

Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism

The murmur of spirits that sleep in the shadow of gods from afar . . .
—Algernon Charles Swinburne

The need of pagan believers to enter into direct contact with their gods led to the development of a certain technique or a set of techniques codified during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, it seems, and given the name "theurgy."¹ It was the subject of philosophical discussions within the Neoplatonist schools, and many followers of Plotinus accepted it

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enthusiastically, almost as a way of life. The man who wrote the code in the second century A.D. is known as Julian the Theurgist, to distinguish him from his father, Julian the Chaldaean. The code itself is known as the *Oracula Chaldaica*, a collection of logia, or sayings, in Greek hexameters, of which fragments have survived.² In its original form, the collection might be called the "Bible" of theurgy, although its enigmatic style and its use of exuberant imagery would have made it difficult to use even then without the help of a spiritual guide or mentor. It seems to address itself to readers who knew already what the theurgical experience is like. Of its style E.R. Dodds has said that it "is so bizarre and bombastic, [the] thought so obscure and incoherent, as to suggest . . . the trance utterances of modern 'spirit guides.' "

Julian the Theurgist was a kind of spiritual adviser to the emperor Marcus Aurelius, whom he accompanied on his campaign against the Dacians. He modeled a human face from clay and turned it toward the enemy. When they approached and were about to attack the Roman legions, unbearable flashes of lightning came out of the face and drove the barbarians away in a panic.³

Although the *Oracula* were known to the Neoplatonists as the ultimate source of theurgical lore, some of them—for example, Proclus⁴—saw in Plato the true founder of theurgy, whereas others—for example, Plotinus himself⁵—apparently considered Orphism as the origin of one branch of theurgy, the part that dealt with the animation of statues, which has been called *τελεστική*.

The term *theurgia* can be explained in contrast to *theologia*. It is an activity, an operation, a technique, dealing with the gods, not just a theory, a discussion, an act of contemplation. As such it was considered a form of worship, possibly the best kind of worship, and it clearly had its own rewards for those who practiced it. In his work *On the Mysteries of Egypt*, an elaborate defense of theurgy against skeptics and unbelievers, Iamblichus says (2.11):

It is not thought that links the theurgist to the gods; else what should hinder the theoretical philosopher from enjoying theurgic

2. *Oracles chaldaïques*, ed. E. des Places (Paris, 1971), with a French translation and notes.

3. *Oracles* pp. 221f. des Places, from Psellus.

4. *In Timaeum* 2.255.26f.

5. *Enn.* 4.9.11; P. Boyancé, "Théurgie et téléstique néoplatonicienne," *Rev. Hist. Rel.* 147 [1955]: 195ff.

union with them? The case is not so. Theurgic union is attained only by the perfective operation of unspeakable acts correctly performed, acts which are beyond all understanding, and by the power of the unutterable symbols intelligible only to the gods.⁶

To understand the whole concept and the ideology behind it, we ought to look at some synonyms and paraphrases as they were more or less commonly used. It is not my ambition to give a complete list, only a few analogies.

Another name for theurgy is *ἱερατική τέχνη*, "priestly art," suggesting that the theurgist saw himself as a priest.⁷ *Θεαγωγία*, another name, means literally "evocation of a god"; similarly, *φωταγωγία* means "evocation of light"; the terms are synonymous, because god is light. A more general term, *ἔργα εὐσεβείας* (in Latin this would be *opera pietatis* or *pia opera*), shows that theurgy was considered a part of religion, a religious duty, in fact, by some.⁸ Iamblichus (*Myst.* 3.19) speaks of the "execution of eternal actions" when he clearly has in mind theurgical operations. The term "fire" appears in several terms—for instance, "actions of eternal fire," *πυρὸς ἀφθίτου ἔργα*, and the knowledge of the theurgist is called "understanding heated by fire."⁹ A closely related group of synonyms—*ὄργια*, *μυστήρια*, *τελεταί*, *μυσταγωγία*—indicates that, in later paganism, theurgy had acquired the status of the old mystery religions; in fact, theurgy can be considered the ultimate development of the mysteries, because it represents an initiation into the highest mystery of all, the union of man and god.¹⁰ Other names are "theosophy," "service," "ritual," "divine knowledge."¹¹

Philosophy and Theurgy

The basic doctrine of theurgy could be found, as I have said, in the *Oracles*, but it was greatly expanded and interpreted by the Neo-

6. Cf. Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, edited, with a commentary, by E.R. Dodds (Oxford, 1933), xx.

7. *Oracles* p. 219 des Places. The term *θεαγωγὸς λόγος* is also found in the Magical Papyri.

8. *Oracles* p. 177 des Places.

9. *Oracles* frs. 6, 133, 139.

10. J. Bidez, "Notes sur les mystères néoplatoniciens," *RBPh* 7 (1928): 1477–81.

11. Iambl. *Myst.* 5.22; cf. des Places, *Oracles*, p. 45, n. 2.

platonists—not all of them, but quite a few. The philosophers who belonged to the various schools of Neoplatonism can be divided into those who placed theurgy above thought, those who did not, and those who were undecided.

Let us look at the basic doctrine first. An excellent account has been given by Franz Cumont.

Following Plato, the Chaldean theurgists clearly opposed the intelligible world of the ideas to the world of appearances which are perceptible by the senses. They had a dualist concept of the universe. At the top of their pantheon they placed the intellect whom they also called the Father (*Νοῦς πατριζός*). This transcendent god who wraps himself in silence is called impenetrable and yet is sometimes represented as an immaterial Fire from which everything has originated. Below him are, on various levels, the triads of the intelligible world, then the gods who reside beyond the celestial spheres (*ἄζωνοι*) or who preside over them (*ζωναῖοι*). . . . The human soul is of divine substance, a spark of the original Fire, has of its own will descended the rungs of the ladder of beings and has become imprisoned in the body. . . . When it is freed of all the material wraps by which it is burdened, the blessed soul will be received in the fatherly embrace of the highest God.¹²

Using this doctrine as a starting point, the Chaldeans perfected a technique that could apparently be learned, at least up to a certain point, and more or less guaranteed a manifestation of the divine in a variety of forms on this earth and a union with it in this life as well as salvation in the next.

Obviously, we know only a part, perhaps only a very small part, of the whole procedure, and we can only guess at how and why it worked. No introduction to theurgical operations has survived. We know that Iamblichus, Proclus, and others practiced a kind of theosophy, which, by ascetic exercises, special rites, and certain material objects could bring the deity down to earth or make the soul ascend to the higher regions.¹³ Even if we had Iamblichus' voluminous work on the *Oracles*, which the

12. *Lux Perpetua* (Paris, 1949), 363f., 367. See also *Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (Paris, 1928), 282 n. 69; des Places, intro. to *Oracles*, pp. 1ff.

13. J. Bidez, *La vie de l'empereur Julien* (Paris, 1930), 73ff.

emperor Julian was so anxious to read in a good edition,¹⁴ we would probably not understand much more, and we could hardly expect to be able to reproduce these procedures and obtain the same effects, even if we wanted to. I have collected as many specific details as possible and tried to piece together a picture, but much of it remains a puzzle. One clearly had to be initiated, as Julian was himself, by a master. Part of the technique appears to have been a closely guarded secret handed down in certain families, but also in the philosophical schools—they were, after all, like families.

From the way in which these experiences are referred to—the seriousness, the warmth of the tone, the enthusiasm—one may conclude that the technique usually worked, though failures occurred, it seems, and had to be explained. There also seems to have been a certain amount of fraud; at least this is alleged by outsiders and adversaries, such as the Christians; and even within Neoplatonism there were critics and skeptics. Some theurgists must have been better than others.

But assuming that something truly extraordinary happened, we must look for a plausible explanation in modern terms, and this I shall try to do at the end of my discussion, though I cannot claim to have found the solution; in this area all research must remain more or less tentative.

It has been said that theurgy was essentially a higher form of magic, merely a respectable cousin of what the Greeks called γοητεία.¹⁵ Γόης can designate not only a “sorcerer” but also a “juggler” and quite often a “swindler.”¹⁶ That theurgy was nothing else but magic and closely allied with fraud was the opinion of Christian authors.¹⁷ Believers, on the other hand, distinguished their art carefully from γοητεία. Iamblichus (*Myst.* 3.28–290) attacks the “makers of images,” and he seems to have in mind magicians who can produce false apparitions of the gods.¹⁸ These practitioners apparently claimed the status of theurgists, but for

14. Cf. A.-J. Festugière, *Trois dévots païens*, vol. 3, *Sallustius* (Paris, 1944), 8; *Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1953), 48.

15. H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* (Cairo, 1940), 190ff., 238; cf. S. Eitrem, “La théurgie chez les Néoplatoniciens et dans les papyrus magiques,” *SO* 22 (1942): 47ff.

16. W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago, 1979), s.v.

17. Gregory of Nazianzus *Or.* 4.55f.; cf. C.A. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus*, vol. 1 (1829), 113ff.

18. N.P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, vol. 2 (1961), 434.

Iamblichus they are nothing else but γόητες.¹⁹ It is not quite clear in what sense the apparitions they produced were false. Perhaps they used the kind of magical apparatus described by Hippolytus in his chapter on magicians; perhaps there were certain signs that their trance was fake; in antiquity even an ordinary person was able to distinguish a real trance from a fake one.

A similar distinction is made by Porphyry. Although he is not always sure—unlike Iamblichus—that theurgy is the highest form of religious worship, he strictly rejects the lower forms of magic. In book 2 of *De abstinentia*, which deals with the gods and the ways in which they are worshiped, one chapter (43) discusses the kind of magic performed through evil powers—that is, the powers which evil magicians worship and use, especially their leader (τὸν προεστῶτα αὐτῶν). Demons may send deceptive images and fool persons by “miracle working” (τεξατουγία), here used in a negative sense; there are actually wretched creatures who prepare potions and love charms with their help. All this has nothing to do with theurgy.

The aim of all theurgical operations is clearly described in fragment 97 of the *Oracles* (though a few words in the text are hypothetical); it is, in one word, to embrace God and be embraced by God: “Having flown upward, the human soul will embrace God vigorously. Free of any mortal element, she²⁰ will be wholly intoxicated by God.” The theurgist aims at “unification with the unparticipated One,”²¹ and it is the willingness of the gods to descend that makes theurgy possible.

Through the mystical union with the One and the release from the bonds of fate, humans become actually equal to the gods,²² at least

19. *Myst.* 4.2; cf. Porphyry *De regr. anim.* fr. 2 Bidez (quoted at Augustine *Civ. Dei* 10.9); Proclus *Theol. Platon.* 2.9. The distinction is made elsewhere—e.g., in Apul. *Apol.* 26; Apollonius of Tyana *Epist.* 16; Heliodorus *Aethiop.* 3.16. Cf. Zintzen, “Die Wertung von Mystik und Magie in der neuplatonischen Philosophie,” *RhM* 108 (1965): 92 n. 75.

20. The word for God is masculine in Greek, that for the soul is feminine. One wonders whether there were sexual undertones to the image of the mystical union.

21. A.C. Lloyd, “The Later Neoplatonists,” in *Cambridge History of Later Greek Philosophy*, ed. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge, 1970), 321. He refers to Proclus *Elem. Theol.* 140; *In Platon. Remp.* 2.232ff.; *In Platon. Tim.* 1.209.

