polemics against the traditional Egyptian priesthood suggest that he could have been in competition with them for patronage. He could consequently be considered to have occupied a similar socioeconomic position.

3. A Heavenly Ascent into the Alembic

To show how Zosimos sought to escape embodiment and how this did not lead him to reject the body and materiality, I will present here a translation of a portion of Zosimos’ first *Lesson on Excellence* followed by an analysis of its links with eschatological narratives.⁴⁵

The portion of the *Lesson on Excellence* analyzed here can be separated into five sections: (1) a seemingly disjointed list of ideas beginning with the “rest of the waters,” which is presented as the content of the first allegorical vision; (2) the first allegorical vision; (3) the (abridged) second vision; (4) an interpretation of the visions, which involves a comparison between human and cosmic processes of exchange; and (5) a concluding allegorical recipe explicitly described as a summary of the preceding text.⁴⁶

[[1]] Rest of the waters, movement, increase, disembodiment, embodiment, extraction of *pneuma* from a body, binding of *pneuma* to a body; these are not (coming) from natures that are foreign or brought from

⁴¹ See Festugière 1949:366.6–26.

⁴² On the terminological problems surrounding the timely tinctures in this treatise, see Stolzenberg 1999. On the opposition nature/culture in Zosimos and in modern scholarship, see Grimes 2010.

⁴³ Martelli 2017.

⁴⁴ See Frankfurter 2000 and Moyer 2011:208–273.

⁴⁵ I use this term to describe both what is called a “*katabasis*” narrative and a common feature of apocalyptic literature, the “heavenly ascent” or “voyage to hell” narrative (on these, see Segal 1980, Himmelfarb 1983 and 1993). All these narratives take place in the world of the afterlife and generally involve some form of punishment and some form of guide presenting these to the visitor.

⁴⁶ The text is according to Mertens’ 1995.

outside. Rather, uniform nature possesses the hard shells of the minerals as well as the soft pulp of the plants itself and only in respect to itself.

Zosimos Lesson on Excellence I 1-6

The two manuscript traditions give two different lessons for the following part:

[Version A] The rich variety of the universe, consisting of many materials, and the research takes shape (σχηματίζεται) in this uniform and multicolor species. Hence the fact that it lays (υποβάλλει) the abatement (ληξιν) and the increase (αύξησιν) by which nature flees (υποφεύγει), nature being under the temporal influence of the moon.

Zosimos Lesson on Excellence I 7-16

[Version B] The rich and diverse research of all things is preserved in this uniform and multicolor shape (σχήματι). Hence the fact that it lays (υποβάλλεται) the cessation and the increase by which nature rushes (ιππεύει), nature being under the temporal influence of the moon.

Zosimos Lesson on Excellence I 7-16

[(2)] As I was saying these things, I fell asleep; I see a sacrificer (ιεουργόν) standing before me above an altar in the shape of a libation bowl (βωμοῦ φιαλοειδοῦς). The altar was at the top of fifteen steps and a priest stood there (ιερεύς). I heard a voice coming from above saying:

‘I have accomplished the action consisting in going down the fifteen steps of shining darkness and going up these steps of illuminating light. The sacrificer is now changing me (καινουργῶν) by shedding away the consistency of my body. Consecrated by force I accomplish myself as *pneuma*.’

After I had heard the voice of the one who stood in the bowl-altar, I asked to know from him who he was. He answered saying with a weak voice:

‘I am *Iôn*, the priest of the shrines and I undergo an intolerable violence. At sunrise, someone came running and mastered me, dividing me with a blade, pulling me apart according to the structure of the assemblage and skinning my head with the sword he held. He intertwined the bones with the flesh and burned (them) with the fire from his hand

until I learned to become *pneuma* by changing (my) body. This is the intolerable violence I endure.'

As he was talking to me and that I was urging him to speak, his eyes became like blood and he vomited all his flesh. And I saw him as a small, mutilated human, kneading himself with his own teeth and falling down (συμπίπτοντα). Frightened, I woke up and I wondered: 'Would not that be, perhaps, the rest of the waters?' And I was resolved to believe that I had truly understood.

