

"Clarifications" of Obscurity:
Conditions for Proclus's Allegorical Reading
of Plato's *Parmenides*

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Exegetical work on philosophical systems requires not only that one give an account of the structure of a system's assumptions and arguments, but also of its forms, such as the form of expression (or *genre*: dialogue, poem, aphorisms, and so on), or its form of argumentation (clear cut discursive exposition, logical formalization, metaphorical, allegorical discourse, and so forth). These formal considerations may seem to be secondary, merely ornamental issues, but they can raise unexpected questions. The literal reading of a text has its counter-part in allegorical interpretation. This way of reading, which must have started with the first readers of Homer and found a fertile ground in Philo's allegorical commentaries on the Bible, was amazingly natural for Proclus (c. 411–485), whose writings and commentaries represent the last phases of late antique philosophy, and particularly of the relation between philosophy and rhetoric.

Proclus was a major systemic philosopher of late Neoplatonism. Beside his fame as one of the last notable heads of the Platonic Academy, he was also known in his youth as a rhetorician with a profound curiosity about divination and theurgy. He was a practitioner of magic and it is said that he knew how to bring rain and that, through a particular rite, he saved Attica from a dreadful drought.¹ Proclus was devoted to the Greek gods, especially Athena, whom he invokes at the beginning of his commentary on the *Parmenides*:

I pray to all the gods and goddesses to guide my mind . . . to kindle in me a shining light of truth . . . to open the gates of my soul to receive the inspired guidance of Plato.²

¹ Marinus, *Vita Procli*, 28. See Marinus, *Proclus ou Sur le Bonheur*, ed. and French trans. Henri-Dominique Saffrey and Alain Philippe Segonds (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001), 33. *Vita Procli*, a hagiographical biography written by his pupil, Marinus, is the main source of information that we have about Proclus.

² Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon, *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 19. See also Proclus, *Théologie pla-*

He consistently opposed Christianity and supported the dying old religions, and, paradoxically, he influenced medieval Christian philosophy to a considerable degree, through Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's "plagiarism" of his work.³

Proclus used the allegorical method at length in his philosophical commentaries on Plato's dialogues and developed a substantial allegorical technique, even in his commentary on the *Parmenides*, a dialogue which would, at first glance, hardly seem likely to inspire an allegorical reading, given its technicalities and aridity.⁴ His efforts to charge the text with heavy allegorical meaning challenge both the literary critic and the philosopher to clarify what he was doing. Some tenets of Proclus's commentary on Plato's *Parmenides* will thus be scrutinized as a case study in the present article, in an attempt to delineate and to discuss the main suppositions of the Proclean allegorical reading. My hypothesis is that allegory is a philosophical rather than a literary mechanism and bears for Proclus philosophical implications as one of his main methodological devices. The main question addressed here is: Why would someone question allegorically a philosophical text? Or, in other words: What are the prerequisites for using allegory as part of a philosophical inquiry? I wish to focus on *why* one would read a philosophical text allegorically rather than *how* such a reading was done (discovered, invented, transmitted through a certain tradition, etc.)

tonicienne I, 1, 2, 4, ed. and French trans. L. G. Westerink and H. D. Saffrey (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968), 7–8, 17–18. For a comparative reading of the invocations from the *Parmenides* and *Platonic Theology* see Robbert Maarten van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 225–26.

³ A consistent overview of the hidden presence of Proclean philosophy in medieval thinking is provided in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology: A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*, ed. E. R. Dodds, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Pseudo-Dionysius's plagiarism of Proclus was massive: "he followed Proclus slavishly in many of the details of his doctrine" (Dodds in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, xxvii–xxviii). See also Egbert P. Bos and P. A. Meijer, eds., *On Proclus and His Influence in Medieval Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

⁴ The most studied allegorical commentaries of Proclus are those that focus on Homer. See Oiva Kuisma, *Proclus' Defence of Homer* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1996); Anne D. R. Sheppard, *Studies on the 5th [fifth] and 6th [sixth] Essays of Proclus' Commentary on the Republic* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980); and Robert Lambertson, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (London: University of California Press, 1989).

Opacity and Clarity

A philosophical discourse is not always a model of clear speech, clear argumentation, or clear ideas. On the contrary, it is frequently full of obscure concepts and follows an obscure paradigm, or may be expressed in such obscure language and rhetoric that it verges on gratuitous meaningfulness. For late antique philosophy, the tension between non-figurative speech and rhetorical speech, which could be found in Plato's dialogues (the tension between *logos* and *mythos*, or between philosophy and poetry), was a means for finding further layers of meanings. Like the Christian exegesis of the Bible, Platonist commentators tried to clarify and make sense of the rhetorical and decorative features of Plato's dialogues. Far from reading Plato literally, the Neoplatonists followed the principle that Plato's texts always require more than a *prima facie* reading, both where the text is obscure philosophically (because of unclear argumentation) and where the text is not at all philosophical, but merely a kind of rhetorical exposition (a *captatio benevolentiae*).