22. A.D. Nock, ed., *Sallustius: Concerning the Gods and the Universe* (Cambridge, 1926) liv, xcvi. The distinction between ούστας (encounter) and ένωσις (union) is made by S. Eitrem, “Die systasis und der Lichtzauber in der Magie,” *SO* 8 (1929): 49ff.

for a short time; afterward they assume their human condition again. Theurgists rank higher than theologians, because they not only think and talk about the gods; they know how to act on them.²³

Theurgy is also the path to salvation, another blessing that connects it with the mystery religions. It saves the soul and can even save the body, according to the *Oracles* (fr. 128). It will help the soul to leave the "flock" (of ordinary human beings), subject to fate (frs. 102 and 103), and it will wash the soul from its terrestrial pollution (fr. 196). How is all this possible? The human soul is fiery by nature and related to the cosmic fire; therefore it has a natural tendency to return to it and rejoin it.²⁴

These beliefs are based on four main principles: (1) the principle of power (δύναμις); (2) the principle of cosmic sympathy (συμπάθεια τῶν ὄλων); (3) the principle of sameness (ὁμοιότης); (4) the idea of the soul-vehicle (ὄχημα).²⁵

I should like to discuss these principles briefly. First, there is power, which is used not as a philosophical term but as a general concept, not unlike *mana*. There is power available in the universe to those who know how to plug into it, so to say. Magic, of course, is also based on this concept, and it, too, operates with the principle of cosmic sympathy. This second principle involves certain hidden relationships in the universe that cannot be explained by the sequence of cause and effect, or in terms of time and space. A force located thousands of miles from where I am may nevertheless affect me and my whole life. The universe is a huge living organism in which nothing happens without influencing some other part. Even if the connection is not obvious, the result is clear, and philosophy or occult science has to find an explanation. Plotinus says (*Enn.* 4.4. [28] 32.13), "The universe is one and affected by common feelings and like a living being, and what is far is near."²⁶ And Porphyry (*Letter to Anebo* fr. 24 Parthey) writes that sympathy exists, as those can attest who "call the gods, carry stones and herbs, tie sacred ties, open what is closed, and produce valid apparitions of the gods"—that is, theurgists.

The third principle, sameness, connects the subject with the object—

23. J. Bidez, *Vie de l'empereur Julien*, 369 n. 8; Lloyd, "Later Neoplatonists," 277.

24. F. Cumont, "Le mysticisme astral," *Bull. Acad. Belge* 1909, pp. 256ff.; Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 470.

25. Only three principles (the ὄχημα is not considered) in Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 679.

26. Zintzen, "Die Wertung," n. 83; G. Luck, *Arcana Mundi* (Baltimore, 1985), 147ff.

those who see and understand with those who are seen and understood.²⁷ There is a definite "family relationship"²⁸ between us and the gods; for if we did not share, in some way, in the nature of the divine, how could we know the divine? If the human eye did not share somehow in the nature of the sun, how could it see the sun?

The fourth principle underlying theurgy is the vehicle of the soul (ὄχημα), a kind of astral body that we have; the gods have one, too. The "evocation of the Light" (φωταγωγή; the word is also used as a synonym for theurgy, as we have seen already) illuminates the ὄχημα of the theurgist with a divine light, and so divine apparitions (φαντασμοί) move our "active imagining perception" (ἡ ἐν ἡμῖν φανταστική δύναμις), according to Iamblichus (*Myst.* 3.14). The shiny vehicles of the gods can actually be made apparent by means of theurgy.²⁹ In a modified form the doctrine of the ὄχημα seems to survive in modern spiritualism; but there are other indications, as we shall see, that in ancient theurgy mediumship played a role.³⁰

Many Neoplatonists between the third and the sixth centuries were practicing theurgists and tried to accommodate their philosophy to the mystic experiences they had. Some did not practice it, although they may have found it interesting, but there is no general agreement within the school as to the comparative merits of philosophical discussion in the traditional Platonic sense versus theurgy. The Chaldean doctrine may have had roots in Platonism, but it is really a new development. According to Olympiodorus (*In Platon. Phaed.* 123.3–5 Norvin), Plotinus and Porphyry put philosophy first; Iamblichus, Syrianus, and Proclus put theurgy first. This may be an oversimplification. Porphyry was certainly attracted by theurgy, although he hesitated to place it above theology. Moreover, Olympiodorus' list is incomplete: many other philosophers named in Damascius' *Vita Isidori* and in Eunapius' *Vitae Sophistarum* were either practicing theurgists or devotees of some kind—for example, Aedesius, Antoninus the Anchorite,³¹ Asclepiodotus,³² Chrysanthius,

27. Psellus (following Proclus) "On Greek Theurgy," *CMAG* 6 (1928): 148; cf. Iambl. *Myst.* 3.14.

28. Cf. E. des Places, "Syngeneia: La parenté de l'homme avec dieu," *Etudes et Commentaires* 51 (1964): 164ff.

29. J. Trouillard, *L'un et l'autre selon Proclus* (Paris, 1972), 186ff.

30. E.R. Dodds, in his edition (with commentary) of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, pp. 313ff.

31. On Antoninus "the Anchorite" see G. Luck, "Two Predictions of the End of Paganism," *Euphrosyne*, n.s., 14 (1986): 153ff. (in this volume, pp. 257–61).

32. Cf. Zintzen, "Die Wertung," 93 n. 31.

Eunapius, Eustathius, Heraiscus, Isidorus, Julian the Emperor, Marinus, Maximus, Nestorius, Plutarch of Athens, Sallustius, Sopater, Sosipatra, Syrianus, and Theosebius.

The career of Sosipatra, a celebrated philosopher and psychic, as we would say, is told by Eunapius (*Vit. Soph.* pp. 466–70 Boiss.).³³ As a little girl she was educated by blessed demons or heroes who appeared one day on her father's estate, recognized her talents, and took her away; her father knew better than to object. Later she was brought back, and it turned out that she had developed her psychic gifts to an astonishing degree. Eventually, she became a great teacher and thinker in Pergamon. A relative of hers by the name of Philometor, "overcome by her beauty and eloquence," as Eunapius says, fell in love with her and cast a love spell on Sosipatra, but his magic was defeated by an even more powerful performance by Maximus, the pupil of Aedesius and teacher of the emperor Julian. The frustrated lover felt trapped and ashamed of himself, which impressed Sosipatra; she "looked at him with different eyes and admired him because he had admired her so much."

The story is fascinating, because it tells us something about the intellectual elite of paganism at the time of the emperor Julian. Magic was everywhere, but it could be defeated, and—most important of all—theurgy worked. It looks like the pagan elite's last stand in the battle against the Christians. To prove that they were on the right side, the pagans claimed to have inherited not only the best of Hellenic culture—Platonism and rhetoric—but also direct contact with the ancient gods at any time they desired. Add to this the beauty and charm of Sosipatra and her psychic gifts, and you have an irresistible argument that paganism is better. The emperor Julian, by returning to it, accepted this kind of thinking and endorsed it.

As we try to define the nature of theurgy, we face the question: Does it involve compulsion? Can theurgists actually force the gods to appear, to communicate with mortals? The issue is controversial, but it seems to me that inasmuch as theurgy is a kind of higher magic and all magic recruits demons and gods, presses them into service, as it were, sometimes against their will, it is reasonable to suppose that even theurgy is a form of pressure. There is evidence of this in the *Oracles*, fragment 220: "Listen to me, though I am unwilling to speak, for you have bound me by compulsion [ἀνάγκη]." Similarly, fragment 223 states: "Drawing some

33. A summary is given by Lloyd, "Later Neoplatonists," 278.

of them [gods] by unspeakable [?] charms [ὑγγες] from the air, you made them descend easily on this earth, even though they did not want to; those in the middle,³⁴ riding on the winds of the middle, far from the divine fire, you send to the mortals like prophetic dreams, treating demons disgracefully [ἀεικέα δαίμονας ἔρδων]."

The Techniques of Theurgy

What actually happened? What did you have to do to make the gods appear or have their statues smile at you or to have wonderful visions of light? We have certain clues but no authentic step-by-step description of the whole procedure, and it is unclear in what order or sequence the ritual was performed. Perhaps every practitioner had an individual technique that worked well for him or her but not so well for anyone else.

Roughly speaking there seem to have been two types of operation. One depended on the use of "symbols" and "tokens" (σύμβολα, συνθήματα) to consecrate and animate the statues of the gods. The other one depended mainly on mediumistic trance. This distinction has been made by E.R. Dodds³⁵ in his fundamental essay on theurgy, and it has been accepted by the scholars with whose work I am familiar. The second type of operation, involving a medium in a state of trance, has been experienced and described in modern times; but the first, the animation of statues, is not something we can deal with easily, though it may also have required trance or some similar state of mind.

Any attempt at reconstructing the whole ritual must be tentative, as I have said. There are some elements that can be identified; here I partly follow Edouard des Places,³⁶ the learned editor of the *Oracles*, who based his distinction on fragments 132, 139, 208, and other texts.

1. Long periods of silence (fr. 132). This is an ascetic discipline,³⁷ like fasting, forcing oneself to stay awake, praying for long periods of time. It means depriving oneself of a natural activity like eating, sleeping, or talking. I shall discuss this as well as other elements later on.

2. The "understanding warmed by fire" (fr. 139), an enigmatic

34. Probably the demons of the air as intermediaries between ether and earth; cf. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus*, 730 (c).

35. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), 283ff.

36. *Oracles* pp. 17f. des Places.

37. Cf. O. Casel, "De Philosophorum Graecorum Silentio Mystico," *RGVV* 16, no. 2 (1919).

phrase that also occurs as a synonym for the whole art of theurgy. The divine fire that theurgists hope to see at some point will help them understand all of theurgy in a flash. It will teach them to pray properly and give them knowledge of all classes of gods (fr. 139). The ability to distinguish higher from lower gods, heroes from demons, and elevated souls from common ones plays a great role in pagan demonology³⁸ and in the theurgical operations based on it.

3. Material things, such as herbs and stones, but also words uttered or written down, because words were considered just as real as any material things. These are included in the category of "symbols" and "tokens" (σύμβολα, συνθήματα), and they really could be anything—an object, a magical formula, from the stone *mnizouris* to a *vox mystica*—anything that would establish a contact between a human being and a god. It looks as though the "symbols" and "tokens" were passwords or guarantees that everything was all right: the god would recognize the theurgist as a legitimate petitioner, and the theurgist would recognize the god as a real god, not just a demon or a hero. But the whole doctrine is not clear on this particular point, and I will have to return to it.

4. Specific magical tools, such as the "bull-roarer" (ῥόμβος or στροφάλος) and similar objects that may look like simple magical toys to us but apparently produced the desired effects under certain conditions. Again, I will have to say more about these devices at a later point.

5. In some cases, perhaps, use of drugs which were similar in their effects to mescaline or LSD. Very little is said in our sources about the ingestion of mind-altering substances, but there are allusions to heavy perfumes and aromatic vapors. This is another problem that will have to be dealt with more fully at a later point.³⁹

There can be little doubt that silence, fasting,⁴⁰ praying, and lack of sleep over long periods of time may induce a state of consciousness quite different from what we call normal. Add to these techniques the art of concentration described in *Oracles* fragment 2, which stresses the importance of walking "through the channels of fire not by dispersing

38. Perhaps also in the early church; see Paul's 1 Cor. 12:10 διακρίσεις πνευμάτων.

39. Dodds (*Greeks and the Irrational*, 296) briefly mentions the steps leading to trance.

40. On the discipline of fasting in various religions and cultures see R. Arbesmann, "Das Fasten (RVV 21 [1929]); Felicitas D. Goodman et al., *Trance, Healing, and Hallucination: Three Field Studies in Religious Experience* (New York, 1974); Judith H. Dobrzynski, *Fasting* (New York, 1979).

oneself but with full concentration [μή . . . σποράδην, ἀλλὰ στιβαρόν]. These "channels of fire" lead toward the "intelligible fire" (fr. 66), which Iamblichus (*Myst.* 3.31) calls the "end of every theurgical operation." Remaining in total darkness for a long time is a related technique; by not seeing or hearing or saying anything, our senses are being manipulated in a certain way. Monotonous, endlessly repeated prayers, incantations, formulas, litanies, and names have a hypnotic effect. The Tibetan mantra, *om mani padme hum*, may be compared. Let us not forget that firm belief that the gods would eventually manifest themselves and previous discussions with persons who had had such experiences, or having watched them in the midst of one, would create a climate in which miracles not only seemed possible but actually occurred. This, at least, is what Iamblichus seems to suggest (*Myst.* 1.15; 3.11, 17; 5.26). Music and dancing, rhythmic sounds, and motions of different kinds also may lead to trance. There is a more dramatic form of ecstasy that expresses itself in shouting and wild gestures.⁴¹ These ecstatic and visionary experiences result from a psychic disposition but can be developed and activated, as we have seen, by ascetic disciplines, specific rituals, and physical resources.

