

## MYTH, LITERATURE, AND THE UNCONSCIOUS CONFERENCE

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***The myth of the soul's ascent: astral bodies, planetary sins,  
and Jung's concept of 'individuation'***

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Abstract

*This paper explores the ancient myth of the soul's descent into incarnation and its ascent to its original home after death. This narrative is usually accompanied by the themes of a 'spirit-vehicle' or intermediary between soul and body, planetary archons or potencies who confer specific vices or sins, and characterological attributes that constitute the idea of fate in Gnostic, Greco-Egyptian, Neoplatonic, and late antique Jewish magical literature. The myth of the soul's celestial ascent is often viewed as 'exteriorised' and reflecting the concrete belief in a literal post-mortem journey, but from the literary evidence it is clear that the celestial ascent of the soul was also understood as an internal transformative process in some circles in late antiquity, and the recitation of the myth as a form of ritualised performance was meant to facilitate this internal process. The myth of the soul's ascent, and its accompanying literature and ritualistic practices, retain their structural continuity in various cultural adaptations through the mystical practices of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Jewish Kabbalah during the medieval period, the 'spiritual' alchemy of the early modern period, and on into the occult revival of the late nineteenth century, the work of C. G. Jung, and many contemporary spiritualities. This paper will explore the myth of the soul's ascent and its relationship with modern depth psychology, including the complex interface between a powerful idea with agency and the cultural manifestations through which the idea emerges at different epochs and in different cultural contexts.*

An enduring idea

For over a century, the narrative of the celestial ascent of the soul has engaged religious and cultural historians seeking to understand why human beings, when faced with the vicissitudes of life and the inevitability of death, so often envisage salvation as a hierarchically structured journey to higher realms.<sup>1</sup> Historical routes of transmission of the idea can often be easily discerned: for example, Cicero in the 1st century BCE clearly derived the soul-journey in his *Somnium Scipionis* from the soul-journey of Er in Plato's *Republic*, written three centuries earlier; and Macrobius' commentary on Cicero's work in turn

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<sup>1</sup> On the antiquity and ubiquity of the idea, see John J. Collins, 'Introduction', in John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane (eds.), *Death, Ecstasy and Other Worldly Journeys* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), ix; J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), vii-ix; Ioan P. Couliano, *Out of This World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (London: Shambhala, 1991), 2.

reproduces the narrative in the early 5th century CE.<sup>2</sup> But focusing exclusively on literal transmission may obscure the importance of the extraordinary persistence of this myth, and its capacity for adaptation in a wide variety of cultural paradigms. The celestial ascent appears to be a narrative with exceptional vitality and ‘agency’,<sup>3</sup> retaining its structural consistency across various cultures and epochs at the same time that it generates constantly shifting permutations in the sphere of religious thought.

Recent academic literature on this mythic theme has focused primarily on the local sources, variations, and dissemination of the idea in antiquity.<sup>4</sup> Some explorations describe the ‘progression’ of the idea from mythic image to theosophical speculation or philosophical construct.<sup>5</sup> Or the idea is presumed to have vanished, along with other religious perspectives from antiquity, in the wake of the ‘de-animation’ of the Hellenic cosmos in the Christian Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> These approaches do not acknowledge that mythic, mystical, and

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic*, X.614a-621d, trans. Paul Shorey, in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 838-844; M. Tullius Cicero, *Somnium Scipionis*, in *De re publica and De legibus*, trans. C. W. Keyes (New York, NY: Loeb Classical Library, 1928), 261-83; Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, XII.13, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1990), 136-137. Also see the similarities between the celestial ascent in the second century CE Poimandres, CH I.24-26, in *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Aesclepius*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6, and the late fourth-century CE descent in Servius, *Ad Aeneid*, VI.714, in A. D. Nock, ‘The Lyra of Orpheus’, *The Classical Review*, 41:5 (1927), 170. Also see Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love*, VI.4, trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1985), 112. See also the discussion in Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. Margaret Cook (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 43-44.

<sup>3</sup> For a structuralist perspective on the ‘agency’ of ideas, see Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992), 2-7. For a cognitive perspective, see E. Thomas Lawson, ‘Psychological perspectives on agency’, in Jensine Andresen (ed.), *Religion in Mind: Cognitive Perspectives on Religious Belief, Ritual, and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 141-172; E. Thomas Lawson, ‘Cognition’, in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2006), 75-84; Ilkka Pyysiäinen, ‘Cognition, emotion, and religious experience’, in Andresen (ed.), *Religion in Mind*, 70-89. On ideas as ‘configurations of experience’, see C. G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, CW6, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), ¶1512-533; C. G. Jung, *The Symbolic Life*, CW18, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), ¶1742; C. G. Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, CW8, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), ¶1352-353.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*; Hans Dieter Betz, *The ‘Mithras Liturgy’: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). On early Jewish literature, see, for example, Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> On the ‘myth to mysticism’ approach to the celestial ascent, see Hans Jonas, ‘Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought’, *The Journal of Religion*, 49:4 (1969), 315-329. On the ‘myth to philosophy’ approach, see John D. Turner, ‘The Gnostic Threefold Path to Enlightenment: The Ascent of the Mind and the Descent of Wisdom’, *Novum Testamentum*, 22:4 (1980), 324-351.

