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THEURGY: RITUALS OF UNIFICATION IN THE NEOPLATONISM OF IAMBlichUS

By GREGORY SHAW

I. INTRODUCTION

In the late third century of the Common Era, the Platonic tradition was changed profoundly under the direction of Iamblichus of Chalcis, head of the Platonic school in Syria. Through the introduction of Egyptian and Chaldaean religious rites as part of the intellectual disciplines of his school, Iamblichus was given the honorific title ‘divine’ (θεῖος) by his Neoplatonic successors. Modern scholars, however, have generally not seen the head of the Platonic school’s turning to magic rites as the high point of intellectual progress, and Iamblichus’ contribution to Platonism has either been dismissed as a corruption of the tradition or has been left as an irresolvable enigma.

Iamblichus called these rituals ‘theurgy’ (θεουργία), which he described as divine acts (θεῖα ἔργα) or the working of the gods (θεῶν ἔργα). The rites themselves were performed by men, but Iamblichus maintained that it was the gods who directed the work. Theurgy was supposed to intensify the presence on earth of higher beings through the performance of specifically designed rituals, and though this may sound more magical than Platonic, Iamblichus argued that theurgy had nothing to do with sorcery (τοῖς γόησιν) (*De mysteriis* [DM] 161.10–16)¹ or wonder-working (θαυματοουργία DM 175.13f.).² Theurgy employed ritual to subordinate man to the divine will — precisely the opposite of sorcery. For Iamblichus, theurgic rites revealed the vestiges of a divine presence. That presence was ineffable, but what lay beyond man’s intellectual grasp could nevertheless be entered and achieved through ritual *action*, which is why Iamblichus argued that theurgy transcended all intellectual endeavors. In his defense of theurgy in the *De mysteriis*, Iamblichus’ description of theurgic

¹ *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, cited in the essay as *DM*. The standard edition is E. des Places, *Jamblique: Les mystères d’Égypte* (Paris 1966). Also useful is Thomas Taylor’s translation: *Iamblichus on the Mysteries of the Egyptians* (2nd ed.; London 1895). The text of *DM* 161.10–16 is as follows: Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν ἂν τις θαυμάσειε καὶ ἄλλα τῆς ἀντιλογικῆς καινοτομίας, ἀτὰρ δὴ καὶ τὴν ἐναντίωσιν τῶν δοξασμάτων καταπληγείη ἂν εἰκότως, εἰ τῆς ὅλης ὑποθέσεως φαινομένης μόνον παρὰ τοῖς γόησιν, οὔσης δ’ οὐδαμῶς, καὶ παρὰ τοῖς ἐκ πάθους ἢ νοσήματος ὀρηκμένοις, ἀπατηλῶς πάντη διακειμένοις, τολμᾷ λέγειν ὡς ἐνεστί καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας αὐτοὺς τυγχάνειν.

² ὥστε εἰδέναι μὲν χρὴ καὶ ταύτην τὴν θαυματοουργίαν τίνα ἔχει φύσιν, χρῆσθαι δὲ ἢ πιστεῦειν αὐτῇ μηδαμῶς.

rituals assumes a perplexing variety of expressions, and the baroque quality of this text has done little to help solve the enigma of how and why religious rituals were introduced into the Platonic curriculum. Hence, the *De mysteriis* has elicited many conflicting interpretations of the role of ritual in philosophical religion.

I will briefly review recent scholarship on theurgy, in order to place Iamblichus' work in a perspective which I hope more genuinely reflects his understanding. The enigma of theurgy, unfortunately, has been made even more perplexing by modern scholars who have imposed their values on it as the criteria for understanding, distorting Iamblichus to fit the suppositions of our own world-view. I hope to resolve some of these difficulties by approaching the problem in a new, and perhaps 'old,' way, in order that further studies of theurgy might be based on principles drawn from the work of Iamblichus himself.

II. THE THEURGICAL DEBATE

The confusion surrounding theurgy is not new. Neoplatonic theurgy has been the subject of controversy and debate from the time Iamblichus integrated it into the Platonic tradition. Porphyry was the first Platonist to discuss theurgy; he held that theurgic rites were useful only as a means to purify the lower soul.³ Iamblichus, with a significantly different notion of 'soul,' believed theurgic rites possessed the highest degree of initiatory power. Damascius attests this divergence in the Platonic tradition in his commentary on the *Phaedo*, where he says: '... some, such as Plotinus, Porphyry, and many others honor philosophy more highly, while Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus, and the theurgists give more honor to the hieratic art.'⁴ Philosophy, for Iamblichus, meant the art of demonstrating truths through intellectual discourse; theurgy, however, neither demonstrated nor proved but lifted the soul directly into the divine. Simply put, philosophy educated and was a human art, theurgy initiated through the power of the gods.