To understand the experiences of the theurgists, we have to study the phenomenon of ecstasy. What the Greeks called ἔκστασις we would call "trance" today, but not every trance is ἔκστασις in the Greek sense of the word; it is the religious context that counts.

The two best discussions of ecstasy published in more recent years are, in my opinion, an article by F. Pfister in the *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*⁴² and a chapter in E. des Places' book *La religion grecque*.⁴³ I will summarize the results of their research as far as it is of interest to us. Pfister (who does not deal with theurgy) begins with a standard definition of ecstasy, as he found it in a modern dictionary of psychology: "ecstasy . . . is an exalted state in which, as if in a dream, visions are seen, truths understood, voices heard."⁴⁴ It is interesting to compare this definition to the definition of trance, as it is given in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*: "a state characterized by a more or less prolonged suspension of consciousness and inertness to stimulus, a cataleptic or

41. Iambl. *Myst.* 3.5, 25; Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 686; F. Pfister, "Ekstase," *RAC* 4 (1959): 944ff.

42. Pfister, "Ekstase"; cf. W.R. Inge, "Ecstasy," *ERE* 5 (1910): 157ff.

43. E. des Places, *La religion grecque* (Paris, 1969), 308ff.

44. Fr. Giese, *Psychologisches Wörterbuch*, revised by F. Dorsch, 8th ed. (1968).

hypnotic condition." Ecstatic experiences are found in many different cultures,⁴⁵ and they are mainly explored today by anthropologists and parapsychologists.

The very word *ecstasy* implies that those who have this experience step outside themselves, step outside, as Plato says (*Phaedrus* 249d: ἐκ τῶν ἀνθρώπων σπουδασμάτων), normal human occupations; he calls this state a "divine madness" (θεία μανία). Another synonym or near synonym for ecstasy is "movement," κίνησις, implying a change in psychological structure. Thus the so-called Dionysius Areopagita, a Christian Neoplatonist,⁴⁶ speaks of the "special power of theologians when they are moved by the spirit." He says "theologians," but he clearly means "theurgists." Other synonyms, as collected by Father des Places, are ἐνθουσιασμός, ἐκπληξις, θάμβος.

In his speech *Apologia sive de magia*, Apuleius speaks of ecstasy as follows: the human mind can be drugged by incantations and heavy aromatic smoke until it gets completely out of control (he uses the verb *externare*, a Latin equivalent of ἐξίστασθαι); then it forgets everything, but afterward it returns to its own nature (chap. 43).

According to Proclus (*In Platon. Alcibiad.* 1.92.3ff.; cf. Plotin. *Enn.* 6.4f.), ἐκστασις involves ἔκτασις, "expansion." This is probably a play on words; even though they are not related—ἐκστασις is derived from ἐξίστασθαι, whereas ἔκτασις is derived from ἐκτείνειν—the two words sound alike, and by means of the weird logic of false etymologies, a relationship between them suggested itself to Proclus: "the soul expands in order to get closer to god, and god expands to meet the soul, without ever stepping outside, for he always remains inside himself," he explains.

The Greeks believed that a certain psychic disposition was a necessary requirement; "only individuals who tend by their nature toward ecstasy will become possessed," says Plutarch (*Quaest. Roman.* 112). Not all so-called philosophers will experience this state, but a human being who is "beloved by the gods" and whose soul is "god-loving" (θεοφιλῆς can mean both) will be privileged to experience visions and enjoy theophanies.⁴⁷

Plotinus was one of these privileged individuals, as it appears from Porphyry's *Vita Plotini* (23): four times during the years of Porphyry's discipleship the master succeeded in rising to the highest god. Plotinus

himself defined ecstasy as an awakening of the soul from its physical nature (*Enn.* 4.8.[6] 1.1).⁴⁸ Proclus, too, had such experiences (Marinus *Vita Procli* 7.30). The gift itself, not just technical knowledge, was passed on in certain families, and it could be transmitted from teacher to disciple by the laying on of hands. A devout visitor might catch it, by *osmōsis*, as it were, from a holy place.⁴⁹

Wine and other intoxicating substances were apt to bring about a trance, and Iamblichus (*Myst.* 3.25) compares trance to a state of drunkenness. I will consider later the possibility that the ancients used drugs comparable to hashish (used in Sufism), mescaline, or LSD. Strong perfumes and burning incense had a powerful effect, as a medical writer notes (Ps.-Galen *Defin.* 487 = 19.462 Kühn): some persons are filled by the god, get into trance when they inhale the smells during the ritual. Music and dancing, as I have said already, must have played an important role, but the dancing, just as the screaming and the violent gestures mentioned before, can also be considered an effect of trance, not only a cause.

Pfister touches on prayers and incantations and refers to earlier research. The person who serves as medium in these rites will get into trance as a result of being exposed to words uttered in a certain way over a long period of time, and in trance this person will be in touch with supernatural powers that will enable him or her, among other things, to prophesy.⁵⁰

A recently published book on trance, as observed in so-called primitive societies⁵¹—and I emphasize *so-called*, because who are we to judge what is primitive and what is advanced?—dwells on most of the points we have considered already—fasting, music, dancing, smells, drugs—but mentions, in addition to all this, (1) the personal magnetic power of a shaman; (2) breath control; (3) masks, costumes, and tattoos. Our ancient sources say nothing about breath control, as far as I can tell, and very little about costumes and the like, although one assumes that theurgists would dress up for the ritual—even wear a mask that would identify them with the god they were about to conjure up. The practice

48. H.-R. Schwyzler, *RE* 21:571; Pfister, "Ekstase," 980.

49. Heliodorus *Aethiopica* 2.11.

50. A. Abt, *Apuleius' Apologie* (RVV 4, no. 2 [1908]), 232ff.; Fr. Heiler, *Das Gebet* (Munich, 1923), 252ff.

51. Trance can be induced "by a cleverly-dosed combination of music, song, incense and the personal magnetic power of the [shaman]" (Nina Epton, "Trance in the Shadows," *Trances*, ed. S. Wavell, Audrey Butt, and Nina Epton [New York, 1967], 128).

45. H. Findeisen, *Schamanentum* (Berlin, 1957), 162ff.

46. *De divin. nom.* 1 (PG 3.585).

47. F. Pfister, *RE* 11:218; suppl. 4:319f.

of having magical spells tattooed on the body of a miracle worker is attested. Can you think of a handier reference? But what is perhaps the most important factor—the magnetic power of theurgists, their personal charisma—is also the most elusive factor, and we can only guess its impact from the enthusiastic allusions to successful experiments.

In the book on trance I just mentioned, there are photographs of women and men in so-called primitive societies who seem to be getting ready to go into trance. It is impossible not to notice the look of deep concentration and seriousness on their faces: there can be no doubt, I think, that they are about to experience something very important, something wonderful in their lives. It may be an escape; they know that they will be in another world, at least for a short time.

How did a witness recognize true ecstasy? I have said already that there was such a thing as a fake trance and that in antiquity it could be detected without too much trouble. Real trance was indicated by some or all of the following signs: shouts, spasms, foam at the mouth, wildly kicking feet, jumping around, being insensitive to pain. Some of these symptoms could probably be faked, but not all of them, and not convincingly.

The highest experience granted to a person in ecstasy is a vision of the deity, the ultimate knowledge of what the nature of the deity is, and mystical union with the Highest, the Unthinkable.⁵²

What were the experiences of theurgists like? That is the main question, but there is no clear answer to it.

The testimonies we have often deal with fire and light. In fragment 147 of the *Oracles* the goddess Hecate addresses the theurgist as follows:

After this invocation you will see either a fire which, like a child, leaps in the direction of the flow of the air, or a shapeless fire from which a voice rushes forth, or an abundant light which encircles, as it whirrs, the earth, or a horse which flashes more brightly than light, or a child riding on the swift back of the horse, on fire, or covered with gold, or else naked, or holding a bow and standing on the [horse's] back.

These are different types of light visions, nine altogether, some shapeless, some in the shape of a horse or a child on a horse.

In other fragments of the *Oracles* (147, 148) we are told of the sacred

fire that shines without a shape⁵³ and speaks to the theurgist; but sometimes the theurgist sees everything in the shape of a lion, and everything is lit by flashes of lightning. I would guess that these were utterances of one or several mediums in trance recorded over a period of time and put into verse by the compiler of the *Oracles*.

The theurgist spoke of αὐτοψία when the person who had been initiated "saw the divine light" (Marinus *Vita Procli* 28). Another type of vision was called ἐποπτεία; it describes a vision seen by the theurgist in charge of an initiation. It could also happen that a great teacher or priestlike figure would radiate light. This is reported to have happened during Proclus' lectures; he himself communicated with luminous apparitions of Hecate during theurgic rites.⁵⁴ It was the theurgists' ambition to see the gods themselves, their αὐτοφανῆ ἀγάλματα.⁵⁵

There is a remarkable anecdote in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (PG 65.314c/d).⁵⁶

The abbot Olympius told the following story: A pagan priest once came down to Scetis [the name, or the location, of the monastery], entered my cell, and spent the night there. When he observed the lifestyle of the monks, he said to me, "Leading this kind of life, do you see anything of your God?" I said to him, "No." Then the priest said to me: "When we perform the sacred rites for our God,⁵⁷ he hides nothing from us but reveals his mysteries to us. But you, after so many labors, vigils, periods of silence, ascetic exercises say, 'We see nothing'? Altogether it would seem that, if you see nothing, you keep evil thoughts in your hearts which separate you from your God and that because of this he does not reveal his mysteries to you." I went away and reported the words of the priest to the

53. A.D. Nock, *Sallustius*, xcix; Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*, 251. According to Psellus' commentary on *Oracles* fr. 148 (p. 173 des Places), many see the divine light, but it must be shapeless; if it has a shape, a form, one should not consider true the voice that comes from it.

54. Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 415, 440.

55. Iambl. *Myst.* 2.4; cf. 1.12, 2.5, 3.6; Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 686 n. 2.

56. Quoted by Reitzenstein, *Poimandres* (Leipzig, 1904), 34; cf. Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 686 n. 2.

57. He uses the verb ἱερουργέω, which seems equivalent to θεουργέω; cf. Porphyry *Ad Marcellam* 18; Iambl. *Vita Pythag.* 3.14. Paul uses the verb (Rom. 15:16), but with εὐαγγέλιον as an object, perhaps "serve the gospel as a priest" (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *Lexicon*, s.v.).

52. Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 415.

elders, and they marveled and said that it was so; for unclean thoughts separate God from humans.

Reitzenstein points out the naive character of the story and the almost cozy relationship between Christians and pagans in Egypt during the period of transition which it seems to attest. It must be said, however, that the theurgist comes out on top.

That the theurgists were granted bodily visions of the gods is declared in *Oracles* fragment 142: "For your sake, bodies have been attached to our autophanies [αὐτόπτοις φάσμασιν]." By their nature the gods are incorporeal, but for the sake of humankind, or rather, for the sake of a chosen few, the θεοφιλεῖς, they assume a physical shape and become αὐτόπτοι. Such a vision is called αὐτοφάνεια or αὐτοπτικὸν θέαμα.⁵⁸ But not only gods appear; visions of lesser spirits—angels, demons—are also possible; hence it becomes very important for the theurgist to distinguish between the various categories.⁵⁹ According to Psellus (commentary on *Oracles* fr. 88 [p. 175, des Places]), the *parousia* of Nature, when she is invoked by the theurgist, is preceded by a whole "choir" of demons in various shapes, her precursors; they appear to be gracious and kind, and they feign goodwill toward the person who has been initiated. By implication this probably means that these demons are not really kind, and the person who has just been initiated presumably lacks experience and may easily be fooled by them (Iambl. *Myst.* 2.4; 7).