<sup>6</sup> On the ‘de-animation’ and ‘discarding’ of Hellenic cosmology, see C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Philip Grierson, ‘The European Heritage’, in Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe (eds.), *Ancient Cosmologies* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), 225-258; Richard C. Dales, ‘The De-Animation of the Heavens in the Middle Ages’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 41:4 (1980), 531-550; Pierre Duhem, *Medieval Cosmology: Theories of Infinity, Place, Time, Void, and the Plurality of Worlds*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985 [1913-17]), 3-17.

philosophical versions of the celestial ascent have existed side by side from antiquity to the present day. Interiorised forms of the soul's ascent, emerging in later contexts such as the 'occult revival' of the late 19th century, appear not to be recognised as expressions of the same idea, despite clear structural and phenomenological similarities. The appearance of the narrative in contemporary spiritualities, such as the interiorised ascent through the seven 'God-responses' described by the 21st-century California guru Deepak Chopra,<sup>7</sup> are seen as a uniquely modern, psychologised response to the challenges of secularised Western culture.<sup>8</sup> But awareness of the psychological dimension of religious experience is not exclusive to the period following the invention of the word 'psychology', and it may be inappropriate to assume that only secularised 'moderns' experience that state which Paul Heelas, referring to 'New Age' beliefs, calls 'self-spirituality'.<sup>9</sup> It is not always clear whether any account of the soul's ascent, ancient or modern, poetic or exegetical, is understood by its narrator as 'objective' on a physical level, 'symbolic' on a spiritual level, 'subjective' on a psychological level, 'allegorical' on a philosophical level, 'real' but occurring in an otherworld or *mundus imaginalis*, or a mixture of any or all of these.<sup>10</sup>

#### The 'Platonic space-shuttle'<sup>11</sup>

Not every narrative of the celestial ascent involves the idea of the soul. The Babylonian Etana is transported to heaven on the back of an eagle, but falls off because he is

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<sup>7</sup> See Deepak Chopra, *How to Know God: The Soul's Journey Into the Mystery of Mysteries* (London: Rider, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> For this view of contemporary spiritualities, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'New Age Religion and Secularization', *Numen*, 47:3 (2000), 288-312; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Danièle Hervieu-Léger, 'Secularization, Tradition and New Forms of Religiosity: Some Theoretical Proposals', in Eileen Barker and Margit Warburg (eds.), *New Religions and New Religiosity* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998), 28-44; Yves Lambert, 'Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?', trans. A. T. Larson and S. Londquist, in William H. Swatos, Jr. and Daniel V. A. Olson (eds.), *The Secularization Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 95-125.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 19. On the assertion of individual spiritual authority in antiquity, see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963), 32-33. For an alternative perspective, viewing subjective and objective perceptions as occurring simultaneously in a given culture and a given individual, see Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 92. On the 'two poles' of mythic and rational thought, see also Antoine Faivre and Karen-Claire Voss, 'Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion', *Numen*, 42:1 (1995), 53.

<sup>10</sup> On the *mundus imaginalis*, see Henry Corbin, 'Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal', trans. Ruth Horine, in Benjamin Sells (ed.), *Working with Images: The Theoretical Base of Archetypal Psychology* (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 2000), 70-89; Adriana Berger, 'Cultural Hermeneutics: The Concept of Imagination in the Phenomenological Approaches of Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade', *The Journal of Religion*, 6:2 (1986), 141-156.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase is from Couliano, *Out of This World*, 88.

so heavy,<sup>12</sup> and the beautiful Greek youth Ganymede is physically abducted to heaven by Zeus.<sup>13</sup> Equally, not all beliefs about the soul involve an ascent; another narrative commonly found in antiquity is the *catabasis*, the soul's descent into the underworld.<sup>14</sup> When soul and ascent do coincide, there is no single 'authoritative' version of the narrative.<sup>15</sup> The ascent of the soul appears in the Egyptian Pyramid Texts of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE,<sup>16</sup> but it was available only to royalty.<sup>17</sup> A more democratic access to heaven first emerges in Greece in the 6th century BCE or earlier, in the fluid aggregate of soteriological doctrines and rituals known as the Orphic mysteries.<sup>18</sup> Orphic religious currents present a radical shift in the Greek concept of the soul: in every human being there is an immortal individual essence that preserves its identity independent of the mortal and transient body.<sup>19</sup> Funerary tablets found in tombs dating from the 6th century BCE indicate the post-mortem nature of the Orphic celestial ascent. But the Orphics also seem to have practised ritual initiations involving

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<sup>12</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 76; Couliano, *Out of This World*, 56; S. H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology: From the Assyrians to the Hebrews* (London: Penguin, 1985), 59-60.

<sup>13</sup> On Enoch, see Genesis, 5:24. On Enoch's *somanodia* or bodily ascent, see James D. Tabor, "Returning to the Divinity": Josephus' Portrayal of the Disappearance of Enoch, Elijah, and Moses', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 108:2 (1989), 225-238. On Ganymede, see Timothy Ganz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 557.

<sup>14</sup> Carol Zaleski, *Otherworldly Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experiences in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, discussions of the soul in Platonism and Gnosticism by Turner, 'Gnostic Threefold Path', 324-351; Roelof van den Broek, 'The Authentikos Logos: A New Document of Christian Platonism', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 33:3 (1979), 260-286.