In his *Commentary on Aristotle's Categories* (6.33), Simplicius notes that

Aristotle did not use myths or symbolic enigmas in the way some of his predecessors did [Pythagoras and Plato], but [...] preferred obscurity of formulation to every other form of concealment.⁵

It was thus natural to charge philosophers with using intentionally obscure language,⁶ and Aristotle is thought, according to Simplicius, to have had a preference for it.⁷ How was it possible that the language of philoso-

⁵ Cited in Proclus, *A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements*, tr. G. R. Morrow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), xxiv. The formulation is very unclear. Why is "myth" or "symbolic enigma" an alternative to "obscurity of formulation"? Is Aristotle deliberate in his obscurity? Simplicius is perhaps referring to the so-called esoteric writings as opposed to the exoteric ones.

⁶ Aristotle's obscurity was a subject of study for the ancient reader as well as for the modern one. Bishop Hippolytus thinks that Aristotle's account of the soul is obscure, while Atticus affirms that he is seeking to avoid criticism by using "obscure language." See Jonathan Barnes, "Metacommentary," in Jonathan Barnes, *Method and Metaphysics: Essays in Ancient Philosophy I*, ed. Maddalena Bonelli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 195.

⁷ Simplicius made a similar claim in the *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* (8. 18–20): Aristotle practiced "obscurity, thereby discouraging the more idle students" (Barnes, "Metacommentary," 197).

phy, which, according to modern ideas, should avoid obscurity, was perceived as intentionally obscure? It seems that for ancient philosophers one had to use an obscure discourse to discuss the intelligible world. For example, in a passage from his commentary on the first book of Euclid's *Elements* (11), Proclus notes that in the *Republic* (533d), Plato observes that

Socrates describes the knowledge of the understandable as being more obscure than the highest science, but clearer than the judgments of opinion.⁸

In contrast to Aristotle's obscurity, which was supposed to be intentional, the obscurity of Plato's language was perceived as being, in a sense, natural, that is, necessary. However, there are passages in the Platonic corpus that are so obscure that one cannot be sure that the reason for this lack of clarity is precisely a "higher science," which cannot be expressed by unambiguous speech.

Throughout his prose and in curious ways at times, Plato was an enigmatic writer. Two small examples may illustrate the nature of some of the puzzles Plato's writings pose. In *Phaedo*, the dialogue which presents the last hours of Socrates, Plato writes, surprisingly, that he was sick and absent from the scene. It is the only self-referential passage of all the Platonic dialogues and it has intrigued scholars for a long time: why does Plato mention himself only here as a *dramatis persona* – indeed, as an absent *dramatis persona*? Again, the same dialogue offers the riddling last words of the dying Socrates: "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius: please pay the debt, and don't neglect it."⁹

Moreover, why did Plato choose to write philosophy in the form of dialogues? Can one ignore the literary form, the narrative frame, and focus solely on the ideas it contains? Why did he choose the specific characters he did and not other ones? Why do some characters appear more

⁸ Proclus, *A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements*, 10.

⁹ Plato, *Phaedo* 118, 7–8, trans. David Gallop (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 72. This is not the only type of intentional obscurity to be found in Plato's dialogues; there are several. For example, the passage in the *Republic* in which Plato speaks about a eugenic number, the so called, "nuptial number," became notorious for its obscurity (*Republic*, VIII, 546b). Comparing a riddle of Atticus with Plato's description of the "nuptial number," Cicero exclaims: "Your enigma of the juice-merchants from Velia has simply defeated me, it's darker than the Platonic Number" ("Aenigma succonumex Velia plane non intellexi; est enim numero Platonis obscurius"; *Letters to Atticus* VII, 13, 5, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton-Bailey [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 16–17).

frequently than others? These dialogues are full of conflicting remarks and uncertain claims.