Generally speaking, good demons have round bodies; bad demons are recognizable by their square shapes. Unfortunately, all demons can change their shapes and appearances very quickly.⁶⁰

Real danger may be involved in theurgical practices. If a terrestrial demon approaches, the theurgist must immediately sacrifice the stone *mnizouris*, whatever it is, and invoke him.⁶¹ The sacrifice of the stone

58. Cf. *Oracles* fr. 101; Iambl. *Myst.* 5.23. Both the *Oracles* and Iamblichus seem to prefer φάσμα to φάντασμα, the latter, perhaps, implying a less authentic experience (des Places, *Oracles*, pp. 101, 144).

59. Paul's διακρίσεις πνευμάτων (1 Cor. 12:10) may be compared, but cf. also E. Lerle, "Diakrisis Pneumatōn" (Diss., Heidelberg, 1946).

60. K. Svoboda, *La démonologie de Michel Psellos* (Brno, 1927), 7, 20.

61. Audrey Butt ("Training to be a Shaman," in *Trances*, ed. Wavell, Butt, and Epton, 155) writes about the Akowaio Amerindians of Guyana:

The possession of spirit stones, *wata*, as we have learned, is a major weapon of both defence and attack in the control of a skillful shaman.

makes another demon appear, a greater demon than the terrestrial one, a demon who will tell the truth (Psellus on *Oracles* fr. 149 [p. 184 des Places]). From Porphyry's account of Plotinus' experience in the temple of Isis (see later discussion), we know that sometimes an assistant had to hold chickens as a safety measure and strangle them when something went wrong. Apparently one did not always get the visions one wanted, and certain precautions were considered indispensable. Behind this particular fear lies the magical concept that mischievous demons are always lurking around, ready to interfere, perhaps just out of boredom, to do something rather than nothing at all, but sometimes because they are evil. It was also possible that a hostile theurgist, jealous of another's success, would try to interfere with a ritual; Psellus⁶² says that the theurgists "make the gods descend to them by enchanting songs, and they fetter and release them, as Apuleius did, who by oaths forced the 'god with the seven rays' [Heptaktis, but another reading seems to be Epaktos] not to communicate with the theurgist [i.e., Julian the theurgist]." Because Julian the theurgist and Apuleius were contemporaries, the story implies that Apuleius, who was taken for a magician by his enemies, although he protested his innocence and was acquitted by a court, actually practiced theurgy and was a rival of the formidable author of the *Chaldean Oracles*.

The spirit, or spirits, in each stone are helpers who can intercept and catch the spirit of sickness which is being sent. If the shaman wishes to be aggressive he may use the following method: when *Imawali*, the forest spirit, has stolen the spirit, *akwalu*, of a living person and so renders him ill and in danger of death through the deprivation, then the shaman will in turn steal that *Imawali's* baby and will place it on one of the spirit stones in his collection. This act will make the spirit baby, the little *Imawali*, ill. *Imawali's* father will then, to save his child, quickly give back the human spirit he has stolen. In this way the shaman is believed to be able to perform one of his main tasks, the restoration of stolen spirits.

Apart from this method, the shaman can use his spirit stones as projectiles with war heads, that is, with a built-in spirit aggressor. A spirit battle, utilizing spirit stones, may occur between two enemy shamans, as a contest to prove which of the two is superior as well as a means of releasing a patient from spirits under the control of the enemy shaman.

The Greek *mnizouris* seems to be such a "spirit stone."

62. In the treatise entitled "For Those Who Asked How Many Kinds of Philosophical Investigations There Are," in *Oracles* pp. 221f. des Places and in *Scripta minora* 1.446 K.-D.

The story, which may well be apocryphal, does not seem to be known to the scholars who have worked on Apuleius.

There are other dangers. When a medium—the Greek term is *δοχεύς*, literally, a “recipient”—is employed, he or she may be too weak to bear the full impact of the divine presence. In *Oracles* fragment 211, Hecate seems to complain (the context is not clear) about this, for she says, “The wretched heart of the medium is too weak to bear me.”⁶³

Still other possible dangers are foreshadowed in *Oracles* fragment 141: “A careless mortal with a tendency toward these things [i.e., earthly passions] is a liberation of the god.” This must mean that in such a case the theurgist loses his hold on the god and sets him free prematurely. The theurgist has to put his whole faith into his prayers and his rites, or else the god will slip out of the temporary compulsion (*ἀνάγκη*) that binds him. This possibility would support the older doctrine, rejected by more recent scholars, that theurgy was a form of compulsion. It seems that the gods were not always in a mood to be conjured up or evoked; they sometimes resented being called.⁶⁴ Porphyry (*De philos. ex oracul. haur.* pp. 162ff. Wolff) describes a certain theurgical ritual during which a statue of Apollo was bound with wreaths and linen straps, surrounded by bright lights, and assaulted by prayers and chants to force the god to descend and reveal the truth to his insistent worshipers. Finally the god—through the voice of a medium, no doubt—begs them to leave him alone.⁶⁵

Material Resources Used in Theurgical Practices

Some of these resources seem to be very old, but the Neoplatonists justified their use philosophically by saying, as Iamblichus (*Myst.* 5.23) does, that matter is not necessarily evil. On the contrary, there is a kind of matter that is pure and divine and does not prevent our communicating with the gods; in fact, it may become a receptacle for their manifestations on earth. The statue of a god is, after all, a material object. Matter

63. Psellus *Accusation of Michael Cerularius* 1.249 K.-D.: “Sometimes, along with the advent of divine powers, earth spirits are moved whose approach and motion when they happen with some force the weaker mediums cannot bear.” For the Stoic doctrine see Lucan *Pharsalia* 5.144–20.

64. Cf. Damascius *In Platon. Parmen.* 2.95.1a; E. Chaignet, *Comm. Procl. Parm.*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1900), 306 n.5.

65. Cf. Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 418.

(*ὕλη*) is offered by the gods, and it is “congenial” (*συμφυής*) to them, says Iamblichus (*ibid.*).⁶⁶

Psellus confirms this when he writes (*Expos. Chald.* p. 191 des Places), “They [the theurgists] . . . say that there exists a sympathy between the upper world, especially the one beneath the moon, and the lower world.” And elsewhere (*Comment.* p. 169 des Places) he claims: “We can only ascend toward God by strengthening the vehicle of the soul by material rites; he [i.e., the theurgist] thinks that the soul must be purified by stones, herbs, and incantations.” This is in accordance with Iamblichus, who writes (*Myst.* 5.22–23) that a single stone or a single herb can put us in touch with some divine activity.⁶⁷

To make and consecrate statues of deities in the proper way seems to have been an important branch of theurgy. It was recognized as such by Plotinus, who attributed the art to the “sages of old,” probably the Orphics. It is embodied in the *Oracles* (fr. 224, of doubtful authenticity): “Create a statue, purified in the manner I shall teach you. Make the body of Mountain rue [*πήγανον ἄγριον* = *Ruta halepensis*, according to Dioscorides 3.45, who identifies it in 3.46 with the magical Homeric herb *moly*] and adorn it with little animals, with domestic lizards, and when you have crushed a mixture of myrrh, gum [*σύραξ*], and frankincense, blend it with these creatures, go out into the open air under a waxing moon and perform the rite by saying this prayer.” This sounds very much like a recipe from the magical papyri.⁶⁸ Porphyry (*De philosoph. ex oracul. haur.* pp. 130f. Wolff) prescribes a similar process: “You consecrate a statue of Hecate in the following way: Produce a certain kind of fillet; grind lizards together with fragrant essences and burn all that; say a certain prayer in the open air under a waxing moon; do all this to consecrate the statue of Hecate. Then she will appear to you in your sleep.” The two prescriptions are remarkably similar. One notices that certain steps are outlined very clearly but others are left open, so to speak, to be filled in by the theurgist—for instance, the prayer whose text is not quoted; the theurgist probably learned it from a mentor, along with the proper way of

66. Cf. Trouillard, *L'un et l'autre*, 184f.

67. Cf. also Proclus *Elem. Theol.* p. 276 Dodds. Dodds notes that this doctrine is borrowed from Egyptian magic and that lists of symbolic animals, plants, and stones are frequent in the Magical Papyri. Elsewhere (*CMAG* 6 [1928]: 129) Proclus says that stones, plants, animals, perfumes, and other “sacred, godlike things” can share in the nature of the divine.

68. See G. Wolff, *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda* (1856), App. III, pp. 195ff.

reciting it. The written word was incapable of teaching this. The "sleep" in which Hecate will appear is probably more like a trance or a state of hypnosis.

Some of the tools used in theurgy are clearly of a magical nature. There is the so-called *rhombus* of Hecate, described by Psellus (on *Oracles* fr. 206 [p. 170 des Places]) as a golden ball enclosing a sapphire and covered with magical characters; it was rotated at the end of a strap made of bull's hide.⁶⁹ Originally this was a rhombus-shaped object, made of wood, bone, or metal; the spheric shape and the precious materials seem to be a later development. The *rhombus* is mentioned in descriptions of magical rites, notably in Theocritus (2.30).⁷⁰ It is the "bull-roarer" of the Australian aborigines. Another name for this tool is στροφάλος or Ἐκατικὸς στροφάλος (*Oracles* fr. 206), which des Places translates as *tourbillon*—"whirlwind" or "toupie"—that is, "spinning top," but it is almost certainly the magical *rhombus*. When the magician or theurgist rotates it above his head, it produces a whirring or whizzing sound called ῥοῦζος (*Oracles* fr. 107), which apparently was thought to imitate the whirring of the heavenly bodies as they move with incredible speed through space.⁷¹ The rotation of the tool was thought to affect the ritual through its unspeakable force. As the theurgist rotates the *rhombos*, he makes his invocation to the gods (ἐπικλήσις), but sometimes he laughs or produces indistinct yells or imitates animal sounds as he whips the air. All this sounds more like a ritual performed by the shaman of some primitive tribe, and it is hard to picture a Neoplatonist like Iamblichus or Proclus uttering inarticulate sounds or imitating an animal or laughing insanely as he rotated his bull-roarer.⁷² Perhaps they let someone else do this for them and simply watched and listened.

The magical wheel, or ἵνυξ, should be distinguished from the rhombus. It is also mentioned by Theocritus in the poem just mentioned.⁷³ Originally, the ἵνυξ was a bird, the wryneck, *lynx torquilla*, a kind of woodpecker; for magical purposes, it was tied or nailed onto a wooden wheel. Later, the wheel itself, with no bird attached, could be called ἵνυξ; it is often represented on Greek vases.

69. Bidez, *Vie de l'empereur Julien*, 78.

70. Gow's note gives all the necessary information, and his commentary even has a photograph of a reconstructed model, on pl. V.

71. See des Places, in his introduction to Iambl. *Myst.*, p. 18.

72. Clapping, whistling, or hissing—imitating various animals—is attested in the Magical Papyri; see Eitrem, "La théurgie," 70.

73. See Gow, pp. 39 and 41, of his commentary (vol. 2, Cambridge 1952).

For A.S.F. Gow, who had a model reconstructed and photographed for his commentary on Theocritus, it is a "spoked wheel, or a disk, with two holes on either side of the centre." He continues:

A cord is passed through one hole and back through the other; if the loop on one side of the instrument is held in one hand, the two ends . . . in the other, and the tension alternately increased and relaxed, the twisting and untwisting of the cords will cause the instrument to revolve rapidly first in one direction and then in the other.