Zosimos Lesson on Excellence I 17–43

[(3)] And I fell asleep again. I saw the same bowl-altar and boiling water above and an infinitely large population in it. There was nobody I could interrogate outside of the altar. I climb to look at the sight inside the altar and I see a small razor-wielding⁴⁷ and grey-haired human (πεπολιώμενον ξυρουργόν άνθρωπάριον) saying to me: 'What are you looking at?' I answered that I was amazed by the agitation of the water and of the humans who burned together and yet lived. He responded to me saying: 'The sight which you see is the entrance, the exit and the transformation (μεταβολή).' I interrogated him further: 'What transformation?' He replied, saying: '(This is) the place of the exercise which is called maceration (ταριχείας, also "embalming"), for the humans who wish to reach excellence enter here and become spirits (πνεύματα) after having escaped their body.' I said then to him: 'And are you a spirit?' And he answered, saying: 'Both spirit and guardian of spirits.'

Zosimos Lesson on Excellence I 44–59

[Jumping over I 59–73]

[(4)] And after I had these visions, I woke up again and I said to myself: 'What is the cause of such a vision? Is this not the water which is white and which is yellow, the boiling, the divine?' And I found that I understood well (καλῶς ἐνόησα) and I said that it was good to speak and good to hear, good to give and good to take, good to be poor and good to be rich. How does nature learn to give and to take? The copper-human gives and the liquid-stone takes. The metal gives and the plant takes. The celestial bodies give and the flowers take. The sky gives and the earth takes. Thunder gives of the revolving fire.

⁴⁷ Or "tonsorial," as suggested by the LSJ.

Everything is woven together and everything is unwoven. Everything is mixed and everything is put together (again). Everything is blended and everything is separated. Everything is inundated and everything is dried, everything blooms and everything loses its bloom in the bowl-altar; for everything (exists) according to method, according to a measure and according to the minute measurement of the four elements. The weaving and unweaving of all things and the interconnection of the universe do not occur without method. Method is natural; it breathes in and out and it takes care of the orders [i.e. the “order of things”], increasing (αὔξουσα) and abating (λήγουσα) them. And, to summarize, if method is not left behind, all things that are harmonized through separation and union transform nature (ἐκστρέφει, also: “turn nature inside out”). Transformed (στρεφομένη [i.e. “turned”]), nature turns into itself (εἰς ἑαυτὴν στρέφεται). This is the nature and the interconnection of the excellence of the entire cosmos.

Zosimos Lesson on Excellence I 74–99

[(5)] In short, my friend, build a monolithic shrine (ναόν) for yourself that is like white lead, like alabaster, like (marble) of Proconnesus, and which has neither beginning nor end in its construction.⁴⁸ Inside, it has a source of the most pure water and a light shining like the sun. Seek diligently for the entrance of the shrine (ἡ εἵσοδος τοῦ ναοῦ), take a sword in your hand and search for the entrance. For the place where is the opening of the way is narrow and there is a snake lying next to the entrance and guarding the shrine. Once you have mastered it, first sacrifice it and having skinned it, divide its flesh and its bones part by part. After you have put back its parts one by one with the bones, make yourself a base next to the entrance of the shrine. Climb, enter and you will find there the thing sought for. For the priest, the copper-human, the one you see seated in the source and collecting the thing—you do not see him a copper-human (anymore). He changed of color (and) of nature and has become a silver-human. If you wish, in a short time you will have a gold-human.

Zosimos Lesson on Excellence I 100–118

We might start picking this text apart by looking at *lōn*, one of the most striking and most crudely corporeal elements of the text. Who is he? Why must

⁴⁸ Most likely an alchemical metaphor for the egg, see Mertens 1995:223n39.

he suffer? And why in that particular way? *Iôn* was methodically separated, reunited, and then burned; he turned his body inside out and then outside in, which finally caused him to “collapse.” As *Iôn* himself explains, these processes led him to learn how to transform his body into *pneuma*.⁴⁹

All exchanges between Zosimos and the inhabitants of his imaginary world involve “violence” (*bia*) or “punishments” (*kolaseis*), leading to the “transformation” (*metabolê*) or “bodily change” (*metasômatoumenos*) of a body into *pneuma* and taking place in a bowl-shaped altar found in the first vision at the top of fifteen steps of “illuminating light” and “shining darkness.” The climbing up and down of the fifteen steps of light and darkness is a reference to Egyptian representations of the moon cycle, consisting in fourteen steps leading to a platform, on which the moon is symbolized.⁵⁰ The association of *Iôn*’s travel up and down the staircase with the moon’s cycle suggests more specifically that the thirty steps should be associated with some form of voyage through the sky. As such, it also probably referred to an eschatological journey.