The puzzling passages—which still puzzle scholars nowadays and which elude philosophical elucidation as well as other sorts of interpretations (e.g. historical-critical ones)—are abundant in all dialogues and are present at different narrative layers. There was thus disagreement about the interpretation of Plato's writings almost immediately after his death. Speusippus reformulated Plato's philosophy in terms of mathematics. Xenocrates followed the same line of interpretation. Aristotle attributed to Plato ideas that can hardly be found in his dialogues; and so on. All these interpretations—each of them with its peculiarities—were a natural consequence of the fact that Plato was *by no means a clear author*. For Proclus, a philosophical text's resistance to clear interpretation led to a suspicion that it might be read allegorically. As John Dillon remarked in the introduction to the first book of Proclus's commentary on the *Parmenides*, allegorical exegesis uses such "apparent contradiction in the text to reveal a higher truth."¹⁰ Thus allegory is a way to unify a text and make it meaningful even when it lacks any obvious unity or clear meaning.

Allegorizing Plato's *Parmenides*

Proclus's learned commentary on the *Parmenides* is not, however, an allegorical interpretation of the entire dialogue. It attempts, rather, to elucidate allegorically some of the apparently unintelligible passages of the *introduction* of the *Parmenides* that sets the stage for the philosophical discussion that follows, passages that could easily be overlooked by the modern reader since, in the economy of the dialogue, the introduction might not be considered part of the argument. Thus, Proclus's allegorical method of interpretation actually discovers, or creates, further "obscurities" in the dialogue. The transmission of the original conversation, the characters, their determinations and other details, like, for example, the place of the conversation, are shown to function as mythical and eternal archetypes. This allegorical interpretation of the introduction raises the narrative frame to the level of *mythical story*.

¹⁰ See Morrow and Dillon, "Introduction" to Book I in *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, 14.

The *Parmenides*¹¹ starts with the arrival at Athens of the narrator of the dialogue, an unknown character named Cephalus of Klazomenae, along with his countrymen, who are genuinely interested in philosophy. Adeimantus welcomes them and they ask him to take them to Plato's half-brother, Antiphon, whom they ask to talk about a discussion that took place a long time ago between a young Socrates and two Eleatics: Zeno (who was then in his forties) and Parmenides (who was then about sixty-five). Antiphon tells them that he heard and learned by heart a description of the discussion from Pythodorus (a student of Zeno), who had been present at the original dialogue which had taken place in his house, and then begins his narrative.¹²

Unlike the narrator of most Platonic dialogues, the raconteur of the *Parmenides* was not present at the original talk. With the exception of the *Symposium*, the *Parmenides* is the only other text in Plato's corpus in which the information that lies at the core of the dialogue has been transmitted through three successive stages (the original discussion is retold by Pythodorus, then by Antiphon, and finally by Cephalus).¹³ There are some scholars who think that this manner of telling the story

¹¹ It is surprising to learn that the Neoplatonists thought that Plato's *Parmenides*, a dialogue that others have always considered a model and a masterpiece of philosophical obscurity, contained the clearest presentation of Plato's theological program and was the key to understanding all the other dialogues and all of Plato's other mythologies and philosophical programs. The second part of the dialogue, which seems to be more of a logical exercise, was the starting point for the construction of a mystical metaphysics by Neoplatonic philosophers.

¹² Cephalus, who memorized the whole discussion from Antiphon, starts narrating the original conversation *ex abrupto* to an unknown audience and in an unknown place. Interestingly, he is able to recount the entire conversation, but starts with the confession that he is unable to remember the name of Adeimantus's half-brother (126b): "Your half brother on your mother's side – what was his name? I've forgotten" (Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John Madison Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997], 360). It remains unclear why Plato introduced the apparently unnecessary intermediaries between Cephalus, the final narrator, and Pythodorus, the initial narrator.

¹³ See also Reginald E. Allen, *Plato's Parmenides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 69–72. Something similar can be seen in a passage from the *Timaeus*, where the myth of Atlantis is learned from a fifth generation narrator: Plato narrates an account he heard from Critias, who heard it from an old man, who heard it from Solon, who heard it from an Egyptian priest.

is principally decorative, while others believe that "this complex narrative scheme is not accidental"¹⁴ and suggest that

the more one reads Plato, the more one becomes aware that the literary elements, such as setting, character, prologue, and epilogue, are carefully chosen to give an aesthetic statement about the entire dialogue's structure and intention.¹⁵

Proclus pays as close attention to the dramatic qualities of the dialogues as he does to their main arguments. Accordingly, Proclus does not think that either Plato's choice of characters or the way in which he constructs the sequence of transmission of the original discussion is accidental. These features may seem to be rather insignificant details for the modern reader,¹⁶ but for Proclus they provide additional meaning to the entire dialogue.¹⁷ For the modern reader, the prologue of the dialogue may not seem to contribute to the philosophical argument developed in it, but for Proclus it is a genuine philosophical language that resembles metaphysics.