Once more, we are considering a very simple, probably very ancient, magical tool adapted by the theurgists for their purposes and loaded by the Neoplatonists with philosophical ideas. I disagree with Gow on one point only. He underlines the facts that the ἵνυξ is never mentioned in the numerous love spells of the Magical Papyri and that there is no clear Latin equivalent of it (the *turbo* of Horace *Epodes* 17.7 is either this or a *rhombus*), and he concludes that it may have passed out of use.⁷⁴ The opposite is true, as the testimony of the theurgists shows. Marinus reports (*Vita Procli* 28) that Proclus used the "divine wheels" to communicate with the gods. There may be a connection with the "magical wheels" hanging from the ceiling of a palatial hall in Babylon, according to Philostratus (*Vita Apollonii* 1.25.6). They are also seen on Apulian vases. The Babylonian magi called them the "tongues of the gods."⁷⁵

I have already mentioned the "symbols" and "conventions," σύμβολα and συνθήματα, that link every material thing here with spiritual principles "there." Their exact nature is still controversial. They were known to the theurgists and used by them to achieve union with the gods.⁷⁶ They are scattered throughout the universe through the kindness of the gods, says Iamblichus (*Myst.* 5.23) and work without our knowledge (ibid. 2.11). Some of them are spoken, others are unspeakable, according to Proclus (*Theol. Platon.* 1.5C = p. 24.4 S.-W.).⁷⁷ Some were concealed inside the statues of the gods, Proclus attests (*In Platon. Timaeum* 1, p. 273 Diehl); they ensure the presence and intervention of the gods and are known only to the τελεσταί.⁷⁸

74. See Gow's article "Lynx, Rhombos, etc." *JHS* 54 (1934): 9.

75. Eitrem, "La théurgie," pp. 78f.

76. Proclus *Elem. Theol.* p. 223 Dodds.

77. *Oracles* fr. 109, with the note of des Places.

78. See Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*, 292; P. Boyancé, "Théurgie," 196 n. 2.

We have seen that the theurgists, during their rituals, uttered inarticulate sounds. Like the sorcerers of the Magical Papyri, they also used foreign names and words, preferably not in Greek "translation" (we would probably say, "transliteration"); otherwise they would lose their power. This is what Psellus (on *Oracles* pp. 169f. des Places) says, and he cites as examples *Serapheim*, *Cherubeim*, *Michael*, *Gabriel*—all Hebrew names. In the case of *Cherubeim* the ending in Greek transliteration could also be *-bin* or *-bim*, but a thoroughly Greek ending, *-eis*, is found in Josephus (*Antiqu.* 7.378). This is presumably the form one should not use; it was important to stay as close as possible to the Hebrew. Similarly, *Daniel* would have been fine, but not *Danielos*, a hellenized form also found in Josephus (*Antiqu.* 10.193).

I have said before that φωταγωγία, "evocation of light," is another term for theurgy. It seems to refer to a specific technique that may have been just one part of a more complex ritual. The theurgist stares at a lamp, then closes his eyes, then opens them again, then prays, and so continues. If he repeats this for a long time, he will no longer see a lamp but an overwhelming radiance. There is a variation of this technique: the theurgist stares for a long time at a white wall covered with magical symbols; the wall was probably illuminated.⁷⁹

Whether any animals were sacrificed during theurgical rites is not clear. Porphyry condemns the practice (*Letter to Anebo* fr. 29; cf. Theodoretus, bishop of Cyrrhus, *Curatio* 3.66). He argues that it makes no sense to kill animals and use them for ritual purposes when the demons and deities themselves declare it taboo to touch any dead body.⁸⁰ It seems that the theurgists were divided on this particular issue. One might say that part of their doctrine was dictated by the various deities and spirits who manifested themselves: one spirit might say, "I abhor animal sacrifices," but another one insisted on it. This is purely speculative, but it could explain, at least in part, the obscurities and apparent contradictions we find in our texts. We have seen already how the doctrine itself accounted for failures.

Let us assume now that twelve Neoplatonists conducted twelve different theurgical practices within the space of a month and then met to discuss their results. It seems very unlikely that anything like a uniform picture or a consensus would emerge. It then became the duty, I would

79. See Iambl. *Myst.* 3.14; Eitrem, "Die systasis," 49ff.; Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 508f.

80. Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 422.

imagine, of the senior theurgist or the most distinguished teacher to present a theory that would account for the analogies as well as the anomalies. A work like Iamblichus' *De mysteriis*, with its labyrinthian, sometimes erratic, train of thought, may reflect a number of experiences and represent an attempt to account for their exasperating variety. If the doctrine was partly based on mystical revelations and parapsychological experiments, we should not be surprised that everything was in constant flux.

On the basis of fragmentary testimonies that survive, Joseph Bidez, in his well-known work *La vie de l'empereur Julien* ([Paris, 1930], 79), has reconstructed Julian's own initiation into the rites of theurgy. It is a remarkable piece of historical fiction, and very plausible at that. Bidez speaks of voices and noises and appeals, disturbing music, heady perfumes, doors that open by themselves, luminous fountains, moving shadows, fog, sooty vapors, statues that seem to be animated and look at the candidate kindly and threateningly in turn, as they are surrounded by radiance, thunder and lightning, earthquakes to announce the arrival of the supreme god, the inexpressible Fire itself.

How can we explain these happenings? Julian's enemies accused his teacher, Maximus, of being a sophist and a fraud, but they did not completely discount the participation of real demons.⁸¹

There is a story behind the story. A Neoplatonist of the school of Pergamon, Eusebius of Myndus, who was critical of theurgy, described to the future emperor Julian, when he was a student of his, a scene in the temple of Hecate orchestrated by Maximus. Eusebius clearly tried to warn the prince against this sort of thing, but—in sublime irony—his warning had exactly the opposite effect: Julian had been waiting to find a man like this, and he at once bid farewell to Eusebius and went to study with Maximus, who then introduced him to theurgy.

Eunapius (*Vit. Soph.* p. 475 Boiss.), who was a wholehearted believer, tells another story. After Maximus had assembled a large number of friends in the temple of Hecate, he burned a grain of incense, recited "to himself" the whole text of a hymn, and made the statue first smile, then apparently laugh; finally the torches she held in her hands burst into a blaze of light.⁸² Even Eusebius, the skeptic, was impressed at first,

81. Bidez (*Vie de l'empereur Julien*, 79f.), quotes from Gregory of Nazianzus *Or.* 4.55; this, of course, is hearsay, too, but very imaginative and dramatic.

82. The animation of a doll during a graveyard ritual in a country town sixty miles west of Djakarta is reported by Nina Epton, "Trance in the Shadows," *Trances*, pp. 117ff.).

but later—perhaps after he had figured out how it could have been done—he called Maximus a “miracle worker for show,” θεατρικός θαυματοποιός.

Psellus describes a theurgical ceremony that took place in 1059 A.D.⁸³ He had been asked to investigate—he was, after all, an expert on the subject—and his efforts led to a formal accusation of the patriarch, Michael Cerularius, and his protégés, the monks of Chios. It is a fascinating document, which shows how pagan theurgy survived in a Christian context. So far, it has not been analyzed properly, as far as I know,⁸⁴ but what it tells us agrees with the information the pagan writers preserve. We hear about singing, monotonous movements of the limbs, blinking of eyelids, ingesting narcotics or hallucinogenics, and rubbing them in and inhaling them as well. After a while the prophetess Dosithea (the medium) began to speak softly; then she trembled; then she levitated. She spoke of cosmic subjects. Soon some Christian prophets, martyrs, and saints and also the Virgin Mary and the Holy Trinity “appeared” (i.e., spoke through the medium), but they had only trivial things to say, such as “Hello” or “Blow twice into your cup” or “I am glad to see you after having seen the moon.”⁸⁵

These trivial messages from a higher world must have been disappointing for the patriarch and the monks, but the levitation of the prophetess was an event. Levitation apparently occurred when the medium was in trance, and Iamblichus (*Myst.* 3.5)⁸⁶ seems to have observed the phenomenon. It has also been reported in modern times.⁸⁷

Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus

I should like to examine the attitude toward theurgy on the part of these four Neoplatonist philosophers. We have seen already that the school, as a whole, was divided on this issue. Some philosophers were deeply involved in theurgical rites; others were opposed to them; still others seem to have been interested but not committed. The school doctrine,

83. *Scripta minora* 1.232ff. K.-D.

84. There is a useful résumé in Svoboda, *La démonologie*, 50f.

85. *Ibid.*

86. Cf. Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 688.

87. Proclus *Elem. Theol.* pp. 163ff. Dodds; on the famous medium David Douglas Home see C. Wilson, *The Occult* (New York, 1973), 463ff.

which, in itself, combined “aims that appear divergent, if not incompatible,”⁸⁸ did not require any commitment one way or the other. Those who did believe were naturally anxious to convert those who did not, perhaps recruiting candidates for initiation among their more promising students. If Julian left one teacher because he rejected theurgy and went on to study with a renowned theurgist, many others may have done the same.

There was room for theurgy within the school doctrine, and the system provided explanations for how and why it worked, but theurgy was by no means a building block on which other building blocks rested. You could put it in or take it out and the structure as a whole did not change very much. It was more a matter of personal faith and religious belief. Neoplatonism was not a monolith: it counted seven schools in the course of four centuries, and within the schools we find a wide range of differing personalities.

Plotinus dealt with the problem of magic more than once in his lectures (e.g., *Enn.* 2.9.14, 4.4.40–44).⁸⁹ He was also credited with supernatural gifts by his biographer, Porphyry. Plotinus clearly believed in the effectiveness of magic up to a certain degree, but this does not make him a practicing magician or a theurgist himself.⁹⁰ Because magic existed in the world, Plotinus had to find a place for it in his system and explain it somehow. He did this by borrowing the concepts of sympathy and antipathy—that is, concepts on which magicians and theurgists depended. There are forces in the universe that are freely available, and magic simply reinforces them. Plotinus compared magic to music because both affect the irrational part of the soul.

Some magicians are evil, to be sure, and yet their sorcery works, for the forces are available to them too; but those who use magic for evil purposes will be punished sooner or later. Whatever harm magicians may be able to do to human beings, they cannot affect the universe, and even on earth their powers are limited, for the mind of the wise is safe from magical practices.

According to Plotinus, the magicians use certain substances (φύσεις) and certain gestures or positions (σχήματα) as well as incantations (ἐπωδὲς τὸ μέλος). Does he have in mind the “symbols” and “tokens” of

88. See R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (London, 1972), 4.

89. See *ibid.*, 70ff.; Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 117ff.

90. A.H. Armstrong, “Was Plotinus a Magician?” *Phronesis* 1 (1955): 73ff., a reply to Ph. Merlan, “Plotinus and Magic,” *Isis* 44 (1953): 341ff.

the theurgists? The problem has been discussed at great length, and no agreement has been reached so far.⁹¹

Plotinus admits the power of magic over the irrational part of the soul, not over reason and free will. Human beings in general are affected by cosmic influences, as they are directed against them by magic, only insofar as they are part of the cosmic organism that is a living being itself. Taking into account the nature of cosmic sympathy, magic can be understood as a perfectly natural phenomenon.⁹²

In his well-known chapter on theurgy in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, E.R. Dodds came to the conclusion that Plotinus was neither a magician nor a theurgist. This view was attacked by Merlan but reaffirmed in an admirable article by A.H. Armstrong,⁹³ and the whole controversy can now be considered closed. But it still is a fascinating problem.

Porphyry, in the biography of his teacher, tells an anecdote (*Vita Plotini* chap. 10, in Armstrong's translation).

One of those claiming to be philosophers, Olympius of Alexandria, who had been for a short time a pupil of Ammonius, adopted a superior attitude toward Plotinus out of rivalry. The man's attacks on him went to the point of trying to bring a star-stroke on him by magic [ἀστροβολῆσαι μαγεύσας]. But when he found his attempt recoiling upon himself, he told his intimates that the soul of Plotinus had such great power as to be able to throw back attacks directed at him on those who were seeking to do him harm. Plotinus was aware of the attempt and said that his limbs on that occasion were squeezed together and his body contracted like a moneybag pulled tight. Olympius, since he was often rather in danger of suffering something himself than likely to injure Plotinus, ceased his attacks.