Eschatological narratives, especially those of the Platonic or Apocalyptic traditions, generally take place after a voyage through the heavenly spheres and often involve a divine guide explaining the punishments found in the after-life.⁵¹ Punishments and guides are also found in Zosimos’ two visions, and both visions are separated by a linking formula similar to the one found at the beginning of the eschatological narratives of the *Zostrianos* from Nag Hammadi and the Hermetic *Poimander*.⁵² The most striking analogies with Zosimos’ *Lesson on Excellence*, however, do not come from these texts but from Plutarch’s *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance*.⁵³

⁴⁹ *Authentic Memoirs* X 2.34–35: ἔμαθον μετασώματούμενος πνεῦμα γενέσθαι.

⁵⁰ As Mertens (1995:35n7) noted, since the introductory text of the visions (section 1 in my translation) referred to the moon, it is likely that the fifteen steps refer to the moon cycle. The fourteen-step staircase leading to the moon is a common representation in Egyptian temples and must have inspired Zosimos. In Edfu and Dendara, for example, the moon phases are represented by a staircase of fourteen steps leading to a platform, the fifteenth step, on which rests an eye (= the moon). See von Lieven 2000:127–132; I would like to thank Joachim Quack for the reference. Even considering that Zosimos was unaware of Egyptian moon-symbolism, he could have reached it through Greek texts. Plutarch mentions that some associated Osiris with the lunar world and that the dismemberment of Osiris in fourteen parts was associated with the waning phases of the moon (*On Isis and Osiris* 367c–368b). See also Derchain 1962:25–26.

⁵¹ For angelic guides in Apocalypticism, see Himmelfarb 1983:50–60 and 1993:38–40, 55–57, 67–69.

⁵² *Authentic Memoirs* X 2.17: καὶ ταῦτα λαλῶν ἀπεκοιμήθην. See *Nag Hammadi Codices* VIII 1.3.14–1.4.1 and *Corpus Hermeticum* I 1.

⁵³ I would like to take the occasion to thank the organizers and participants of the *Katabasis* colloquium, which took place in Montreal and Quebec City in 2014 (www.katabasis.ca), and more particularly Renaud Gagné who brought the “upward *katabasis*” of Plutarch’s *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* to my attention.

The closing myth of *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* narrates the visions of a certain Thespesios, who found himself in heaven after having violently fallen on his neck and lost consciousness. Looking down through the airy depths of heaven, Thespesios could see flamelike bubbles coming up (from the Earth) and letting go "compact human shapes" as they reached the surface where he was standing.⁵⁴ On this "calm sea" situated between the Earth and the Moon,⁵⁵ Thespesios met a "kinsman" (*sungenês*), who gave him a tour of the heavenly sphere where souls are punished and purified from past errors.

Thespesios saw that souls in heaven faced punishments tailored to the nature of the crimes they committed. The souls of hypocrites who pretended to be virtuous were "forced to turn themselves 'inside out' (*ektrepesthai*) ... like sea-centipedes that have swallowed a hook and that turn upon 'themselves' (*ektrepousin*)."⁵⁶ It is likely that Zosimos had a similar image in mind when he described the transformation of *Iôn*. In any case, the image of self-regurgitation and redigestion seen in the light of eschatological narratives appears as an apt allegory of moral self-examination. Moreover, as showed in the anthropological and eschatological narrative of the treatise *On the Letter Omega*, Zosimos explicitly described his eschatological goal as the extraction of the "inside human."⁵⁷ The same process appears to have been transposed in his vision as self-regurgitation.

Next to the bowl-altar, Zosimos found a "small human" (*anthrôparion*) who answered his questions and played a role analogous to that of Thespesios' kindred spirit, the divine guide found in most eschatological narratives. In the eschatological myth of *On the Face that Appears in the Moon*, the role of the guide was played by a human who had previously shed its fleshy body and who was on its way toward a "second death" (943a-944c). Like the souls reaching the space between the moon and the earth, Thespesios' divine relative and guide was a "compact human form." The image of the "small human" (*anthrôparion*) appears analogous to that of the inhabitants of heaven in Plutarch's eschatological myths, and to that of Thespesios' guide as well.

⁵⁴ *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* 564a.

⁵⁵ This is also the case in Plutarch's *On the Face that Appears in the Moon* 943c.