For an exegete like Proclus, the effect of the *mise-en-scène* goes beyond pure esthetics and touches metaphysical principles. He believes that it is impossible to understand Plato's complete philosophical program in this dialogue without paying close attention to the sequence of narrators. The layers of communication are necessary and indicate that one cannot have direct access to Platonic forms. The prologue and the core content of the dialogue therefore cannot be separated. In his commentary on the *Alcibiades*, Proclus says this plainly:

The introductions to the dialogues of Plato accord with their overall aims and have not been invented by Plato for the sake of dramatic charm . . . nor do they aim at mere accurate narrative, as some have considered . . . these circumstances depend on the general purpose of the dialogues.¹⁸

¹⁴ Allen, *Plato's Parmenides*, 69.

¹⁵ Robert Sherrick Brumbaugh, *Plato on the One: The Hypotheses in the Parmenides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 26.

¹⁶ Tarrant remarks that "to the modern reader Proclus' ingenuity will probably seem like a reduction ad absurdum of the view that prologues are significant" (Harold Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000], 40).

¹⁷ Reading a dialogue as a whole in which each feature has its meaning is specific to the Neoplatonists and is a late development: "the significance of each detail of the text is plainly a principle of post-Iamblican allegorizing" (Dillon, "Introduction," in *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, 13).

¹⁸ Proclus, *In Alcibiadem* 18.13–19.10, trans. W. O'Neill, in *Proclus: Alcibiades I: A Translation and Commentary* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 11–12. See

In his commentary on the *Parmenides*, furthermore, Proclus says:

studying any Platonic dialogue we must look especially at the matters that are its subject and see how the details of the prologue prefigure them.¹⁹

Proclus's way of interpreting suggests that it is inappropriate to ask if the exposition is fictive or historical. Proclus interprets the prologue as a chronicle of metaphysical principles, neither historical nor fictive, which describes plastically how the forms enter the world. He allegorizes everything he can. For example, being "outside the city walls" signifies the transcendence of the gods. He also allegorizes the transmission of the initial conversation, the characters, and the origin of the characters, as follows:

*Allegorization of the narrative transmission.*²⁰ Proclus interprets the various stages in the transmission of the original conversation as the progression of the forms into matter, as a chain of ontological levels: Cephalus's audience represents the primordial material (*hypodochē*) in which the Demiurge, according to the *Timaeus*, impresses the forms; Antiphon's speech to Cephalus represents the progression of the forms into *physikai ousiai*; Pythodorus's description of the conversation to Antiphon stands for the progression of the forms into souls (Antiphon's interest in horses is related to the image of the soul in Plato's *Phaedrus*); the conversation itself stands for the *Nous* and the intelligible world of the forms.

*Allegorization of the characters.*²¹ According to Proclus, Parmenides is an *analogon* for the unparticipated and divine Intellect (*Nous*); Zeno is an *analogon* for the participated Intellect (*nous*); and Socrates represents (*eoike*) the particular intellect. Proclus discovers other kinds of *analogia* as well: Parmenides is the symbol of *Being*, Zeno that of *Life*, Socrates that of *Intellect*; Pythodorus stands for the *angels*, Aristoteles for *individual souls* (the fact that he becomes one of the thirty tyrants signifies the keenness of the souls to descend into the tyranny of the passions), Pythodorus for the "divine Soul" (he uncovers the intelligible world and receives *logoi* from it), Antiphon for the "demonic soul" (his association with horsemanship hints that he desires to rule the physical world), Cephalus for the "individual soul." These allegorizations allow Proclus to

also James A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 84–85.

¹⁹ Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* 659, p. 47.

²⁰ Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* 626–27, p. 25–26.

²¹ Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* 628–30, p. 27–28.

further allegorize the phases of the initial discussion. For example, he interprets Socrates's turning from Zeno towards Parmenides as the return of the *Nous* through *Life* towards *Being*.²²

*Allegorization of the origin of the characters.*²³ Unexpectedly, Proclus interprets even the origins of the main characters. With respect to the first *lemma*—"When we arrived in Athens from our home in Clazomenae, we encountered Adeimantus and Glaucon in agora" (126a)—Proclus identifies the city Clazomenae with the Ionian school, which is a symbol of Nature, and Parmenides and Zeno with the Italian school, a symbol of the intellectual being:

let us take Ionia as a symbol (*symbolon*) of nature, Italy as a symbol of intellectual being, and Athens as the intermediary that provides a way up for the souls who are aroused to move from nature to intellect.