As Damascius reports, Neoplatonists such as Proclus followed Iamblichus and believed theurgy to be the crown of Platonic virtues, that which transformed man into a divine being.⁵ With few exceptions, the leading Platonists after

³ Porphyry, *De regressu animae* 27.21–28.15.

⁴ "Οτι οἱ μὲν τὴν φιλοσοφίαν προτιμῶσιν, ὥς Πορφύριος καὶ Πλωτῖνος καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ φιλόσοφοι · οἱ δὲ τὴν ἱερατικὴν, ὥς Ιάμβλιχος καὶ Συριανὸς καὶ Πρόκλος καὶ οἱ ἱερατικοὶ πάντες (L. G. Westerink, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo* II, *Damascius* [Amsterdam 1977] 105).

⁵ In *DM* 270.14–19 Iamblichus says that in theurgy the soul is lifted up into higher orders and is 'entirely separated' (*χωρίζεται παντάπασιν*) from its participation in generated life.

Iamblichus held to his view of theurgy, and post-Iamblichian Neoplatonism should rightly be called a 'hieratic' school. It is a curious fact that Neoplatonism today is identified with Plotinus and an intellectual mysticism which denied formal religious worship, for in the history of the tradition Plotinus stands nearly alone in this attitude.⁶ In fact, Neoplatonism was far more influenced by the Syrian Iamblichus and his theurgical mysticism than by Plotinus. Yet theurgy strikes the post-Enlightenment mind as a turgid confusion compared with the 'anti-ritualist' stance of Plotinus, whose statement concerning worship of the gods, '... it is for the gods to come to me, not for me to come to them,'⁷ resonates with modern sensibilities free from the 'superstitions' of religion. Consequently, Iamblichus and his school have been condemned or ignored.

Outside the Platonic tradition the reports on theurgy are no less diverse. Augustine, who was familiar with Porphyry's critique, condemned theurgy as an invention of lying demons, devised to turn souls away from the worship of the true god.⁸ For the bishop of Hippo, there was but one sacred praxis, and this was mediated by Christ and His Church; all others were demonic. The pseudo-Dionysius, however, described the same Christian sacraments as *theurgic* mysteries (τὰ θεοῦργα μυστήρια)⁹ and Christ as the 'principle' (ἀρχή) and 'essence' (οὐσία) 'of every theurgy.'¹⁰ It may be argued that Dionysius' use of the term *θεουργία* (which appears 47 times in the corpus) had a different sense than seen in Iamblichian circles; yet there is strong evidence to suggest that Dionysius was the student of Proclus,¹¹ and if so, his understanding of the Christian sacraments must have been informed by Proclus' hieratic Neoplatonism.

In theurgy the soul exchanges (ἀλλάσσεται) one life (in the world of generation and mortality) for another (in the divine and immortal), and is established there, having entirely abandoned the former.

⁶ For the influence of Iamblichus on later Neoplatonism see J. Bidez, *La Vie de l'Empereur Julien* (Paris 1930) chaps. 11 ('Chez les disciples de Jamblique') and 12 ('Theurgie Chaldaique et mystères néo-platoniciennes'). Also see Ilsetraut Hadot, *Le problème du néoplatonisme alexandrin — Hiérocles et Simplicius* (Paris 1978) 94–99, 103–109.

⁷ Porphyry, *The Life of Plotinus* 10. A. H. Armstrong's conjecture that Plotinus' remark was directed toward sublunary spirits and not the Gods of the Platonic cosmos is probably correct: see *Plotinus* I (Cambridge, Mass. 1966) 34f. Nevertheless, the modern appropriation of Plotinus' remarks overlooks the subtlety of Armstrong's explanation, and Plotinus' response to Amelius has been taken as the statement of a heroic rationalist in the face of an increasingly superstitious age (see E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* [Berkeley 1951] 286).

⁸ *De civitate Dei* 10.10.

⁹ Epist. 9. 1 (PG 3.1108A) cf. Henri-Dominique Saffrey, 'New Objective Links between the Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus,' *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. J. O'Meara (Norfolk Va. 1982) 72.

¹⁰ *Eccl. Hier.* 1.1. (PG 3.372A).

¹¹ See Saffrey 72.

Whatever Platonists or Christians of Late Antiquity thought about theurgy, all parties spoke of it in extremes: it was the work of Satan or of Christ, it lifted the soul beyond mortal bounds or tied it to material daimons. Such strong attestations suggest that theurgy was an issue which defined fundamental differences in the attitude of late antique thinkers toward their place in the world and in their sense of responsibility as embodied souls. Even today, the topic of theurgy tends to polarize thinkers into opposing camps. On the one hand, there are those who have embraced theurgic 'lore' as their own, the 'spiritual underground' of Western religious traditions: Theosophists, Rosicrucians, and 'magicians,' such as the students of twentieth-century 'magus' Aleister Crowley, who praise Iamblichus and appropriate theurgy as a legitimization of their own practices and beliefs.¹² These esoteric groups, particularly those who specialize in ritual magic, see themselves within the tradition of Iamblichus, and it may be due in part to their overzealous appropriations of theurgy that the school of Iamblichus has received such bad press in the scholarly world.