⁵⁶ *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* 567b: τούτους (sc. the souls) ἐπιπόνως καὶ ὀδυνηρῶς ἡνάγκαζον ἕτεροι περιστῶτες ἐκτρέπεσθαι τὰ ἐντὸς ἔξω τῆς ψυχῆς ... ὥσπερ αἱ θαλάττιαι σκολόπενδραι καταπιῶσαι τὸ ἄγκιστρον ἐκτρέπουσιν αὐτάς. The *Apocalypse of Paul* (Hilhorst and Silvertsein 1996:140) similarly depicts the punishment of a presbyter who attended to his ritual duties while being impure as an evisceration operated through the mouth with an iron implement.

⁵⁷ *Authentic Memoirs* I 10-15.

Like Thespesios' heaven, the bowl-altar of Zosimos' second vision is the sight of tortures involving boiling substances scorching metal-like souls.⁵⁸ The place was also described by the guide of Zosimos' vision as an "exercise" (*askêsis*) and "a maceration" (*tarikheia*). *Tarikheia* can also refer specifically to the Egyptian art of embalming⁵⁹ and this would also make the bowl-altar a place for death-exercises. The last explanation of the guide, who described the altar-bowl as the site of a transformation into *pneuma*, confirms this reading.

The eschatological narrative of Thespesios in Plutarch's *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* includes a similar vision. During his visit of heaven, Thespesios observed the work of a team of demonic goldsmiths in a sort of perverted version of the scenes of industrious cupids in Pompeii's house of the Vettii:

There were also pools placed one next to the other, one of boiling gold, one of icy lead and another of turbulent iron. Daemons attended these and, like blacksmiths, they were lowering and pulling back each of the souls of those who erred because of cupidity and greediness. Indeed, after the heat had started to make them glow and had made them translucent, they threw them into the lead and immersed them (βάπτοντες). Solidifying on the spot and becoming hard like hailstones, they moved them to the (pool) of iron. They became terribly black in there and, breaking down because of their extreme hardness, they were ground down and changed shape. They were then brought back to the gold, agonizing, as he said, from the painful changes to which they were submitted.

Plutarch *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* 567c⁶⁰

The general idea is similar to that of Zosimos' vision: color change and metallurgical processes, i.e. a "quenching" (*baphê*)—the hardening of a metal through rapid cooling—all taking place in an imaginary space where humans learn to forget the passions of the soul and to abandon the body that produced them. The problem of greed is obviously related to the production of ersatz luxury goods, and, as I will point out below, the question of giving and taking—simultaneously conceived on a human and a cosmic scale—was a central concern of Zosimos' first *Lesson on Excellence*.

Zosimos' visions as well as the last allegorical explanation involve cultic imagery. This feature is also found in eschatological narratives in which heaven is represented as a temple.⁶¹ The main place in which the two visions occur is an

⁵⁸ This is made clear in I 59–73 (not translated above).

⁵⁹ See Rötter 1993:56.

⁶⁰ The text is according to Pohlenz (1929).

⁶¹ See Himmelfarb 1993:14–16.

“altar” (*bômos*) shaped in the form of a *phialê*. In an alchemical context, this word does not primarily refer to a libation vessel but to the top part of the alembic or to the distillate receptacle.⁶² As Mertens noted throughout her edition, Zosimos’ visions are replete with allusions to alchemical processes. It is also certain that the *phialobômos* was meant to represent an alchemical apparatus.

The similarities between the *Lesson on Excellence* and eschatological narratives show that Zosimos had some awareness of eschatological narratives or of their images.⁶³ The similarities between the *Lesson on Excellence* and Hermetic symbolism, which will be examined in the next section, suggest that he depicted the “altar/alchemical apparatus” as the site of a self-reforming, bodily sacrifice.

4. Running Down into the Crater, Running Up toward Poimenandres

In the first vision, then, we have an alchemical apparatus/sacrificial altar upon which *Iôn* the “priest” (*hiereus*) is transformed into *pneuma*/“a small human” (*anthrôparion*). In the second vision, Zosimos learns that *Iôn* is both “sacrificer” (*hierourgôn*)—i.e. the one whom he saw standing outside of the bowl-altar—and the sacrifice itself. This was indicated by Zosimos in the passage omitted from the translation above: “and he [‘house-master’ (*oikodespotês*)] said to me ‘the one which you have seen as a copper-human vomiting his own flesh is the sacrificer and the one who is being sacrificed.’”⁶⁴ The second vision consequently makes clear that *Iôn* stands for both object and subject of the sacrifice/alchemical operation. The perspective taken by Zosimos has also changed. The bowl-altar now takes gigantic proportions and includes “an infinite” (*apeiron*) number of people boiling and moaning in its waters.