<sup>16</sup> On the celestial ascent in the Pyramid Texts, see Whitney M. Davis, 'The Ascension-Myth in the Pyramid Texts', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 36:3 (1977), 161-179; R. O. Faulkner, 'The King and the Star-Religion in the Pyramid Texts', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 25:3 (1966), 153-161; Edward F. Wente, 'Mysticism in Pharaonic Egypt', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 41:3 (1982), 161-179; Wright, *Early History of Heaven*, 3-25; Segal, *Life After Death*, 38-54.

<sup>17</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> See Sarah Iles Johnston, 'Working Aftertime in the Afterlife; or, No Rest for the Virtuous', in *Heavenly Realms*, 90; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 296; W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 6-24. For the Orphic theogonies see M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 68-258; Guthrie, *Orpheus*, 69-130. On possible Egyptian influences, see Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 71-98. On possible Phoenician influences, see M. L. West, 'Ab ovo: Orpheus, Sanchuniathon and the Origins of the Ionian World Model', *The Classical Quarterly*, 44:2 (1994), 289-307. On possible Babylonian influences see G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 22, n. 1; West, *Orphic Poems*, 101-102; Guthrie, *Orpheus*, 98. On possible Iranian influences see Kirk *et al.*, 22, n. 1; West, *Orphic Poems*, 103-105; Robert Eisler, *Orpheus the Fisher: Comparative Studies in Orphic and Early Christian Cult Symbolism* (Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2001 [1925]), 24-29, 42-50. On Indian and shamanistic influences see West, *Orphic Poems*, 4-7, 104. On the problems of Orphic scholarship, see Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 117-118; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 296.

<sup>19</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 300. On Orphic doctrines of the soul's immortality, see also Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. Edwin L. Minar, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 125-136.

music, prayer, sacred objects, and *voces magicae*<sup>20</sup> as a means to induce an ascent in the living neophyte.<sup>21</sup> The idea that the ascent can occur during life as an interior, transformative experience is thus very ancient.

A good deal of evidence about Orphic beliefs is available from Plato,<sup>22</sup> who provided the soul's ascent with a philosophical framework and thus embedded it firmly in the philosophical currents not only of antiquity, but of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, early modern movements such as spiritual alchemy and Rosicrucianism, and many contemporary spiritualities.<sup>23</sup> Plato does not provide a neat, uniform ascent narrative. In different *Dialogues*, he presents the celestial ascent as a post-mortem soul-journey, an allegory, a cosmological model, and an individual spiritual and psychological voyage through progressively higher states of awareness. In the 3rd century CE, Plotinus, attempting to simplify Plato's complex approach, presents an 'intellectualised' celestial ascent:<sup>24</sup> a solitary contemplative quest for the source of individual essence, identical to the search for the source of the godhead.<sup>25</sup> The ecstatic, imaginably fertile ascent presented by Iamblichus in the early 4th century CE, radically different from that of Plotinus, nevertheless fulfils the same purpose: the soul becomes one with the gods and a participant in their creative

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<sup>20</sup> On Orphic initiation rituals, see West, *Orphic Poems*, 155-163 and 167-170; Gábor Betegh, *The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 69-70 and 88-89; R. Delbrueck and W. Vollgraft, 'An Orphic Bowl', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 54:2 (1934), 129-139; Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influences on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, trans. Margaret E. Pinder and Walter Burkert (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 124-127. On wandering Orphic priests or *Orpheotelestai* who perform initiation ceremonies, see Plato, *Republic*, II:364b-365a, in *Dialogues*, 610-612; Burkert, *Ancient Pythagoreanism*, 125.

<sup>21</sup> On the Orphic hymns, see West, *Orphic Poems*, 28-29, 252-253; Guthrie, *Orpheus*, 257-261. For a translation of the hymns, see 'The Mystical Hymns of Orpheus', trans. Thomas Taylor, in Thomas Taylor, *Hymns and Initiations* (Frome: Prometheus Trust, 1994 [1824]), 23-159. On the use of music and *voces magicae* in the 'Mithras liturgy', see Betz, 103-106; Naomi Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (London: Routledge, 2001), 80-81. On *voces magicae* in the Hermetic ascent, see Gilles Quispel, 'Reincarnation and Magic in the Asclepius', in Roelof Van den Broek and Cis van Heertum (eds.), *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition* (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2000), 167-231. On *voces magicae* in early Jewish and Greco-Egyptian mystical ascents, see Rebecca Lesses, 'Speaking with Angels: Jewish and Greco-Egyptian Revelatory Adjurations', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 89:1 (1996), 41-60; Gideon Bohak, 'Hebrew, Hebrew Everywhere? Notes on the Interpretation of *Voces Magicae*', in Scott Noegel, Joel Walker, and Brannon Wheeler (eds.), *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 69-82. On *voces magicae* in Neoplatonic ascents and in the Chaldean Oracles, see Sarah Iles Johnston, *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 88-9, 111; Georg Luck, 'Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism', in *Religion, Science, and Magic*, 185-225; Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); E. R. Dodds, 'Theurgy and Its Relationship to Neoplatonism', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 37:1/2 (1947), 55-69.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, 399c, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Dialogues*, 437.

<sup>23</sup> On Platonic and Neoplatonic elements in 'New Age' thought, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 388.

<sup>24</sup> Jonas, 'Myth and Mysticism', 316.