A study of Iamblichus and theurgy cannot avoid treating, if only indirectly, these modern spiritualists and 'magoi,' who believe themselves heirs of heiratic Neoplatonism. It is not surprising, then, that the first modern scholar to study later Neoplatonism carefully was a life-long member of Britain's Psychological Research Society and attended many spiritualist seances: the classicist E. R. Dodds, author of what is still the most influential study of theurgy, 'Theurgy and its Relation to Neoplatonism.'¹³ Dodds seems to have accepted the interpretation of theurgy alleged by modern magicians, for he explains the sacred rites of Iamblichus' school by comparing them to modern spiritualist phenomena.¹⁴ For Dodds, himself a skeptic of the claims of spiritualists,¹⁵ theurgy was the 'spiritualism' of Late Antiquity and represented the corruption of

¹² Israel Regardie says, '... I hope to show that the technique of Magic is in closest accord with the traditions of highest antiquity, and that it possesses the sanction, expressed or implicitly, of the best authorities. Iamblichus, the divine Theurgist, has much to say in his various writings about Magic . . .' (*The Tree of Life* [New York 1969] 36). Among occultists, however, there are disagreements as to the uses of theurgy, and Regardie used the writings of Iamblichus to defend his practice of ritual magic against the charge of 'psychism' brought by Theosophist critics. The weakness of such appropriations of theurgy is the lack of regard for intellectual and historical contexts, and what results is often an eclectic mix reflecting the personal interests of the author. Nevertheless, such works should not be ignored by scholars, not only because they evidence modern appropriations of theurgy, however distorted, but also because of the sometimes valuable insights of authors such as Regardie. See, for example, his interesting discussion of the dangers of intellectualizing theurgical practice (*op. cit.* 80ff.).

¹³ *Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1941) 55–69; cf. *The Greeks and the Irrational* 288.

¹⁴ *The Greeks and the Irrational* 297ff.

¹⁵ See *Missing Persons* (Oxford 1977) 97–111.

Platonic rationalism with Oriental superstitions. He sums it up as a misguided attempt to control the gods and fate through magic: 'As vulgar magic is commonly the last resort of the personally desperate, of those whom man and god have alike failed, so theurgy became the refuge of a despairing intelligentsia which already felt "*la fascination de l'abîme*"'¹⁶. Dodds, however, acknowledged the 'theoretical' contributions of Iamblichus to be of fundamental importance to the vitality of Neoplatonism.¹⁷ In a mathematical context, Samuel Sambursky praises Iamblichus as a 'theoretic genius.'¹⁸ Yet, his $\pi\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$, theurgy, is dismissed by Sambursky as the cultural baggage of a superstitious age, and condemned by Dodds as the 'corruption' of Plotinus' rational mysticism.¹⁹ This is the pejorative perspective in which scholars have been working for over thirty years; only recently has the Iamblichian school of Neoplatonism been studied as a legitimate development within the Platonic tradition.

Recent studies of theurgy are distinguished by their effort to render more intelligible the $\pi\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$ of later Neoplatonism. Festugière suggested a psychological hypothesis: that theurgy, cast in the figurative imagery of traditional myths, fulfilled a need felt by Platonists for exercising a child-like piety that would complement the 'reflective' piety of philosophic contemplation.²⁰ Festugière and Hans Lewy argue that there were two kinds of 'ascent' to union with the divine recognized by the Neoplatonists: philosophic, by way of contemplation, and theurgic, by means of ritual.²¹ Lewy's distinction, however, is less clear than Festugière's, because he contends that the stages of contemplation had already been conflated with ritual language by the Chaldaean Platonists of the second century.²²

The weakness of Festugière's analysis is that it contradicts what both Iamblichus and Proclus said of the relation between theurgy and philosophy;²³

¹⁶ *The Greeks and the Irrational* 288.

¹⁷ Proclus, *The Elements of Theology* (Oxford 1963) xix.

¹⁸ *The Physical World of Late Antiquity* (New York 1965) 47.

¹⁹ Dodds, 'Iamblichus,' *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford 1970) 538.

²⁰ Festugière asserts that his distinction between 'reflective piety' and 'popular piety' 'peuvent se rencontrer en une même âme' ('Proclus et la religion traditionnelle,' *Études de philosophie grecque* [Paris 1971] 577). He says that theurgy was a form of 'popular piety' fulfilling 'la nostalgie d'une piété toute simple' (*ibid.* 584).