The introductory and concluding sections of the first *Lesson on Excellence* are key to our understanding of these images since they contain explicit interpretations of the visions. Both sections make clear that the topic of the *Lesson on Excellence* is nature. The first six lines describe nature as “uniform,” or made “of one species” (*monoeidês*), as well as delineating its activities and the species it contains. The activities include “movement,” “increase” (as well as other phenomena that could be said to be more human-specific), “disembodiment,” “separation of a spirit from a body,” “embodiment,” and “binding of a spirit to a

⁶² See Mertens 1995: cxxi–cxxiii.

⁶³ To cite another parallel, the ascent narrative of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, mentions that Perpetua reached the heavenly staircase by stepping on the head of a guardian snake as if it were the first step of her ascent (4.7).

⁶⁴ *Authentic Memoirs* X 3.69–72; λέγει μοι ὅτι τοῦτον ὃν εἶδες χαλκάνθρωπον καὶ τὰς ἰδίας σάρκας ἐξεμύοντα, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἱεουργῶν καὶ ἱεουργούμενος.

body." A first apparent contradiction can be noted: if nature is *monoeidês*, i.e. "of one species" or "uniform," it should not contain multiple species such as plants and minerals.

The self-contradictory observation that nature is uniform and multiple at the same time appears in the second part of the introduction and is repeated throughout *The Lesson on Excellence*. In fact, the movement from unity to multiplicity is what Zosimos calls "the excellence" (*aretê*) of the cosmos.⁶⁵ The mention of "the hard shells of the minerals" and "the soft pulp of the plants" was thus probably meant to contrast with the statement that nature was uniform. At the end of the treatise (not translated above), Zosimos gave a final exhortation, which he described as excellence (*aretê*): "pay attention to the nature as you turn it inside out [i.e. transform it], and conceive as made of a single material that which is made of multiple materials."⁶⁶ Awakening from the second vision, Zosimos declared having "well understood" and listed opposite notions beginning with moral terms and finishing with amoral ones: some humans speak, other listen and some give and some take; it is good to be rich and good to be poor just as the sky gives and the earth takes (*Lesson on Excellence* I 77–85). The identification of moral and cosmic exchange processes dissolves the subjective point of view. In other words, social oppositions and imbalances must also be considered to be part of the "order of things" (*Lesson on Excellence* I 93–95). Method—considered from a human point of view as the correct use of tools, "books with diagrams," or of "demonstrative reasoning"⁶⁷—is also found in nature (*Lesson on Excellence* I 93). It guarantees the "weaving" and "unweaving" of all things, that is to say, the sympathetic and antipathetic network of influences through which reciprocal processes occur (*Lesson on Excellence* I 90–99). Zosimos expresses this process of natural self-perfection by punning on the verb (*ek*)*strephein*: "turned inside out, nature turns into/transforms itself."⁶⁸ The expression is more complicated to understand than to translate. Indeed, the idea that a transformation only reveals what was there before is already contained in the English expression "to turn into" something else. This universal process of cyclical changes, which includes intrahuman reciprocal exchanges as well, is what Zosimos calls the *aretê* ("excellence") of the cosmos.⁶⁹

The visions' guides—the two *anthrôparia* and the house-master—show how this *aretê*, i.e. the circularity of natural processes, also relates to human events

⁶⁵ See Mertens 1995:213–214.

⁶⁶ *Authentic Memoirs* X 7.133–135: ἐκοτρέψας τὴν φύσιν ἐπίστηθι, καὶ τὴν πολυύλον ὡς μονόυλον λογίζου.

⁶⁷ See *Authentic Memoirs* I 2.18.

⁶⁸ *Authentic Memoirs* X 4.98–99: ἡ γὰρ φύσις στρεφομένη εἰς ἑαυτὴν στρέφεται.