<sup>25</sup> Kevin Corrigan, "'Solitary' Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius', *The Journal of Religion*, 76:1 (1996), 34-35.

activities.<sup>26</sup> These Platonic and Neoplatonic ascents of the soul cross the boundaries between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ as well as between divine and human: a perception of unity on multiple levels which also emerges in modern spiritualities, and equates the journey up with the journey inward.<sup>27</sup>

The Mithraic celestial ascent of the first centuries CE likewise crosses ontological boundaries, suggested by the fact that the planetary order of the Mithraic grades of initiation does not reflect any astronomical theory extant at the time, and cannot be considered a literal representation of the physical cosmos.<sup>28</sup> Other irregular planetary orders from late antiquity likewise suggest a symbolic understanding of the celestial ascent,<sup>29</sup> such as that of Greco-Egyptian alchemy, emerging at the same time Mithraism was flourishing.<sup>30</sup> Each stage of the soul’s alchemical journey is a process of transmutation in terms of the corresponding metal,<sup>31</sup> a recurring theme in alchemical texts from the 2nd century to the 18th. Ignoring the traditional planetary order that begins with the Moon and culminates with Saturn, the *opus* begins with the base lead of Saturn and culminates with the spiritual gold of the Sun.<sup>32</sup> These Hermetic ascent rituals appear to be the forerunners, both traditionally and historically, of the Western alchemical initiations of the Renaissance and early modern

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<sup>26</sup> See Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> On the crossing of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ boundaries in contemporary spiritualities, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 224-229, 245-252.

<sup>28</sup> For textual evidence, see Bruce M. Metzger, ‘St. Jerome’s Testimony concerning the Second Grade of Mithraic Initiation’, *The American Journal of Philology*, 66:3 (1945), 225. For iconographic evidence and the relationship between grades and planets, see Roger Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* (Leiden: Brill, 1988); Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 18-19; Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, trans. Thomas J. McCormack (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1956 [1903]), 120-124; Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, trans. Richard Gordon (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 131-38.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of discrepancies between Gnostic planetary orders, see Roelof van den Broek, ‘The Creation of Adam’s Psychic Body in the Apocryphon of John’, in Roelof van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren (eds.), *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 41-42.

<sup>30</sup> On the history of Greco-Roman alchemy, see Jack Lindsay, *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (London: Frederick Muller, 1970). On Hermetic alchemy, see Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 89-91, 120-26. See also Lynn Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, Vol. 1 (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1923), 193-199. For the equation of planets and metals described as ‘Mithraic’ but actually Hermetic, see Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 6:22, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/origen161/html>.

<sup>31</sup> See Lindsay, *Origins of Alchemy*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, *Dialogue of Cleopatra and the Philosophers*, in Stanton J. Linden, *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 44-45; Zosimos of Panopolis, *Of Virtue*, 1.2, in *Alchemy Reader*, 52; Stefan Michelspacher, *Cabala*, in Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game: Alchemical Engravings of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 52-58; Johann Isaak Hollandus, *Opera mineralia*, in Herbert Silberer, *Hidden Symbolism of Alchemy and the Occult Arts*, trans. Smith Ely Jelliffe (New York, NY: Dover, 1971 [1917]), 158-160.

period; they are not mere literary tropes, but seem to describe inner experiences of a transformative nature.<sup>33</sup>

The Gnostic celestial ascent of late antiquity involves confrontations with seven hostile planetary archons, emanations of the unknown transcendent God.<sup>34</sup> Some scholars unfavourably compare Gnostic mythic exuberance with the logic of earlier Greek philosophy and science,<sup>35</sup> implying a 'regression' breaking the linear historical progression from mythic to rational thought.<sup>36</sup> Implicit in this approach is the assumption that the Gnostics understood the celestial ascent as literal post-mortem salvation.<sup>37</sup> However, some Gnostics understood their ascent as an inner experience achievable during life: the recitation of their elaborate cosmologies constituted a magical ritual, and was meant to invoke a process of transformation in both narrator and listener.<sup>38</sup> The celestial regions represented by the archons are referred to as the 'hypostatized thoughts of God':<sup>39</sup> each region is also a state of mind. In the treatise called *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, Ialdabaoth, the Gnostic Saturn, eldest and most powerful of the celestial archons,<sup>40</sup> is afflicted with envy:

And this was the origin of Envy. And Envy engendered Death; and Death engendered his offspring and gave each of them charge of its heaven; and all the heavens of Chaos became full of their multitudes.<sup>41</sup>

The great archon provides a mythic image of an inner experience understood to be the most profoundly destructive of all human emotional states. The passage through Ialdabaoth's domain is echoed in the alchemical stage of transmutation known as *nigredo* or 'blackening', over which Saturn 'reigns'.<sup>42</sup> In the initiation rituals of the late-19th-century British occult society known as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Saturn is called 'prince of spiritual initiation', who 'asks a question of the soul, upon the answer to which hangs his fate...Shall he be turned back on to the planes of form, or shall he be permitted to pass on

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<sup>33</sup> Dan Merkur, 'Stages of Ascension in Hermetic Rebirth', *Esoterica*, 1 (1999), 82.

<sup>34</sup> Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*, 93-96.

<sup>35</sup> John J. Collins, 'Cosmos and Salvation: Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic in the Hellenistic Age', *History of Religions*, 17:2 (1977), 129. On definitions of early Greek 'scientific' thought, see also G. E. R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience: Studies in the Origins and Development of Greek Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*, 8-11.

<sup>36</sup> Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*, 110.

<sup>37</sup> Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 171.

<sup>38</sup> Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, 'Gnosticism: A Study in Liminal Symbolism', *Numen*, 31:1 (1984), 110.