It seems fairly clear that Plotinus was complaining of one of the attacks of colic to which, as his biographer writes (chap. 2), he was subject. These attacks must have been real, not imagined, and Plotinus, in a more or less humorous manner (there is a reference to a not very serious passage in Plato's *Banquet*, as Armstrong has shown), explains it

91. See Th. Hopfner, *Ueber die Geheimlehren des Iamblichos* (Leipzig, 1922), 204 n. 36; E.R. Dodds, *CO* 28 (1934): 52f.; Fr. Pfeffer, *Studien zur Mantik in der Philosophie der Antike*, Beitr. z. Klass. Philol. 64 (Meisenheim am Glan, 1976), 121.

92. See Pfeffer, *Studien zur Mantik*.

93. See n. 90.

by the black magic of Olympius. What Plotinus meant to say, as Armstrong (74) suggests, is something like: "My colic is very bad this morning; I feel like one of those bisected creatures in Aristophanes' speech when Apollo was sewing him up. Olympius must be at it again." Obviously, Plotinus believed in the ability of his enemy to hurt him by magical means, just as the enemy believed in Plotinus' ability to defend himself against such attacks and send the evil powers right back to where they came from. This, however, does not mean that Plotinus wished to hurt his enemy; the man was indirectly hurting himself, and Plotinus, his target, acted only like a kind of mirror or refractor.

Armstrong then discusses a passage from the fourth *Ennead* (4.4.43), which he translates as follows (75):

How can the good man [ὁ σπουδαῖος] be affected by magic and drugs? In his soul he cannot be affected by magic; his rational part will not be affected; it will not change his opinions; but as regards that much of the whole in him which is irrational, he will be affected in this, or rather this will be affected. He will not, however, fall in love as the result of philtres [i.e., love potions], for love only occurs when one soul [the higher] assents to the affection of the other [the lower]. Just as his irrational part is affected by spells, so he himself by counterspells disintegrates the powers working there: but he may suffer death from such enchantments, or sickness, or other things that affect the body. Part of the All [in him] may suffer from another part or from the All [itself], but he himself remains unharmed.⁹⁴

This does not mean—I am following Armstrong's interpretation—that the "good man" (the philosopher) is able to practice magic or should, in fact, do so, to protect himself. Plotinus merely admits that magic can affect the philosopher's lower, irrational self, even to the extent of making him sick and killing him; at the same time, he considers this completely unimportant. What the philosopher *can* prevent is the affection of the rational self, which would make him fall in love, among other things. To prevent this, the philosopher uses his own "counterspells" (ἀντεπωδαί), but those are not real spells: they are philosophical arguments and salutary exhortations.

94. Was Plotinus thinking of Lucretius, the philosopher-poet, who, according to Jerome (*Ann. Abr.*) had become insane after having drunk a love potion? Cf. G. Luck, "Was Lucretius Really Mad," *Euphrosyne*, n.s., 16 (1988): 289–94 (in this volume, pp. 60–65).

Another episode recorded by Porphyry (*Vita Plotini* chap. 10) is the conjuration of Plotinus' tutelary spirit by an Egyptian priest in a temple of Isis. Such a conjuration is without any doubt a theurgical act, but not an act of black magic. The story is told to prove that Plotinus was a very unusual human being and had supernatural abilities.

An Egyptian priest who came to Rome and wanted to give a display of his *sophia* [Armstrong takes this to mean "occult wisdom"; it is probably *theosophia*, a synonym of *theurgia*, as we have seen] asked Plotinus to come and see a visible manifestation of his own companion spirit. Plotinus readily agreed, and the evocation took place in the temple of Isis: the Egyptian said it was the only pure spot he could find in Rome. When the spirit was summoned [*κληθεῖς*] to appear [*εἰς αὐτοψίαν*], a god came and not a being of the spirit order, and the Egyptian said: "Blessed are you who have a god for a spirit and not a companion of the subordinate order!" It was not, however, possible to ask any questions of the god or even to see him there any longer, for the friend who witnessed the manifestation strangled the chickens [Armstrong translates "birds"] he was holding as a protection, either because of jealousy or because he was afraid.⁹⁵

The implication is that the so-called friend should not have strangled the chickens at this crucial moment; there was no need: the god was benign, not threatening. And yet he disappeared as obediently as if he had been a minor demon, once the chickens' heads were twisted. All this may be a piece of school gossip, as Dodds and Armstrong suspect, but it certainly tells us something about the school's intellectual climate.

It is also noteworthy that Plotinus was perfectly willing to participate in this ritual, chickens and all, and that he had no problem with the distinction made by the Egyptian between a major god and a minor tutelary spirit. When Armstrong says, "No true god could ever be conjured in Plotinus's universe," he reads something into the story that is not there. Why should the philosopher reject a divine manifestation that proved him to be above ordinary mortals? It is the kind of story he might dismiss with a smile or a shrug, but that smile could mean anything.

A third story told by Porphyry in his biography of the master (chap.

10) describes Plotinus' attitude toward ritual and worship. Porphyry writes:

When Amelius [another disciple of Plotinus] grew ritualistic [Armstrong's translation of *φιλοθύτης*, which means something like "happy to offer sacrifices"] and took to going round to visiting the temples at the New Moon and the Feasts of the Gods and once asked if he could take Plotinus along, Plotinus said: "They ought to come to me, not I to them." What exactly he meant by this sublime utterance we could not understand, nor did we dare to ask.

The story confirms that there was a certain broadness within Neoplatonism. A disciple of Plotinus might feel the urge of making the round of all the temples on certain holy days to perform the appropriate rites; and he might invite his teacher to come along with him, "church-crawling," as Armstrong calls it. The teacher, on the other hand, might not be in the mood and might give a half-serious answer like "I am not going to visit them: let them visit me," but the disciple could take this seriously and tell it to others. Does it really mean that Plotinus thought that he could *force* the gods to come and see him, as the theurgists claimed they could? Probably not. It *may* mean that Plotinus did not expect to find any of the higher gods waiting for him in their temples and that he himself felt superior to the crowd of lower gods who might be expected to hover around in places of worship at the time when sacrifices were being offered: they were of no use to him. Elsewhere (*De abstergentia* 2.37-43) Porphyry discusses demons who attend such sacrifices: they are sublunary spirits of the lowest order, and those of them who delight in blood sacrifices are definitely evil. The philosopher, who—like Plotinus—lives on the level of the intellect, must regard them as his inferiors, and it is their duty to attend on him, if they care. If they do not, Plotinus obviously does not consider it a great loss. But Plotinus also acknowledged higher deities in the universe, and we have no evidence that he felt superior to them.

Porphyry, the disciple and biographer of Plotinus, was interested in theurgy, acknowledged it as a phenomenon, studied it, and experimented with it, as it appears, but came to no clear conclusion. He may have been a little naive, he may have been eager to believe, as Bidez says,⁹⁶ but he was not dishonest. Some of his experiments may have

95. See Eitrem, "La théurgie," 62ff.; Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*, 289ff.

96. *Vie de Porphyre* (Ghent, 1913), 19.

convinced him that theurgy worked, some may have been inconclusive; much depended on the circumstances.⁹⁷

At one point, Porphyry felt that the practice of theurgy was dangerous and deceitful. He told the story of a jealous theurgist who interfered with the practice of a rival and succeeded in tying up the powers that had been conjured up.⁹⁸ According to Theodoretus, bishop of Cyrhus (*Curatio*, 3.59–70), Porphyry was angry at those who deified evil demons and worshiped them in “mysteries and rituals” (τελεταὶ καὶ θυσίαι), because they learned magical incantations from them. Such persons, Porphyry says, are γόητες, not θεουργοί: they specialize in love charms; promise their customers wealth, success, and prestige; and “want to be gods.”⁹⁹

It makes no sense, according to Porphyry (*Letter to Anebo* fr. 30), that a human being who is subject to fate threatens not only the soul of a deceased, not only some minor demon, but even the sun, the moon, and the stars, all divine beings, to force them to manifest themselves and tell the truth. On the other hand, Porphyry does not completely reject theurgy; he just keeps wondering whether it is really essential and whether it achieves what its supporters claim.

Porphyry's work *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda* has been called a “handbook of magic,”¹⁰⁰ and his treatise *De regressu animae* a “blend of Plotinian mysticism and Chaldaean theurgy.”¹⁰¹ But the latter work seems less positive on the subject of theurgy than the former. It is possible that Porphyry, in the meantime, came under the influence of Plotinus and revised some of his views. But he clearly intended to continue his research.

On the one hand, Porphyry seems to believe (*De regr. anim.* frs. 6 and 7 Bidez, quoted at Augustine *Civ. Dei* 10.26–28) that angels come down to teach theurgists knowledge of divine things. On the other hand, he makes a pun and accuses the theurgists of being excessively curious; they should be called “busybodies,” περιεργοί, not θεουργοί (*De regr. anim.* fr. 13 Bidez). The Latin equivalent of περιεργία is *curiositas*, and this is almost

97. Porphyry *De philosophia ex oraculis hauriendis* pp. 154ff. Wolff; Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 418.

98. Porphyry *De regr. anim.* fr. 2 Bidez.

99. Ibid.

100. Bidez, *Vie de Porphyre*, 18.

101. J.H. Waszink, “Porphyrios und Numenios,” *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique* 12 (1965): 45 and n. 2.

a commonplace in condemnations of the magical arts.¹⁰² Theurgy is, indeed, an example of insatiable human curiosity, but for the theurgists it is a virtue. The human being is a “product of audacious nature,” as *Oracles* fragment 106, proclaims; and Psellus, in his commentary on this particular logion, actually uses the verb περιεργάζομαι.

There are certain things that theurgy can do, according to Porphyry, but others it cannot. It does achieve purification of the soul, but it does not enable the soul to return to the deity (*De regr. anim.* fr. 2 Bidez).¹⁰³ And even this purification of the “spiritual part” of the soul is not always possible, for envious powers try to prevent it. For this and other reasons, complete salvation through theurgic rites is not possible (*ibid.*, frs. 3 and 7 Bidez).

In conclusion, Porphyry states that theurgy is not essential for the philosopher; it does certain things, but there are other approaches to mystical union with God that achieve the same goal (*De regr. anim.* frs. 7 and 11 Bidez). The crowd, the masses, may need theurgical mysteries, but the true sage achieves happiness without it, and he can return to the Father, purified of all evil, traveling another road.

Porphyry, like Plotinus, was certainly interested in the phenomena of magic and theurgy, without feeling a deep commitment to it as the way to salvation, but Iamblichus was a true believer. He wrote his treatise *On the Mysteries of Egypt* in reply to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*, as a defense of the theory and practices of theurgy.

According to Iamblichus (*Myst.* 2.11), theurgy definitely has its place in Platonism; in another sense, it replaces and supersedes all philosophy and theology: “The apparition of the gods gives us physical health and virtue of the soul, purity of mind, in short, an ascent of our whole inner existence toward its proper beginning” (*ibid.* 2.6). The aim of the theurgist is union, ἐνωσις, with higher beings (*ibid.* 1.11f., 15, 21; 2.11), and the sacred names of the gods and other divine symbols make the ascent possible. What is required are “hieratic supplications” and a “ritual which involves . . . admirable signs . . . , [for] the ineffable expresses itself in unutterable symbols.”¹⁰⁴

102. See H.J. Mette, *Festschrift Snell* (Munich, 1956), 227ff.; A. Labhardt, *MH* 16 (1960): 206ff.; H. Blumenberg, *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 7 (1961): 35ff.

103. Cf. Zintzen, “Die Wertung,” 89f.

104. He probably refers to the “symbols” or “seals” that were placed in the hollow statues of the gods and animated them at the right moment; see Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*, 292; des Places, intro. to *Oracles*, p. 29.

What were Iamblichus' own specific contributions to theurgy? The question is difficult to answer; because his work is unique in its way and cannot be compared to any other treatment. A large part of it is based on the *Oracles*—for instance, his claim that the theurgist does not belong to the “human herd” and is exempt from fate (*Oracles* frs. 153, 154).