⁶⁹ *Authentic Memoirs* X 7.

taking place in Zosimos' eschatological narratives. Whether we understand the house-master as an estate manager or as a star ruling over its celestial house, the name of this character is appropriate to his external point of view since his discourse unites the process-oriented interpretations of Zosimos and *Iôn*'s description of his torments. By revealing that the copper-human "who was seen vomiting his own flesh" (i.e. *Iôn*) is "the one to whom was given the rule over the water and over those who are punished," the house-master is putting *Iôn* in the position of the user of the alchemical apparatus. *Iôn* the copper-human, which we can now also associate with the generic user of alchemical apparatus, was also said by the house-master to be both sacrificing and sacrificed. Since sacrifice stands for operations made within the alchemical apparatus, this would mean that Zosimos alluded to the user of alchemical apparatus both as object and subject of his alchemical work. We once again find the idea of a circular process and a double identity: nature transforms itself "through itself" and *Iôn* "turns himself out" and chews himself "with his own teeth" until he "learns to become *pneuma*." That is to say that as nature changes itself and is the object of its own theodicy, so does the alchemist, who meets his own transformative punishments and who is the object of his own justice.

The final allegory of the treatise (section 5 of the text translated above) brings these ideas together. The flesh of the snake must be sacrificed, flayed, its flesh separated from the bones "limb by limb," and its body recomposed bit by bit.⁷⁰ Placed in front of the opening of the shrine, the reassembled corpse is then used to find "the thing sought for," represented by the final transformation of the copper-human into a gold-human. Similarly, it is through the methodical dismembering of *Iôn* that transformation is achieved. *Iôn* says that his torturer first "separated" (*dielôn*) him apart methodically and then "weaved" (*suneplexen*) his flesh and bones together. This process transformed *Iôn* into an *anthrôparion*, that is to say, into *pneuma*. When describing the virtuous transformations of nature, Zosimos used the same textile metaphor seen in the case of the weaving of flesh and bone of *Iôn* and also referred to an autonomous self-inversion: "Turned inside out, nature turns into itself;" all things "are woven together" (*sumplekontai*) and "unwoven" (*apoplekontai*) by nature (Lesson on Excellence I 85–90), in this way, nature ensures its union and "excellence."⁷¹

The separation and recombination of *Iôn* and the snake stand here for the most universal process of all, world-transformation. The bowl-altar is an

⁷⁰ *Authentic Memoirs* X 5.108–113. In describing the separation and unification of bodies, Zosimos must have borrowed language from Ezekiel 37 (δοῦναι τὰ ξηρά ἐκάτερον πρὸς τὴν ἁρμονίαν αὐτοῦ), which was interpreted by Origen (among others) as the reconstruction of the body of Christ. See Ramelli forthcoming (a).

⁷¹ See p. 270n52 below.

alchemical apparatus and it also stands for the universe.⁷² Processes found inside it are just like processes found throughout nature: they work transformation through separation and unification of parts, i.e. through a coming and going from unity to multiplicity.

This reading is supported by Hermetic texts, which Zosimos knew.⁷³ The most telling passage figures at the end of the narrative portion of the *Final Abstinence*, which justifies the abstinence from temple sacrifices.⁷⁴ Enjoining Theosebeia to “perfect” herself by obtaining the “timely, genuine and natural tinctures,” Zosimos finished his exhortation writing that she should “run down to *Poimenandra*” and that “having been immersed in the crater” she would “run up to [her] own kind.”⁷⁵

The name of *Poimenandra* (i.e. *Poimandrês*) and the image of the “baptism” or immersion in the crater are specific to *Corpus Hermeticum* I and IV. *Poimander* in *Corpus Hermeticum* I is the “Intellect of the authority” (*nous authentias*) and “Father-God” of the second Intellect.⁷⁶ In the light of the *Corpus Hermeticum* I and IV, “running down toward *Poimander*” means acquiring the knowledge that brings “a return to life,”⁷⁷ and which is acquired by recognizing oneself as being made of light and life, that is, as being the same as the “Father-God.”⁷⁸ This process involves “leaving the body to alteration” as well as its dissolution.⁷⁹ The final stage of the “return to life,” or what is also called a “rebirth” (*palin-genesia*), is the heavenly ascent through the seven spheres up to the “Ogdoadic nature” (i.e. the eighth sphere). There, the “Father-God” is praised with hymns and is finally integrated. This divinization is “the goal for those who possess ‘knowledge’” (*gnôsis*)⁸⁰ and it corresponds relatively well with Zosimos’ anthropology and soteriology.⁸¹ It does not explain, however, why acquiring the correct alchemical techniques should help Theosebeia becoming “perfect” and whether

⁷² The metaphor is explicitly found in the seventh century work of Stephanus of Alexandria *On the Great and Sacred Art* 9.245.3 Ideler.