<sup>39</sup> William Romaine Newbold, 'The Descent of Christ in the Odes of Solomon', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 31:4 (1912), 173.

<sup>40</sup> *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, NHC II.4.95, trans. Bentley Layton, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, 158.

<sup>41</sup> *Hypostasis*, 4.96.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Maier, *Symbola aureae mensae duodecim nationum* (Frankfurt, 1617), in Jung, *CW14*, 229, fn. 585.

into the Light?’<sup>43</sup> Modernity has apparently transformed the archon from an unsavoury cosmic potency to a psychological mirror that reflects back to the initiate the recognition of his or her own corruptibility. The encounter with Ialdabaoth also resembles the confrontation with the ‘shadow’ in the psychological process Jung calls ‘individuation’, about which I will talk more later.<sup>44</sup> It seems that the author of the Gnostic text understood well enough the psychic nature of this ferocious astral *daimon* who, although ontically objective, nevertheless blocks the soul’s passage to freedom from within.

Jewish mystical texts of late antiquity, known as *heikhalot* (palace) literature because of the seven heavenly palaces through which the soul journeys to reach the divine throne,<sup>45</sup> employ magical techniques such the recitation of divine and angelic names in order to induce a soul-journey and communicate with celestial entities.<sup>46</sup> In later *heikhalot* literature, the stages of the ascent are perceived as degrees of individual moral and spiritual perfection, and the angels inhabiting the celestial realms are seen as both ontically objective and dimensions of the human soul.<sup>47</sup> The Jewish *heikhalot* narratives, and the Kabbalah that emerged from these roots in the late 13th century, perceive the gnosis of the celestial ascent as both self-knowledge and God-knowledge.<sup>48</sup> These texts are as psychological as they are

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<sup>43</sup> Israel Regardie, *The Original Account of the Teachings, Rites and Ceremonies of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1989 [1937]), 447.

<sup>44</sup> On the alchemical *nigredo* and Jung’s psychological interpretation, see C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, CW12 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970 [1953]), ¶333-34; Jung, CW14, ¶253-54, 493-94, 741; Marie-Louise von Franz, *Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1980), 220-22. On the confrontation with the shadow, see C. G. Jung, *Aion*, CW9 Part II (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974 [1959]), ¶13-19; C. G. Jung, *Civilization in Transition*, CW10 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974 [1964]), ¶444-457.

<sup>45</sup> Although no English translation yet exists of the *heikhalot* literature, German translations are available in Peter Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur: Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988); Peter Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988); Peter Schäfer, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989). For summaries of the main *heikhalot* texts, see Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*. On the various shades of meaning of the word *heikhala* (plural, *heikhalot*), see Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 14. On *heikhalot* texts involving the magical summoning of angels, see Lesses, ‘Speaking with Angels’; Michael D. Swartz, ‘“Like the Ministering Angels”: Ritual and Purity in Early Jewish Mysticism and Magic’, *AJS Review*, 19:2 (1994), 139. On the magical use of hymns in the fourth to sixth-century CE text *Heikhalot Rabbati*, see Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, 81-83.

<sup>46</sup> On the close resemblance between merkabah techniques, Gnostic rituals, and the Greco-Egyptian magical papyri, see Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, NY: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), 74-83; Morton Smith, ‘Observations on Hekhalot Rabbati’, in Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 150-59; Lesses, ‘Speaking with Angels’, 45.

<sup>47</sup> For a comprehensive exploration of the objective/subjective dimensions of angelic and divine images in Jewish esoteric lore, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> On *kavvanah*, the meditative technique utilised in these texts, see Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 132-33; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), xviii; Steven T. Katz, ‘Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism’, in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 34.

mystical. So too is the Hermetic literature of late antiquity: in the text known as *Poimandres*, the soul's ascent through the planetary spheres is presented as an initiatory ritual intended to induce ecstasy, gnosis, and apotheosis during life, transforming the initiate into a god or a godlike human, and conferring freedom from astral determinism through a direct experience of the soul's independence from the body.<sup>49</sup> In the parlance of contemporary spiritualities, the adept has become 'enlightened'.<sup>50</sup>

### Metallurgical mysticism

The ascent of Jesus to heaven after his crucifixion constitutes a Christian portrayal of the celestial ascent of the soul. All other ascents are thereby rendered obsolete: where once any Mithraic, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Jewish, or Hermetic mystic could seek revelation and transformation through the heavenly journey, now these can be found only in Christ.<sup>51</sup> The celestial ascent lies at the heart of Christian theological doctrine, but the belief that anyone other than Jesus can make the journey – except through the resurrection of the body on the Last Day – suffered condemnation throughout the medieval and early modern periods, in part because of the 'politics of monotheism' and in part because of implications of the divinity of the heavens and the soul's pre-existence and consubstantiality with God.<sup>52</sup> The celestial ascent through the Christianised planetary spheres in Dante's late-14th-century *Paradiso* is an exception: a complex blend of poetry, history, politics, and theology which Ioan Couliano refers to as 'a shamanistic narrative' that could have occurred in 'any space or time setting'.<sup>53</sup> Ideas with vigour can adapt according to individual and cultural

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<sup>49</sup> Merkur, 'Stages of Ascension', 84.