Arriving from Clazomenae "expresses the activity of gods which transcend the reason-principles in nature," while meeting with Glaucon and Adeimantus "indicates the sovereignty of the dyad in the unified plurality." As a consequence, he writes:

But these things, as I said, bear the likeness (*eikon*) of gods themselves and make it very easy for those who wish to follow the analogy (*analogia*).²⁴

²² Dillon rightly asks how one should comprehend the characters: as *eikones* or *symbola*? He concludes that since they represent a "higher" truth, they should be taken as *symbola*. On the other hand, as Dillon observes, the *arrangement of the three passive listeners* in the *Timaeus* (I 9) is understood as an *eikon*. Later on (I 198), the *arrangement of speeches* is understood as *symbolon* for the creation of the Universe (John Dillon, "Image, Symbol and Analogy: Three Basic Concepts of Neoplatonic Allegorical Exegesis," in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, ed. R. Baine Harris [Norfolk, Virginia: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1976], 253).

²³ *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* 660–64, p. 48–51.

²⁴ *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* 662, p. 49. This last elucidation creates some technical problems. Analogy is here understood as a way of establishing relations between the apparent meaning of the text and the transcendent realm. It assumes a theory of correspondence in which each semantic element corresponds to a metaphysical one, and the term retains the sense of "geometrical proportion" from its mathematical uses. In this context "it signifies the correspondence between the surface meaning of the text (or of the characters, things and actions mentioned in text) and the metaphysical truths of which it, or they, are the expressions" (Dillon, "Image, Symbol and Analogy," 255). According to Dillon, Proclus's interpretations show that he did not distinguish between *symbolon* and *eikon*. Some Neoplatonists used a more specific meaning of *symbolon* to mean "any object or any message capable of a double level of interpretation," although this meaning was, as Luc Brisson puts it, "reserved to a small number of

Conditions for Allegory and Likeness

The attempt to explain allegorically philosophical obscurity (Plato's reasons, for example, for choosing a specific storyline) was familiar to the late antique reader and student of philosophy. Neoplatonic philosophers were especially open to the allegorical interpretation of Plato's works because they believed

- (1) that nothing in Plato's corpus is unintended or there by chance
- (2) that his writings were divinely inspired
- (3) in the principle "*panta en pasin*"

These interrelated beliefs are necessary conditions for the allegorical interpretation of Plato's work. The third is in fact more than a condition; it is one of the foundational Neoplatonic metaphysical principles. Let us, therefore, look at each of them more closely.

(1) *The belief that nothing in Plato's corpus is unintended or there by chance.* In the *In Alcibiadem* (10.3), Proclus asserts that the dialogues

must possess what the whole cosmos possesses; and an analogous part must be assigned therein to the good, part to the intellect, part to the soul, part to the form and part to the underlying nature itself.²⁵

And indeed the late Platonists understood the dialogue as a cosmos, and *the cosmos as a dialogue*. The *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* thus describes the virtues of the dialogue form in the following manner:

For in the same way that a dialogue has different personages each speaking in character, so does the universe comprise existences of various natures expressing themselves in various ways; for the utterance of each is according to

initiates" (Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008], 58). Additionally, it seems that the ancient allegorists did not distinguish between *symbol* and *allegory*, "but used the terms as synonyms" (Peter T. Struck, "Allegory and Ascent in Neoplatonism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 69). The key notion in the above commentary is *analogia*, which seems indistinguishable from *allegoria*. As Dillon puts it, Proclus's *analogia* is the heart of his allegorical interpretation, but he provides "no clue as to what precise rules are to be followed in fixing the *analogiai*." Indeed, adds Dillon, "there were in fact none that could be formulated," although this does not mean that "the resulting allegory is arbitrary" (Dillon, "Image, Symbol and Analogy," 256).

²⁵ O'Neil, *Proclus: Alcibiades I*, 6–7.

its nature. It was in imitation, then, of God's creation, the cosmos, that he did this. Either this is the reason, or it is that the cosmos is a kind of dialogue.²⁶

This way of thinking was reinforced by the belief that "the dialogues as a whole constituted a well-ordered arrangement, or cosmos, of interconnected conversations."²⁷ The dialogue is a microcosm of the cosmos; it is understood "as a microcosmic organism, and as a corollary, its creator as microcosmic demiurge."²⁸

Moreover, in speaking about the functions of Plato's prologues in the *In Alcibiadem* (19), Proclus insists that:

on the one hand, the subject matter in fact or word is adapted to the immediate aim, while on the other hand what is wanting to the completion of the topic under discussion is supplied; but all together, as in an initiation, have reference to the overall achievement of the objects of enquiry.²⁹

Each element is necessary and none can be ignored lest the puzzle remain incomplete. This holistic view is yet another condition for a *correct* allegorical interpretation. In fact, Proclus's ideas on this subject resemble ideas in the *Phaedrus* (246c), where Plato concludes that:

Every speech must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs; and it must have middle and extremities that are fitting both to one another and to the whole work.³⁰

A dialogue thus presents itself to the commentator as a complex riddle whose every part can say or suggest something about another part.³¹ Like the parts of the cosmos, each of which resonates with the whole, the parts of a dialogue resonate with the whole of the dialogue, with its

²⁶ Anonymous *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* 15, ed. and trans. Leendert Gerrit Westerink (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1962), 28.