⁷³ Compare Festugière 1949:367.18 with *Corpus Hermeticum* XIII 11.7–8. See also Festugière 1949:365.15, 366.12, *Authentic Memoirs* I 4, 5, 7, 8, 15; Berthelot-Ruelle 1888:2.150.13, 156.8, 156.14–17, 157.2, 162.3, 169.9, 175.14–15, 188.19, 189.4, 198.3.

⁷⁴ Festugière 1949:367.24–25.

⁷⁵ Festugière 1949:368.1–4: ὅταν δὲ ἐπιγνώῃς σαυτὴν τελειωθείσαν, τότε καὶ «ἐπιτύχουσα» τῶν φυσικῶν τῆς ὕλης κατάπτυσσον, καὶ καταδραμοῦσα ἐπὶ τὸν Ποιμένανδρα καὶ βαπτισθεῖσα τῷ κρατῆρι, ἀνάδραμε ἐπὶ τὸ γένος τὸ σόν.

⁷⁶ *Corpus Hermeticum* I 1.1.9–10, 1.9.

⁷⁷ *Corpus Hermeticum* I 1.1.21.

⁷⁸ *Corpus Hermeticum* I 1.1.19.

⁷⁹ *Corpus Hermeticum* I 1.1.24.

⁸⁰ *Corpus Hermeticum* I 1.1.25–26.

⁸¹ See *Authentic Memoirs* I 11–15.

the "immersion in the crater" was meant to be more than a reference to the *Hermetica*.

In *Corpus Hermeticum* IV, entitled *Hermes to Tat: the Crater or Monad*, it is said that God filled a crater with intellect and that he sent it down with a herald and the following message: "you [feminine pronoun] who can immerse yourself in this crater, you who believe that you will go back to him who sent the crater: you who know why you were born."⁸² Being filled with "intellect" (*nous*), the immersion in the crater was meant to "give intellect" to the soul (a word of feminine gender in ancient Greek and most probably referred to in this quote). The intellect acquired in the cup brought knowledge of all things in the world, which led one to relinquish it and to acquire immortality.⁸³

The two other "baptismal" images found in the *Corpus Hermeticum* have generally been contrasted with that of *Hermes to Tat* since they are negatively connoted. In the treatise *To Tat On the Common Intellect*, the soul that enters the body is said to step into and be immersed in pleasure and pain, which are compared to boiling humors.⁸⁴ The other text appears to strike an even more dissonant note: souls are "immersed" (*bebaptismenai*) in flesh and blood, not *nous*, and immersion is described as "a punishment" (*baptismou kai kolaseôs*).⁸⁵ In both cases, however, immersion in the cup allegorizes embodiment.

The positive uses of the image of the immersion in the cup found in *Corpus Hermeticum* IV and in Zosimos' *Final Abstinence*⁸⁶ are neither unrelated to the three so-called negative uses of the same image nor are they in contradiction with them.⁸⁷ The tension perceived in the *Hermetica* between worldly concerns and "technical" treatises on one side and rejection of the world and "philosophical" treatises on the other can be explained by the existence of a Hermetic curriculum by which knowledge of the world was considered as the preliminary step in order to "acquire intellect."⁸⁸ That "rebirth" must first go through a contemplation of materiality, "the visible god," is the topic of *Corpus Hermeticum* V, entitled *That the Invisible God is the Most Visible*. Since the source of the world is invisible, Hermes states, its contemplation should start with the visible

⁸² *Corpus Hermeticum* IV 4.

⁸³ *Corpus Hermeticum* IV 5.

⁸⁴ *Corpus Hermeticum* XII 2: σώματος γὰρ συνθέτου ὥπερ χυμοὶ ζέουσιν ἢ τε λύπη καὶ ἡ ἡδονή, εἰς ἃς ἐμβᾶσα ἡ ψυχὴ βαπτίζεται.

⁸⁵ *Hermetic Fragments from Stobaeus* XXV 8.

⁸⁶ *Corpus Hermeticum* XII 2 and *Hermetic Fragments from Stobaeus* XXV 8. Ephraim the Syrian (fourth century) also mentioned a Hermetic teaching according to which a cup attracted souls into it and made them forget where they came from. According to Ephraim's reading, the cup represented the body (see testimony 22 in Festugière and Nock 1954:vol.4; edition and English translation in Mitchell 1921:210). See Van Den Kerchove 2012:301-302.