But there are two more technical points that seem to be an elaboration or an adaptation of doctrines outlined in the *Oracles*. Iamblichus distinguishes three kinds of ritual prayer (*Myst.* 5.26): “the one that brings together” (συναγωγόν), “the one that ties together” (συνδετικόν), and “the union” (ἔνωσις). This division seems to have become part of theurgical doctrine, for it appears in a slightly different form in Proclus (*In Timaeum* 1.207f.).¹⁰⁵ I should also like to point out Iamblichus' description of a supernatural experience that persons sometimes have in a state between waking and sleeping and sometimes when they are fully awake (*Myst.* 3.2): an intangible and incorporeal spirit surrounds, as if in a circle, the persons who are stretched out; it cannot be perceived or registered, and it swishes as it enters and spreads out without touching anything. This peculiar noise, ῥοῖζος, is the sound of a whistling arrow, but Iamblichus uses it of the divine spirit approaching the human soul. It is also the technical term for the sound made by the magical *rhombus* (see earlier discussion) and by the stars in their celestial revolutions (*Myst.* 3.9).¹⁰⁶

Among the lost works of Iamblichus, there was a commentary on the *Oracles* in at least twenty-eight books, known as the *Theologia Chaldaica*. It made a great impression on the emperor Julian, who eagerly sought a reliable copy of the work.¹⁰⁷

The last of the Neoplatonist theurgists I should like to discuss is Proclus. His vita by Marinus (chap. 28)¹⁰⁸ tells us that Proclus was initiated into the “mysteries of the great Nestorius” by Asclepigeneia, the daughter of the theurgist and miracle worker Plutarchus, son of Nestorius—an important testimony, for it shows that the knowledge and technique of theurgy was handed down in a family from grandfather to son to grand-

105. Des Places, *Religion* 305f.

106. Cf. des Places, *Oracles*, p. 109, n. 2; p. 126.

107. Julian *Letters* 1.2, in Bidez' edition of his works (Paris 1924), p. 19; Bidez, *Vie de l'empereur Julien*, 73ff.; *Oracles* p. 44 des Places.

108. Boissonade, ed. (Leipzig, 1814), reprinted in the Didot edition of Diogenes Laertius (Paris, 1849); English translation by L.J. Rosán (New York, 1949), pp. 13ff.

daughter, and by her to a disciple of her father's who seemed to be a worthy recipient.¹⁰⁹ But Proclus was well prepared for the initiation, for, according to Marinus (chap. 26), he had studied “the many works of Porphyry and Iamblichus and the writings of the Chaldaeans which belong to the same order of ideas, and thus, nourished by divine oracles, he rose to the highest level of the . . . theurgical virtues.” He knew, of course, *De mysteriis*, but he had also studied the *Sentences* of his teacher, Syrianus, and his commentaries on Orpheus. Still according to his biographer, Proclus could influence the weather, heal the sick, conjure up luminous phantoms of Hecate, and had, of course, the supreme experience of seeing the gods themselves (αὐτοψία).

For Proclus, theurgy as a liberation of the soul is a “power higher than all human wisdom [i.e., all of philosophy], embracing the blessings of divination, the purifying powers of initiation, and, in one word, all the operations of divine possession” (*Theol. Platon.* 1.26.63).¹¹⁰ He is convinced that the “hieratic art,”¹¹¹ as he calls theurgy, leads to the union of the human soul with the One.¹¹²

For Proclus, theurgy is a process of deification. It crowns the act of contemplation, and only this gives a meaning to the partial advantages that the theurgist may receive, such as divination or healing power. But the theurgist is not supposed to enjoy his privileges in this world; he is called to rise above it and be freed from evil. He must not bother the deity with futile requests, but he should aim at salvation. This is essentially the teaching of Iamblichus.¹¹³ As a theurgist, Proclus is caught in a conflict. He feels the need to be in touch with his gods, to have visible signs of their existence and their goodwill. The gods are happy to oblige

109. There are references in the Magical Papyri (e.g., 4.477) to the πατρόθεν παράδοτα μυστήρια; cf. Zintzen, “Die Wertung,” 94 n. 79. Sir Francis Galton (*Memories of My Life* [London, 1908], 273ff.) observes that anomalous powers are hereditary in certain families—e.g., the second sight in Scotland. They are liable to be smothered by modern civilization but can be revived by a “life of solitude.”

110. Translated by Dodds, in his edition of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, p. xxii; cf. Iamblichus, *Myst.* 10.4ff.

111. See Hierocles' commentary on the *Aureum Carmen* of Pythagoras, 478–82, ed. Mullach; cf. A.-J. Festugière, “Contemplation philosophique et art théurgique chez Proclus,” in *Studi di storia religiosa della tarda antichità* (Messina, 1968), 17f.; P. Courcelles, *REA* 71 (1969): 509; des Places, intro. to *Oracles*, pp. 34f.; Trouillard, *L'un et l'autre*, 34f.

112. See nn. 21 and 22.

113. See nn. 104 and 105.

him. At the same time, he has too much respect for them to "use" or "urge" them in the way the sorcerers summon their gods. He seems to have envisaged a higher form of theurgy, which was essentially a form of worship. It looks, indeed, as if Proclus had made an effort to purify theurgy from its magical elements, but it may also seem to us that, without those elements, it would not have been theurgy anymore.

How does Proclus explain the effects of theurgy? They are possible because a supernatural power is inherent in the world of the phenomena that surround us. This power can be activated, and theurgy is nothing else but the theory and practice of the activation.¹¹⁴

How does one become a theurgist? Through a strict vegetarian diet, through prayers to the Sun, through the observance of the rites of the Chaldean initiates, through the observance of the Egyptian holy days.¹¹⁵

There are three degrees of initiation, according to Proclus (*Theol. Platon.* 4.16):¹¹⁶ (1) τελετή, "initiation"; (2) μύησις, "consecration"; (3) ἐποπτεία, "vision." The three steps remind one of Iamblichus' three kinds of prayers, though there is a difference. The first step is effected, for Proclus, by the "gods of initiation" (τελεσιουργοὶ θεοί), who have no place in Iamblichus' division; the second stage is effected by the "gods which give cohesion" (συνεκτιζοὶ θεοί); they correspond to the "element which ties together" in Iamblichus where it is the second stage too; but Proclus' third stage, the "vision," is effected by the "gods that bring together," which corresponds to Iamblichus' first step, whereas his third, the "union," has disappeared from Proclus' scheme. This may be a question of terminology, but it might also alert us to the fact that the doctrine was flexible enough to accommodate different kinds of experiences and revelations, which then had to be described and labeled differently by the chief ideologists.

Michael Psellus the Younger (1018–1078 A.D.), a Byzantine Platonist, was fascinated by theurgy, although as a Christian he felt obliged to condemn what was, to him, an old pagan ritual bordering on magic. I have already mentioned his investigation of the séance conducted by the monks of Chios and the accusation of the patriarch, Cerularius, to which it led. To Psellus we owe a number of valuable notes and comments.¹¹⁷

114. B. Tatakis, *La philosophie byzantine*, in E. Bréhier, *Historie de la philosophie*, fasc. suppl. 2 (Paris, 1959), 20.

115. Lloyd, "Later Neoplatonists," 305.

116. See Trouillard, *L'un et l'autre*, 184.

117. They are conveniently collected by des Places in *Oracles*, passim.

He has summarized lost texts, commented on others; and it is perhaps thanks to his personal interest that Iamblichus' *De mysteriis* has survived at all.¹¹⁸ As an outsider, he was, in a way, in the situation that we are in, and a number of things obviously made little sense to him; others he rejected out of hand.

In his *Accusation of Michael Cerularius* (*Oracles* pp. 219ff. des Places) he seems to quote extensively from Proclus. He refers to the conditions under which the "invocations" (κλήσεις) take place, the locations where they were performed, those who saw the divine light, women and men alike, the shapes (or gestures) and divine symbols (σχήματα ταῦτα καὶ θεῖα συνθήματα), but without telling us exactly what they were. Some of them appear to be lifeless objects, others living beings, either endowed with reason (ἐμψυχα λογικά) or without reason (ἐμψυχα ἄλογα). According to Proclus, as reported by Psellus, lifeless objects are sometimes filled with divine light, as when statues, inspired by a god or a benevolent spirit, deliver oracles. Human beings receive the divine spirit and are possessed by it (κάτοχοι γίνονται, θεόληπτοι καλοῦνται). Some mediums experience this kind of thing spontaneously, either at certain times or more irregularly, but always "just like that" (ἀορίστως), a point Iamblichus had made (*Myst.* 3.2). But others stimulate themselves (ἀνακίνησις) to enthusiasm by a voluntary action. Some mediums are completely ecstatic and possessed and no longer aware of themselves. Others remain conscious to an astonishing degree, so that they can apply the theurgical experience to themselves; this probably means that the medium, too, benefits from the experience, not just the witnesses. When the medium is in total trance, it is absolutely necessary for someone "sober" (νήφων) to give assistance. Before and during the ritual, one must avoid anything that might interfere with the arrival of the gods and insist on absolute quiet. We are dealing with parapsychological phenomena, I think, which must have been very real to those who participated in them. Something usually happened, it seems, but it was not always what the theurgists desired. If anything went wrong, it could be blamed on the interference of lesser demons or on the inadequacy of the medium, as we have seen.

From Julian the Theurgist to Proclus, and no doubt much later, mystical happenings of the kind referred to were experienced over and over again, and much was written about them; what we have is probably only a small fraction. That there was a technique of inducing them

118. See des Places, *Oracles*, p. 38, n. 1.

cannot be doubted, but knowledge of it is lost, and it seems impossible to reconstruct it from the texts we have.

Analogies in Other Cultures

In order to find an explanation, we have to look for analogies in other cultures. This method has been used with considerable success by E.R. Dodds in his *The Greeks and the Irrational*. A great deal of solid research done by psychologists and anthropologists is available today.

Personally, I found the work of John Raymond Smythies particularly helpful. He wrote, among other things, a book entitled *Analysis of Perception* (New York, 1956), and he edited a volume, *Science and ESP* (London, 1967), to which he contributed an essay, "Is ESP Possible?" Smythies, a physician by training, has carried out an impressive amount of scientific research, including experiments with hallucinogenic drugs, and is recognized as a philosopher. What he has to say about the "reality" of hallucinations was of particular interest to me.

If we think that we only experience physical objects directly and that there is nothing else in the universe but physical objects, then we have to say that hallucinations are not real. At the same time, they can be undistinguishable, from a strictly scientific point of view, from "true" sense experiences.¹¹⁹ They seem to have their own space, their own time, their specific color; and they occur in a "real" visual field. Persons who are sane, healthy, normal, well educated, even sophisticated, after having been given hallucinogenic agents experimentally, will not admit that their experiences were in any sense unreal. They will just say that they were different. Hallucinations, some of them trivial, may also be induced in susceptible persons by hypnosis.

Visions such as the theurgists claimed to have experienced are rejected instinctively by the modern mind because of our scientific habits of thought, but it seems impossible, considering the evidence we have, to declare all these experiences "unreal" or call them cleverly orchestrated deceit.

Let us assume that some of these visions or happenings were hallucinations induced by drugs or by hypnosis. Even then they could be fully understood only, it seems to me, by those who received them, as they thought, as gifts from the gods, sent to assure privileged human beings

of their favor and goodwill, and thereby affirming the promise of salvation and eternal life.

Smythies (*Analysis of Perception*, 86ff.) quotes at great length from descriptions of visions that persons experimenting with mescaline remembered. This one comes from Havelock Ellis:

I would see a thick, glorious field of jewelry, solitary or clustered, sometimes brilliant and sparkling, sometimes with a dull, rich glow. Then they would spring up into flowerlike shapes beneath my gaze, and then seem to turn into gorgeous butterfly forms of endless folds of glistening, iridescent, fibrous wings of wonderful insects; while sometimes I seemed to be gazing into a vast hollow revolving vessel, on whose polished mother-of-pearl surface the hues were swiftly changing. I was surprised, not only by the enormous profusion of the imagery presented to my gaze, but still more by its variety.