²⁷ Jacob Howland, "Re-Reading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology," *Phoenix* 45.3 (1991): 194.

²⁸ Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm*, 102.

²⁹ O'Neil, *Proclus: Alcibiades I*, 12. See also Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm*, 85.

³⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus* (246c), trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 62.

³¹ The ancient commentator (both the Neoplatonist and the Christian one) struggles to go beyond the text, but does not specify explicitly his method of forcing the text to say something else. In this regard, Lamberton remarks that the goal of the commentator "is to find the hidden meanings, the correspondences that carry the thrust of the text beyond the explicit. Once he has asserted their existence, he rarely feels the need to provide a theoretical substructure for his claims" (Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian*, 20).

skopos.³² A dialogue thus needs a solution and Proclus's interpretation functions as a cipher. Through the allegorical method he decodes the hidden message. In the case of the *Parmenides*, Proclus offers the key to understanding the text in the chain of transmission depicted in the prologue: metaphysical hierarchy is depicted as narrative hierarchy.

(2) *The belief that Plato's writings were divinely inspired.* Plato's Neoplatonic commentators considered his dialogues to have been "divinely inspired."³³ This is why each text is a whole with multiple layers of meaning. Coulter considers that, for the Neoplatonists, Plato "was, in a very real sense, a god and far above criticism."³⁴ Proclus himself writes in his *Platonic Theology* (I, 1) that Plato was the only man through whom secret theological knowledge was made public, while in the beginning of the commentary on the *Parmenides* (617–618), he assumes that his elucidation of this specific dialogue is like "the initiation into a mystery cult,"³⁵ praying "all the orders of the divine beings help . . . to share in this most illuminating and mystical vision that Plato reveals to us in the *Parmenides*."³⁶

(3) *The belief in the principle "panta en pasin."* Late antique philosophers found likenesses between philosophical systems and religious beliefs, between philosophical texts and religious scriptures, between the

³² The strong unity of each dialogue justifies the commentator's "meticulous examination of every word in the text. . . . There can be no purely extraneous elements in the dialogue, nor any unit of meaning so small that it plays no role in the overall plan of the work." The unity of the dialogues "often took the form of allegorical readings of the text" (Dirk Baltzly and Harold Tarrant, "General Introduction to the *Commentary*," in Tarrant, *Proclus: Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, vol. I [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 17).

³³ In both traditions, the exegete must make sense of the obscurities that could be turned into an occasion for pleasing and explaining. At least, in the case of Augustine it can be said that "the purpose of allegory is two-fold: to please and to explain (what cannot be expressed or understood directly). For Augustine, these purposes are complementary, not contradictory" (Frederick Van Fleteren, "Principles of Augustine's Hermeneutic: An Overview," in *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, ed. F. Van Fleteren and J. C. Schnaubelt [New York: Peter Lang, 2001], 9).

³⁴ Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm*, 46.

³⁵ Van Den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary*, 226.

³⁶ *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* 659, p. 19. Not surprisingly, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite substitutes Jesus for Plato in his plagiaristic paraphrase of *Platonic Theology*. For textual correspondences see Istvan Perczel, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Platonic Theology: A Preliminary Study," in A. P. Segonds and C. Steel, eds., *Proclus et la théologie platonicienne* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2000), 500–01.

text as microcosms and the texture of the universe.³⁷ The formal structure and the content of Platonic texts thus imitated those of the universe and similar tools were needed to read the book of nature and a Platonic text. Nothing, moreover, obliged a reader to limit a Platonic text to only one meaning. The different layers of meaning a reader can discover in a Platonic text depend on his erudition and intention, and all the meanings one can discover in a text are interrelated according to the doctrine *panta en pasin*.³⁸ Given these beliefs, and given the correspondences between the physical and intelligible worlds, allegorizing a text is a very natural philosophical and religious behavior. A religious attitude toward a text and a meta-textual reading are simply two of the consequences of these beliefs. These beliefs do not explain Proclus's ideas about how to perform an allegorical reading or why he preferred one allegorical reading to another one, but they do show that his allegorical reading was part of a continuum, an expected consequence of his conception of the world.