⁸⁷ Edwards 1992.

⁸⁸ Fowden 1986.

creation. But since it is not possible to climb to heaven to study the most orderly part of creation (and, consequently, the closest representation of the creator of the universe), the contemplation of God must be made by the study of the created world. Human parturition stands as an especially apt means to achieve this contemplation since it is the visible paradigm of universal creation.⁸⁹ The four references to immersion in the cup refer to the same reality: the visible world, and more specifically the human body, is the first means by which one can access knowledge of the divine. The "immersion into flesh and blood," i.e. embodiment, is a punishment and this punishment in matter is exactly what leads toward rebirth, the "return to life."

Since Hermetic immersion could symbolize embodiment as well as salvation and that the alchemical apparatus stood for the universe as well as that by which salvation was procured, Zosimos could have associated both crater and apparatus with the universe, and the act of entering these structures as embodiment. Zosimos' comparison between the formation of the embryo in the uterus and alchemical tincture further suggests that he saw a similarity between alchemical transformation and embodiment.⁹⁰ From the Hermetic perspective one must first study the creation to perceive the invisible creator, the alchemical apparatus must have seemed as the fruitful site where one could reflect upon the "lessons of the body"⁹¹ through the study of analogical changes in matter, get rid of passions, and consequently reach rebirth after the death of the body.

5. The Alchemy of Zosimos As Spiritual Exercise

Unlike the typical eschatological narrative, the visionary journeys of the first *Lesson on Excellence* are set neither above nor below the earth. By "climbing and entering" inside the tool of his trade in order to "find the coveted thing," Zosimos not only decided to "lean down toward the dark-gleaming cosmos"⁹² but also considered the study of the cosmos and its transformations as a soteriological enterprise. This enterprise was characterized by the double movement

⁸⁹ Asclepius 20–21. For similar examples, see Asclepius 8, *Corpus Hermeticum* V 1, IX 6–7, IX 21–22, XII 21, *Hermetic Fragments from Stobaeus* XXIII 3. Jean-Pierre Mahé (2009) also showed how an astronomical Hermetic treatise (*Hermetic Fragments from Stobaeus* VI) could have been conceived as a spiritual exercise in preparation for the flight of the "perfect" through the seven spheres. This is also similar to the comparison of the travel to the altar-bowl with the travel of the moon across the sky. On the study of heaven as a didactic travel going through several *gradus*, see Manilius *Astronomica* II 750–787, IV 119–121 (here not only "steps" but also zodiacal "degrees") with Volk 2004.

⁹⁰ Berthelot and Ruelle 1888:2.216.4–9.

⁹¹ *Authentic Memoirs* I 4.

⁹² *Chaldean Oracles* fr. 163 des Places.

of humanity initiated by the fall of *Phôs* into matter and concluded by the voyage “up” toward rebirth. This is the “virtuous cycle” of life, which Zosimos described to Theosebeia: “‘running down’ (*katadramousa*) to Poimander to get baptized into the crater, ‘run up’ (*anadrame*) toward your race.”⁹³

Parallels found with the *Hermetica* suggests that Zosimos expected to gain greater clarity about the universe through the practice of alchemy and that it was this knowledge—brought by alchemical practice—that could produce a radical transformation of the self. That this soteriological process was mixed with the creation of fake luxury goods might sound paradoxical. He was well aware of this tension and I would even go as far as to say that it played a fundamental role in his combination of metallurgical and soteriological techniques. Thanks to the powers of analogical thinking, he exploited the persuasive effects that physical science exerted on imaginations to bring the observation of natural principles to bear on the perception of one’s self. In other words, he conceived alchemy as a spiritual exercise derived through persuasion from the efficacy of metallurgical processes. Conversely, Zosimos also transformed the practice of a particular trade into a spiritual exercise.

If Zosimos recommended Theosebeia to “spit on matter” it was not because of a radical anticosmism. The human body (and matter in general) was not simply a hurdle for him. Paradoxically, matter was also the key to the afterlife. From this perspective, his work is not entirely atypical for late antiquity. If what we know of Zosimos’ social context can be used to help us reconstruct the social context of works found in similar corpora (such as the Nag Hammadi codices), exploring early Greek alchemy might be particularly useful in understanding what brought late antique scholars to work with or against each other, irrespective of their theological persuasions and cultic affiliations.

⁹³ Festugière 1949:368.3–4.