<sup>50</sup> For the concept of enlightenment in contemporary spiritual literature, see, for example, Bubba Free John, *The Enlightenment of the Whole Body* (Middletown, CA: Dawn Horse Press, 1978); Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *The Ultimate Alchemy* (Bombay: Anand-Shila Publications, 1974). For a critical discussion of this concept, see Georg Feuerstein, *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy-Wise Adepts, Holy Fools, and Rascal Gurus* (London: Penguin/Arkana, 1991), 172-184.

<sup>51</sup> See William C. Grese, "'Unless One is Born Again': The Use of a Heavenly Journey in John 3", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 107:4 (1988), 677-93.

<sup>52</sup> On the 'politics of monotheism' and the threat that gnosis posed to early Christian authorities, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), 28-34. On the Paris Condemnations of 1277 repudiating the Platonic idea of the divinity of the heavens, see Edward Grant, 'Late Medieval Thought, Copernicus, and the Scientific Revolution', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 23 (1962), 197-220; Edward Grant, 'The Condemnation of 1277, God's Absolute Power, and Physical Thought in the Late Middle Ages', *Viator*, 10 (1979), 211-244. On Platonic, Neoplatonic, Stoic, Gnostic, and Hermetic belief in the identity between God and the human soul, see Roelof van den Broek, 'Gnosticism and Hermeticism in Antiquity', in *Gnosis and Hermeticism*, 1. On the disjunctions between 'Hebraic' and 'Hellenic' Christianity, see Nicholas Constas, "'To Sleep, Perchance to Dream': The Middle State of Souls in Patristic and Byzantine Literature", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 55 (2001), 92. On Hellenic Christianity also see Antoine Faivre, 'Ancient and Medieval Sources of Modern Esoteric Movements', in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, 15. For an overview of the tensions in early Christianity, see Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002 [1966]); Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine* (London: Penguin, 1986).

<sup>53</sup> Couliano, *Out of This World*, 230-31.

requirements, even within apparently unsympathetic religious contexts. In the Christian West, the myth of the soul's ascent, and accompanying ideas of the efficacy of magical ritual to induce a direct inner experience of the journey, persisted in both the Jewish and Christian Kabbalah and the esoteric current referred to as 'spiritual' alchemy. The equation of the alchemical stages with the ascent of the soul through the planets, based on the pantheistic idea of a God immanent in the whole of Nature, is full-blown in alchemical treatises from the sixteenth century onward.<sup>54</sup>

Alchemical texts usually present seven stages of the *opus*,<sup>55</sup> associated with the seven planets in the illustrative engravings of many alchemical works.<sup>56</sup> These texts exercised a powerful influence on nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultists seeking to reconnect with older esoteric traditions of self-transformation. For example, A. E. Waite's Theosophically inclined late-19th-century interpretation of alchemy divides the *opus* into the seven stages of a spiritual ascent, culminating in a union with the Holy Spirit.<sup>57</sup> The alchemical gold is identified with both Christ as the Saviour of the world, and the divine Self in the human being.<sup>58</sup> C. G. Jung, steeped in an investigation of early modern alchemical texts, had also read all of Waite's works on alchemy;<sup>59</sup> and Jung likewise understood alchemy to be an esoteric interpretation of normative Christian doctrine. The Saviour is the divine spirit, fallen 'from the highest place into the darkest depths of matter', where he awaits the deliverance provided by the alchemist through the power of the great mediator of the soul: the human imagination.<sup>60</sup>

### The astral body or 'spirit vehicle'

In spiritual alchemy, the imagination is related to the 'subtle' or 'astral' body'.<sup>61</sup> This

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<sup>54</sup> Ethan Allen Hitchcock, *Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists* (Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003 [1857]); A. E. Waite, *Azoth; or, The Star in the East* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893).

<sup>55</sup> There are exceptions to this. For three stages, see Abraham Eleazar, *Uraltes Chymisches Werck* (Leipzig, 1760), in Jung, *CW14*, 451. For seven stages, see Albertus Magnus, *Libellus de Alchimia*, 30-36, trans. in Linden, 106-109; Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*, Book VII, trans. A. E. Waite, in A. E. Waite (ed.), *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus* (Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003 [1910]), 151. For ten stages, see *Rosarium*, in Jung, *CW16*, 203-320. For twenty-two stages, see Trismosin, *Splendor Solis*, in Wasserman, 94-99.

<sup>56</sup> See Mylius, *Anatomia auri* (1628), in De Rola, 193; Mylius, *Opus medio-chymicum* (1618), in De Rola, 138 and 206; Michelspacher, *Cabala* (1616), in De Rola, 56.

<sup>57</sup> Waite, *Azoth*, pp. 167-68.

<sup>58</sup> Jung, *CW13*, para. 163.

<sup>59</sup> See the catalogue of Jung's library as well as the references in the Collected works, etc.

<sup>60</sup> Jung, *CW13*, ¶183. See also John Dillon, 'The Descent of the Soul in Middle Platonic and Gnostic Thought', in Dillon, *The Golden Chain*, Sec. XII, 357-364. See also a 2nd century CE Gnostic account of the descent of Christ in Newbold, 'Descent of Christ', 168-210; Gilles Quispel, 'Gnosis and Alchemy: The Tabula Smaragdina', in *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme*, 333.

<sup>61</sup> On the 'subtle body' and its relationship with the transformations of matter, see Corbin, '*Mundus Imaginalis*', 79-80.