Plato himself was one of the first philosophers who thought that it was inadmissible to take *ad litteram* the words of Homer, which, at first

³⁷ The links between the structures of the text and metaphysical principles are assured by the same principles that make theurgy possible. Theurgy confers authority on allegorical analysis, and it is worth noting that Proclus, unlike Porphyry, believed that theurgy is superior to all human wisdom (*Platonic Theology*, I, 25). Theurgical beliefs imply that material things share divinity: a statue is not an imitation of divinity; it is a divinity (since it replicates divine features). For the language of theurgy, and that of mysteries as well, as used in allegory see Sheppard, "Allegory, Symbols and Mysteries," in *Studies on the 5th [fifth] and 6th [sixth] Essays of Proclus' Commentary on the Republic*, 145–61.

³⁸ The conviction that everything is related to everything seems to be a common place for late antique thinking. Proclus uses the principle of *panta en pasin* explicitly in his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, 627, and he formulates it in proposition 103 of his *The Elements of Theology* (Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 92–93). Talking about the unity of everything, Proclus differentiates also between "a hidden unity, in which everything is everything," and a "differentiated unity, in which all things partake of one another" (*Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, 627, p. 128). The *panta en pasin* principle has a long history: Syrianus ascribed it to the Pythagoreans, and Iamblichus to Numenius (Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 93, 254). See also Cristina d'Ancona Costa, "Les Sentences de Porphyre entre les Ennéades de Plotin et les Éléments de théologie de Proclus," in Porphyre, *Sentences I*, ed. Luc Brisson (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2005), 189–92.

glance, were an affront to the gods.³⁹ Proclus's solution to this problem was to discover allegories of philosophical principles in myths and poetic stories and he thus dismissed the platonic interdiction on poetry in the philosophical polis. Poetry's affront to the gods became a pretext for allegorizing, which became a *modus operandi* for Neoplatonism.⁴⁰ If, for Plato, poetry is just a copy of a copy, for the Neoplatonists, and especially for Proclus, imitation is significant, indicative of other layers of meaning. Especially in the sixth essay of the commentary on the *Republic*, Proclus claims that the mimetic layer is surpassed by that of the didactic, which is in turn exceeded by the symbolic.⁴¹

Plato would have dismissed such allegorical reading.⁴² There is a trace of reserve in Proclus's enterprise as well. His interpretations are neither true nor false. They are rather meditations in the margin of the

³⁹ It is worth noticing that Augustine (*De Civitate Dei*, II, 7) is sympathetic with Plato: "Once all worshippers of such gods are motivated by... 'lust imbued with the heat of poison' they [some philosophers] prefer to investigate the doings of Jupiter rather than Plato's teachings" (See Augustine, *City of God Books I & II*, tr. P. G. Walsh [Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2005], 115).

⁴⁰ In this respect, Dillon rightly observes that the "'scandal' of immoral stories had been used ever since the beginnings of allegory as a compelling reason why these stories *must* be allegorized" (Dillon, "Image, Symbol and Analogy," 252). Indeed, Marinus (*Vita Procli*, 22) testifies ardently that for Proclus myth is a bearer of truth: Proclus "learned with ease all of Greek and non-Greek theology and also that truth which had been hidden in the form of myths; he explained all these in a very enthusiastic manner to all who wished and were able to understand, and brought them into harmony" (See "Marianus' *Life of Proclus*," in L. J. Rosán, *The Philosophy of Proclus: The Final Phase of Ancient Thought* [New York: Cosmos, 1949], 25). Nevertheless, Plato, in the *Republic* II (378 a–e), rejects stories in the polis, even if they are allegorical: "we won't admit stories into our city—whether allegorical or not", since "the young can't distinguish what is allegorical from what isn't" (tr. G. Grube, rev. C. Reeve in Plato, *Complete Works*, 1017).

⁴¹ Proclus, *Commentaire sur la République* 191.25–193, trans. André-Jean Festugière (Paris: Librairie Philosophique Vrin, 1970), 209–10.