Another experience described involves vague patches of color that develop into mosaics, flowing arabesques, wonderful tapestries. Then certain objects appear, such as masks, statues, fabulous animals, soaring architecture, and finally human figures acting out coherent stories on some kind of stage. All this is in constant motion and very pleasing.

Again and again the descriptions emphasize the surpassing beauty of the visions and the inadequacy of language to do justice to it. This particular theme—the inadequacy of language to express the ultimate truth—is typical for Neoplatonism.¹²⁰ We have seen how often terms like "ineffable" and "inexpressible" occur in theurgical contexts.

It seems to me that an experience that may be primarily esthetic for a twentieth-century subject—though we hear about moving statues, masks, and so on—could very well be a religious one for a second-century person who had been programmed to expect it. The technique of programming was, of course, an essential part of theurgy, just as important as the technique of getting into trance or taking the right drug in the right doses. If anything was done improperly, things could go wrong and the visions were terrifying rather than blissful. It is true that no specific drugs are ever named, but the powers of herbs, stones, aromatic essences, and the like are emphasized many times.

Mescaline is a vegetable alkaloid found in nature in the juices of a small Mexican desert cactus, *Anhalonium lewinii*. The Mexican desert

119. Smythies, *Analysis of Perception*, 81.

120. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 6, 11, 14, 41, 57–59, 88–90, 91, 114–16, etc.

Amerindians make a brew, peyote, from the plant and use it for religious ceremonies. It was discovered for Western science in 1886 by the distinguished pharmacologist Lewin, after whom the cactus is named.¹²¹

Mescaline also produces changes in other senses. Auditory hallucinations of wonderful music and of voices speaking in strange languages have been reported but are apparently rare (Smythies, *Analysis of Perception*, 90). Fragrant perfumes may be smelled; hard objects may be felt to be soft and malleable. Sometimes synesthesia occurs: sounds are accompanied by appropriate images.

A typical feature of the mescaline phenomena is that the patterns, designs, scenes, and so forth are always changing; they are a continuous kaleidoscope. But it is possible, in certain instances, to predict what vision will follow the one that the subject is having at a given moment. Smythies (*Analysis of Perception*, 92) writes, "If one flash of the stroboscopic lamp is directed at my closed eyes, I will notice that the complex hallucinated pattern will immediately change to be replaced by a more primitive pattern." Therefore it seems entirely possible that the theurgist, working with a medium in trance, could, to a certain extent, influence the kind of hallucination the medium was to have. This may explain the uses of lamps and shiny objects in theurgic rituals.

Smythies refers very briefly and without elaborating to "alleged occult phenomena," such as apparitions of the recently dead, and to precognitive dreams. He is clearly aware of the perspectives that these experiments open up for our understanding of ancient religions: "persons in the early Christian era pursued hallucinatory experiences with . . . passionate intensity believing them to provide a direct method of communication with the supernatural world." Of course this pursuit had been going on for a very long time—think of Delphi and Eleusis—and it continued, as we have seen, to the end of antiquity and beyond.

We have to accept Smythies' conclusion, I believe, that "the decision to call only ordinary sense-experience real is an isolated phenomenon of our more recent type of Western European culture." It is contingent, he

adds, on the biochemical accident that our adrenal glands happen to produce adrenalin and not . . . mescaline. One wonders whether in the course of the history of humankind not only cultures change but also the human brain and the human glands. Perhaps there is even a connection between the two types of change. At any rate Smythies must be right when he says that cultural factors and biochemical accidents are not valid philosophical or scientific criteria when it comes to analyzing sense perceptions.

There is no doubt a kind of sensitivity that, as Gilbert Murray has put it,¹²² "is apt to be deadened and disregarded by our all-absorbing material civilization, and if so, disregarded at our peril." Murray maintained, "It is in that region that our great tool, language, fails us and we have most highly developed our ancient pre-linguistic and supra-linguistic sympathy." Gilbert Murray was not only a distinguished scholar; he had himself remarkable psychic gifts. To confirm Murray's fears, Sir Cyril Burt,¹²³ a well-known British psychologist, notes that in some remote parts of Wales in the early twentieth century local opinion still took extrasensory phenomena as a matter of course, but half a century later, when he returned to the same villages and spoke to the villagers, he found that these beliefs had practically died out.

Another possible approach to the problem of ancient theurgy seems to me the study of the voodoo cult. At first sight the two worlds appear to be totally unrelated and heterogeneous, but a closer look reveals amazing similarities. In the volume *Science and ESP*, mentioned earlier, there is an excellent essay by Francis Huxley, an Oxford anthropologist, entitled "Anthropology and ESP." It is based on the author's firsthand experiences of the voodoo cult in Haiti today. Huxley states that very little of what he saw in Haiti needed explanations in terms of ESP, although what he witnessed ranged from highly serious religious practices (comparable to theurgy) to vindictive exercises in black magic (goety). He comments briefly on very similar techniques found throughout the world and, one might add, throughout the ages.¹²⁴ Incidentally,

122. In his presidential address delivered at a meeting of the Society for Psychical Research in 1952, printed in *Science and ESP*, 15ff.

123. "Psychology and Parapsychology," in *Science and ESP*, 97.

124. The following scene was observed by Nina Epton in the slums of Djakarta ("Trance in the Shadows," 115ff.):

The scene I was about to witness was a throwback to a world which is as foreign to progressive, modern Indonesians as it was to me.

121. On the moods produced by mescaline see O.F. Bollnow, *Das Wesen der Stimmungen* (Göttingen, 1943), 160ff. In Sufism trance is achieved by hashish; see J.W. Hauer, *Yoga* (Göttingen, 1598), 29f. In their book *The Road to Eleusis* (New York, 1978), R. Gordon Wasson, Carl A.P. Ruck, and Albert Hofmann argue plausibly that in archaic Greece there was a method to isolate a hallucinogenic drug from ergot, and that this drug was mixed into the *kykeon*, the ritual drink served at the initiations. Ergot is related to LSD.

the distinction made in Haiti between *un profane* and *un avec connaissance* corresponds to the distinction made in paganism between the uninitiated and the one who has already participated in theurgic rites.

A knot of ragged *betjak* boys and a few women with naked babies astride their hips had gathered round an old man and a boy. "There's going to be a *kuda lopeng*" (dance of the human horse), one of the bystanders informed me. "It's been ordered for a birthday *slamentan*," said another.

The old man was thin and bent, with matted hair falling over his shoulders: his face was haggard and his dark eyes sunken, but they shone with an unnatural brilliance. A few feet away from him an emaciated boy crouched shivering as in an epileptic fit. He was astride a hobby-horse, a flat bamboo frame painted in black, with a gaudy fringe tied to the mane. Somebody tossed a bundle of hay into a corner.

Three musicians sat with their backs against a bamboo house, beating drums of various sizes with long, nervous fingers. The old man picked up a whip, stiffened and fixed the boy with his glittering, hypnotic eyes. The drums softened until they came to an imperceptible stop. The boy raised his eyes towards the sorcerer and an anguished silence ensued. Nobody in the audience stirred. Whether we wanted to or not we had all been drawn into the magic evil orbit. We were the involuntary prisoners of that loathsome creature with the matted hair and talon-like fingers. We were assisting him with an unrealized force latent in every one of those present.

The old sorcerer gave a bestial snarl accompanied by a crack of the whip; we started and fell back a pace or two. The instant he heard his voice the boy responded with a half-choked sound like a horse's neigh. The sorcerer cracked his whip again and shouted a command in a high, quavering voice. The boy-horse approached the bundle of hay on his hobby-horse. Again he neighed—there was no mistaking the sound—bent forward and began to munch the hay.

After two or three minutes the old man shrieked another command and the boy-horse reared and pranced like a circus pony. Another crack of the whip and he galloped round the sorcerer shaking his long black hair. His muscles appeared to have lengthened; his face had narrowed and looked curiously equine—or were we victims of a collective hallucination?

The performance ended as abruptly as it had begun. The boy-horse suddenly uttered a pitiful cry and rolled over on the ground panting, his body moist with perspiration, his eyes staring skywards with the fixity of the demented. The old man stepped forward and bent over the writhing form, whispering in his ear. Little by little the twitching body of the horse-boy began to relax. The convulsed face became smooth and rounded and the breathing normal.

A state of trance and an overpowering feeling of being possessed by a god are achieved in voodoo mainly through wild dancing and the sound of drums. The possessed often become insensitive to pain or accomplish unusual feats, and afterward they forget the whole experience, although knowledge of it may later come to them in a dream.

Let me quote Huxley's account of a voodoo ritual.

The preparations for a voodoo ceremony are lengthy, consisting of designs drawn in flour or ash upon the ground, libations poured at various points, prayers and songs to Christian saints as well as to the gods of voodoo. When they are accomplished, the drums begin to sound and the choir of men and women attached to the temple sing and dance in praise of the gods. The mounting rhythm of drum and song, and the continual effort of the dance, lead to the first signs of the gods' presence among the dancers: a certain abstraction. It is the drummers who largely provoke dissociation: they are skilful in reading the signs, and by quickening, altering, or breaking their rhythm they can usually force the crisis on those who are ready for it. The dancer thus singled out falters, feeling a heavy weight on neck and in legs, while a darkness invades his sight and mind; he loses his balance and totters with great strides from side to side of the dancing floor, a bewildered or agonized expression on his face. He may collapse among the audience at the sides, who put him back on his feet and send him for another voyage over the floor till the buffets of sound have their full effect. Suddenly a new expression dawns on his face and he draws himself up in an attitude which is often instantly recognizable: the god has possessed him or, as the usual expression goes, he has been mounted by the god as a horse

One of the drummers rose and walked round to collect a few rupi-ahs; the sorcerer continued to bend over the boy who now appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Somebody nudged my arm. It was my *betjak* driver. "Not a bad performance," he remarked casually, "But I have seen better. Anyway it was genuine. Sometimes the boy just pretends he's in a trance. They can't always go into a real one and that makes it awkward for everybody, since they earn their living that way. Of course, the old *dukun* has a few sidelines. He sells medicines—herbal ones—and love potions in the kampong markets. Some poor fools still believe in them."

The use of the whip reminds one of the Greek *rhombos*, but there are other parallels to theurgical operations as well.

by its rider. The god then stalks about the floor, paying his respects to the priest, taking part in the ceremony if necessary, admonishing persons in the audience or giving them his blessing, till he slowly or suddenly absents himself. The dancer comes to himself with a bewildered expression and usually retires for a time to recover. (*Science and ESP*, 286)

In the absence of any explicit, candid, firsthand account from antiquity, I believe that a solution to the problems of theurgy may be found in this direction.¹²⁵ As scholars, we should look for explanation in terms of modern psychology, psychic research, and anthropology. What I have to offer are just a few tentative suggestions. A good deal of work remains to be done.

The "Way Out": Philological Notes on the Transfiguration of Jesus

The synoptic Gospels (Mark 9:2–13, Matthew 17:1–13, and Luke 9:28–36) report the transfiguration of Jesus in similar terms, but there are significant differences. As an episode, the Transfiguration is placed in the same context in all three Gospels: it is preceded by the first prediction of the Passion and the Resurrection and followed by the narrative about an exorcism and the second prediction. The debate of Elijah's return, missing in Luke, ought to be interpreted as part of the Transfiguration episode in the two other Gospels.

According to Mark, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John on a high mountain and is "transfigured" (μετεμορφώθη) before their eyes. His clothes assume a dazzling whiteness which no one who bleaches cloth on earth could achieve. Elijah and Moses appear and converse with Jesus. Peter then proposes to build three shelters (σκηνάς, *tabernacula*),¹ one for

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1. The tents Peter wants to build are sometimes explained as temporary shelters for distinguished visitors. There is probably no connection with 2 Peter 1:13, where σκήνωμα refers to the human body. (This letter contrasts, in 15–21, the transfiguration of Jesus as a real experience with the "craftily concocted myths" of the gentiles). There may be a connection with σκηνή in Hebr. 9:11 (the

125. See R. Ganschinietz, *Hippolytus' Kapitel über die Magier*, TUGAL 39 (1913), passim.

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