‘soul-vehicle’ found its way from Plato through the Neoplatonic philosophers to the astrological-medical theories of the Renaissance and, eventually, to the Theosophical currents of the occult revival of the *fin-de-siècle* and contemporary spiritualities in the 21st century. The star-like vehicle is not always singular: Porphyry, in the late third century CE, proposes one subtle body; Proclus, two centuries later, suggests a second, denser one, mediating between the first vehicle and the physical body.<sup>62</sup> A sophisticated blend of mystical and scientific thought is already evident in this ancient concept, combining the central idea of the celestial ascent with the spirit-vehicle and the concept of ‘subtle matter’ derived from Stoic physics.<sup>63</sup> Macrobius describes seven luminous ‘envelopes’ acquired as the soul descends, each reflecting the attributes of the relevant planetary sphere.<sup>64</sup> In Gnostic doctrines, the subtle bodies, of which there are seven, are viewed as the carriers of astral fate.<sup>65</sup> In *The Apocryphon of St. John*, the planetary archons create Adam’s ‘psychic body’ as a series of onion-like layers which bind the soul to the body’s desires.<sup>66</sup> These corruptible astral vehicles are collectively called the ‘counterfeit spirit’,<sup>67</sup> which ‘contriveth and senseth all sins and the evil which the rulers of the great Fate have commanded’.<sup>68</sup> Although Augustine counters this depressing interpretation of the subtle body by asserting that it can be purified through chastity, the idea, stripped of its overt astrological cosmology, has remained embedded in Christian theology to the present day in the doctrine of the seven cardinal sins: the Gnostic myth of the soul’s planetary journey seems to lie at the basis of this potent religious concept.<sup>69</sup>

In sixteenth-century medical and alchemical works, the soul, before its ‘immigration’ into the physical body, clothes itself in ‘a certain shining, pure body like a star’.<sup>70</sup> This ‘shining body’ is the mediator between the human intellect and the celestial realms from

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<sup>62</sup> See Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Proposition 209, 183, and Dodds’ commentary, 306-8; Kissling, 323-24; Walker, ‘Astral Body’, 121; Couliano, *Psychanodia*, 51-52. Finamore, 11-27.

<sup>63</sup> On Stoic physics and the gradations of material substance in the cosmos, see Long, A. A. and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol. 1: *Translation of the Principle Sources with Philosophical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 266-343; F. H. Sandbach, *The Stoics* (London: Duckworth, 1989 [1975]), 69-94.

<sup>64</sup> Macrobius, 12.13.

<sup>65</sup> See Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, p. 160.

<sup>66</sup> *The Apocryphon of John*, II.1.15, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, 107.

<sup>67</sup> See the discussion on the ‘counterfeit spirit’ in Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*, 102-105.

<sup>68</sup> *Pistis Sophia*, 111.283, trans. G. R. S. Mead, at <http://www.gnosis.org/library/pistis-sophia/ps116.htm> [accessed 25 August 2006].

<sup>69</sup> Augustine, *De civitas dei*, X.28, trans. Marcus Dods, in Philip Schaff, ed., *St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.X.1.html> [accessed 10 August 2006]. See also Zaleski, 59; Morton W. Bloomfield, ‘The Origin of the Concept of the Seven Cardinal Sins’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 34:2 (1941), 124, fn. 17. See also Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State College Press, 1952), 1-67; Siegfried Wenzel, ‘The Seven Deadly Sins: Some Problems of Research’, *Speculum*, 43:1 (1968), 1-22.

<sup>70</sup> Jean Fernel, *De Naturali Parte Medicinæ*, Book IV (Paris: André Wechel, 1554), 104, in Walker, ‘Astral Body’, 119.

which the soul has descended, and is equated with the imagination, also called ‘the star in man’.<sup>71</sup> The imaginative faculty as the mediator of celestial divinity, described in late antiquity by Iamblichus and by the Kabbalistic literature of the medieval period, is articulated most clearly by the sixteenth-century alchemist and physician Theophrastus von Hohenheim, later known as Paracelsus. He attributes to the ‘shining body’ not only the capacity to understand and participate in the unity of the cosmos, but also the generation of diseases and their cures.<sup>72</sup> The ‘shining body’ is a source of divine revelation as valid as that of scripture, and more accessible because, according to Paracelsus, it dwells ‘in our hearts’.<sup>73</sup>

### The ascent of the soul as ‘individuation’

Jung, for whom Paracelsus provided a major inspiration, interprets the celestial ascent as an interior journey:

The journey through the planetary houses boils down to becoming conscious of the good and the bad qualities in our character, and the apotheosis means no more than maximum consciousness, which amounts to maximal freedom of the will.’<sup>74</sup>

With this statement, the celestial ascent becomes a symbolic narrative of ‘individuation’, the inner process through which an individual can achieve full integration of the personality. Jung perceived the celestial ascent in Gnostic, Hermetic, Neoplatonic, Kabbalistic, and alchemical texts as structurally similar to the processes through which his patients moved as they accessed the various levels of their inner worlds. The bypassing of the hostile Gnostic archons symbolises

...the overcoming of a psychic obstacle, or of an autonomous complex, suitably represented by a planetary god or demon. Anyone who has passed through all the spheres is free from compulsion.<sup>75</sup>

Jung did not confine the individuation process to a specific number of steps.<sup>76</sup> But the initial and final phases of the process correspond closely with the alchemical ascent, beginning with the ‘psychic suffering’ and ‘war on a moral plane’ of the Saturnian *nigredo*, and culminating with the solar alchemical gold: a direct inner experience which on a metaphysical level reflects the soul’s ‘faculty of relationship to God’, and on a psychological level reflects the

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<sup>71</sup> Martin Ruland, *A Lexicon of Alchemy or Alchemical Dictionary* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1984 [1893]), 182.