⁴² What looks like a secondary trope in Plato, but was used sometimes as a philosophical tool (e.g., the "allegory of the cave" from the beginning of the book vii of the *Republic*), was taken as a way, if not *the way*, of doing philosophy in late Neoplatonism. However, the Middle Platonists resisted using allegory as a tool, at least to some degree, and criticized the practice of allegorical interpretation as an alteration of the text; in this respect, Plutarch notes that "Some commentators forcibly distorted the stories [i.e. myths] through what used to be termed 'deeper meanings' but are nowadays called 'allegorical interpretations'" (Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths*, 58).

text.⁴³ *The text is a pretext* for what seems to be a theological exercise. Distancing himself both from Plato and from his own commentary, Proclus says:

In general these analogies should not be taken as unimportant, especially if we believe Plato, who said that nothing else is so beneficial to the soul as what draws it from phenomena to being, freeing us from the former and making it easy for us to imagine immaterial nature with the help of these.⁴⁴

He points out that it is more important to have a meta-textual reading than a literal one. Even if the accuracy of a text's content is hard to establish, the effort of interpreting it allegorically will ultimately elevate the soul. Proclus further adds:

So that even if Plato himself did not formulate these matters in this way it would be beneficial for us to do so. For it is a good exercise for a well endowed soul which is capable of moving from images to their archetypes and delights in observing these all-pervading analogies.⁴⁵

In this passage one can see the Platonic theory in action: every structure in the phenomenal world corresponds to its intelligible archetype; there is no such thing as a non-archetypal structure in the world, since all things have a divine model. Plato's text itself is a perfect copy of its intelligible archetype and it can transport the reader from the phenomenal to the intelligible world.

Conclusion

For Proclus, the prologues, the characters, and the main speakers of Plato's dialogues are not gratuitous, but full of significance and cannot be neglected in the economy of philosophical argumentation. The dialogues' plain, non-philosophical features stand for metaphysical realities. His reading is a philosophical exegesis with elements that resemble religious practices. By the fifth century, his method of interpretation had become an established tool of late Platonism, existing alongside and, to some degree, in competition with the interpretational practices of Alexandrian Christians with respect to biblical texts (especially Philo's reading of the

⁴³ Proclus's use of hypothetical formulations—for example, "If we should be required to give a likely analogy" (*Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* 628, p. 27)—gives the impression that he is aware that his technique and his allegorical commentary provide a model of allegorical interpretation.

⁴⁴ *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* 675, p. 59.

⁴⁵ *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* 675–76, p. 59.

Book of Genesis, or Augustine's quest for an allegorical reading of biblical books). Even if Proclus was hostile to Christianity, he shared with these Christians a taste for and a pleasure in meta-meaning.

Like deconstruction or structuralism in recent decades, allegorical interpretation in the late antique world was a means of "clarifying" obscurities by an even more obscure discourse (since one can figure out the *conditions* for allegorical reading, but not the *internal reason* for allegorizing in one manner and not in another). The allegorical method *clarifies the obscurity*—or, in other words, clarifies the apparent gratuity of the rhetoric—in philosophical discourse. Proclus creates the frame for an analysis that is neither true nor false, but is rather a sort of a game for which the rules are to some extent flexible (the most undeniable rule being the sacred nature of the text) and which is potentially endless (depending on the abilities of the interpreter).⁴⁶

Proclus's commentaries show that allegorical readings of Plato created a specialized jargon for the philosophy of the fifth century. The purpose of his allegorical commentaries was to initiate readers into the multiple layers of Plato's text and presupposed that "the author intended that the reader seek beneath the surface some second or indirect meaning."⁴⁷ Proclus's introductive commentary on the *Parmenides*, which was most probably a handbook for his students, can be taken as an example of how to interpret allegorically, i.e., how to elevate one's comprehension beyond the literal level of a text. The extravagance of his commentary should in fact secure him a place in the history of religion,⁴⁸ rather than in that of literary criticism,⁴⁹ since his attitude towards the text turns

⁴⁶ This taste for unpacking layers of meanings would subsequently have an impressive role in the theological discourse and its multi-layered reading of the Bible and, even later, in understanding the language of nature, in which each physical event can be interpreted through *otherwise analysis*.

⁴⁷ Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm*, 25.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Donald Andrew Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 95, where allegory is said to "have to do more with the history of religion and ethics than with that of literary criticism," or Peter T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 7: "The allegorists' interpretive exuberances, of course, fall outside of literary criticism as Aristotle defined it, so one is more likely to see allegorism classified as speculative philosophy, naive science, or theology."

⁴⁹ I am inclined to think that Coulter's remark that Proclus "surely merits a more secure place in the history of literary criticism" (Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm*, vii) is a bad-turn in understanding the function and purpose of allegory in the case of the Neoplatonists.

Plato's dialogue into a fetish and comes close to magical thinking, divination, or theurgy.



Obscurity in Medieval Texts

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Obscurity in Medieval Texts

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Lucie Doležalová, Jeff Rider,
and Alessandro Zironi

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