<sup>72</sup> Paracelsus, *Sämtliche Werke: 1. Abt. Medizinische, naturwissenschaftliche und philosophische Schriften*, VIII, 161-170, ed. Karl Sudhoff, 14 volumes (Munich and Berlin, 1922-1933), in Heinrich Schipperges, Heinrich, ‘Paracelsus and His Followers’, trans. John Bowden, in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, 158.

<sup>73</sup> Paracelsus, *Caput de morbis somnii*, IX; Paracelsus, *Astronomia magna*, XII, both in Jung, *CW13*, ¶148.

<sup>74</sup> Jung, *CW14*, ¶309.

<sup>75</sup> Jung, *CW14*, ¶308.

<sup>76</sup> Jung, *CW13*, ¶398.

‘unified self’.<sup>77</sup> Individuation is thus the psychological dimension of the archetypal narrative of the soul’s journey. While it occurs naturally in all people, techniques of analytic work such as active imagination, according to Jung, deepen and enhance the process;<sup>78</sup> and such techniques are as old as the narratives of the soul’s ascent. Jung recognised that this mode of relationship with the inner realms belongs to the sphere of magic: in a dialogue with an imaginal figure called Philemon in the recently published *Red Book*, he declares categorically:

We need magic to be able to receive or invoke the messenger and the communication of the incomprehensible.<sup>79</sup>

Various researchers exploring the soul’s journey in specific cultural contexts have found Jung’s concepts invaluable in understanding the continuity of ascent narratives. Henry Corbin, discussing the ascent in 11th-century Islamic mysticism, makes frequent references to Jung’s theory of archetypal images and his use of active imagination.<sup>80</sup> Dan Merkur concludes that visionary experiences, dependent largely on the technique of active imagination, constitute the revelation at the core of the Gnostic mythic cosmologies of late antiquity.<sup>81</sup> Gregory Shaw, discussing the theurgic practices of Iamblichus, compares them specifically to active imagination.<sup>82</sup> Moshe Idel, although cautious about any ‘mechanical’ application of Jung’s ideas, notes that Jungian models may be helpful in comprehending the soul’s journey in Kabbalistic mysticism.<sup>83</sup> Understanding the celestial ascent as an archetypal pattern, expressed through an immensely creative range of images, may be one of the most useful models currently available to explore the structure, continuity, and culturally mediated varieties of this enduring mythic theme.

### Conclusion

Considering the celestial ascent of the soul as an idea with agency, that couples creatively with other ideas as well as with cultural formations, allows the myth both structural integrity and unlimited diversity in terms of its expressions. A recognition of differing human responses, along with a willingness to adopt methodological agnosticism, rescues the idea from the reductionism of a purely functionalist or sociological approach. The thorny issue of whether a narrator, or a researcher, interprets the soul’s ascent as

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<sup>77</sup> Jung, *CW14*, ¶494; Jung, *CW12*, ¶11; Jung, *CW9ii*, ¶264.

<sup>78</sup> Jung, *CW14*, ¶752-55.

<sup>79</sup> Jung, *Red Book*, 142-43.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Corbin, *Avicenna*, 165, 208-222, 257-69; Corbin, ‘*Mundus Imaginalis*’, 78-79, 84.

<sup>81</sup> Merkur, *Gnosis*, ix.

<sup>82</sup> Shaw, ‘Containing Ecstasy’, 53-87.

<sup>83</sup> Idel, *New Perspectives*, 25.

veridical or symbolic, may depend more on individual predisposition than on the validity of the evolutionist construct of ‘myth’ growing up and becoming ‘philosophy’ or ‘science’, or the subtler but equally evolutionist construct that only secularised, ‘disenchanted’ moderns can expect to encounter the divine in the human imagination.<sup>84</sup> The paradoxical simultaneity of subjective and objective portrayals of the celestial ascent throughout history challenges some of the most cherished paradigms of contemporary scholarship and, as Bruno Latour suggests, raises questions about the assumption that we are, or have ever been, ‘modern’.<sup>85</sup>

Ideas with ‘agency’ may be seen to inform the changing paradigms of science, philosophy, psychology, religion, politics, and the arts as they mutate and clothe themselves in the languages of particular cultural milieux. These interactions precipitate transformations in both the individuals and the culture in which the idea is active, resulting in the development of new religious and social forms. The idea endures, not only because it has been transmitted, but because, as a narrative with ‘agency’, its attractiveness and resonance are able to ensure its continuing transmission. Modernity has provided a new range of paradigms through which the celestial ascent of the soul can be understood. But the idea itself remains structurally consistent and capable of undergoing further permutations. The appearance of the myth in contemporary spiritualities and psychologies amply demonstrates its indestructibility from the ancient world to the present day.

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<sup>84</sup> On the sociological hypothesis of ‘enchantment’ and ‘disenchantment’, see Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Bischoff (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993 [1963]); Sharot, 278-79; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ‘How magic survived the disenchantment of the world’, *Religion*, 33 (2003), 357-80; Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture: Pulling Down the Moon* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 77-84.

<sup>85</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 107.

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