²¹ Festugière, 'Contemplation philosophique et art théurgique chez Proclus,' *ibid.* 596; Hans Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* (ed. Michel Tardieu; Paris 1978) 462.

²² Lewy 175.

²³ The value of theurgy in post-Iamblichian Neoplatonism is demonstrated in their discussion of the hierarchy of virtues. Porphyry systematized the four virtues on the basis of Plotinus' discussion of them; in his treatment, the highest virtue was called 'paradigmatic,' and was ranked above political, cathartic, and contemplative virtues. Iamblichus, however, called the highest virtue 'theurgic'; he was followed in this by his successors. See Ilsetraut Hadot's discussion of the 'virtues' in Neoplatonism, *Le problème* 152f.

in this regard, Jean Trouillard's two studies on Proclus as Platonist and theurgist are a great help.²⁴ Contrary to Dodds' position as well as to Festugière's, Trouillard argues that theurgy did not in any way reflect a softening of Neoplatonic thinking, but arose out of the Neoplatonists' profound reflections on the limits of rational understanding and the consequent need for man to have a discipline which carried him beyond those limits.²⁵ Trouillard's chapter 'La théurgie' in his study *L'un et l'âme selon Proclus*²⁶ is probably the best introduction to the world-view of Neoplatonic theurgy. Against the background of his analysis of Plato's dialectic in Proclus, Trouillard shows how theurgy was understood — and remains understandable — as an outgrowth of this dialectic and as a development of negative theology by the Neoplatonists. He stresses theurgy's non-manipulative aspect, and uses Plato's myth of the procession of the gods in the *Phaedrus* to explain the cosmological structure in which theurgy worked.²⁷ The hypothesis of 'two ways' of ascent was rejected by Trouillard, who sees, in later Neoplatonism, one integral path leading from moral purifications to contemplation and finally to theurgy, which brought about the *unio mystica*.²⁸ To Trouillard's credit, this is precisely what the Neoplatonists themselves said.²⁹ Rather than standing outside their thought-world and judging it with post-Enlightenment criteria, Trouillard enters the subtlety of the Neoplatonists' philosophical reflections and reveals the limits of the reflective process that they discovered. It was this discovery which led to the introduction of theurgic rites, whose validity Trouillard accepts without embarrassment, because he understands the thinking which led to it.

Trouillard's invitation to enter the world-view of later Neoplatonism, however, has not been entirely well-received, in part because his scholarship bears much similarity in style to the Neoplatonists he studies. So his work has been criticized, as well as praised, for its Neoplatonic tone.³⁰ With regard to theurgy, Trouillard has never attempted to make an exhaustive study of the

²⁴ 'Les merveilles dans la vie et la pensée de Proclus,' *Revue Philosophique* 163 (1973) 493–52 (= *La mystagogie de Proclus* [Paris 1982] 33–51); 'La théurgie,' *L'un et l'âme selon Proclus* (Paris 1972) 171–89.

²⁵ *L'un et l'âme* 171.

²⁶ See above, n. 24.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 186–89.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 177.

²⁹ See above, nn. 5 and 23.

³⁰ A. H. Armstrong has praised Trouillard's work repeatedly, and finds that his supposed 'invention' of a 'neo-Neoplatonism' reflects the depth of Trouillard's insight into Neoplatonic thought. See 'Negative Theology, Myth and Incarnation,' *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* 213. For a more critical appraisal of Trouillard's 'Neoplatonizing,' see A. Charles, 'La Raison et le divin chez Proclus,' *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 53 (1969) 412f.

subject, but has simply outlined its principal theses.³¹ A more exhaustive study of theurgy, one that pays special attention to Iamblichus' arguments, is the excellent work of Andrew Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition*, in which he corrects the distorted impression of Iamblichus as depraved occultist and gives the *De mysteriis* more serious attention than it has yet received.³² Smith's work is probably the study of theurgy that has been most influential among Anglo-American scholars, because he provides a vocabulary by which the seeming chaos of Neoplatonic hieratic practices are given a semblance of order. Smith borrowed his terms from Laurence Rosan, who divided theurgy into practical and theoretic modes, which he called 'lower' and 'higher' theurgy.³³ In Rosan's model, lower theurgy included the use of ritual objects and gestures, whose sensible affects made it suitable for the common man still bound by gross appetites and sensations. Higher theurgy, however, transcended the use of objects and gestures, and was a theoretical activity more or less like Plotinian *θεωρία*.³⁴ Smith found Rosan's division too simplistic, and bases his critique on a careful reading of the *De mysteriis*, which, he says, suggests that there was some kind of ritual element even in higher theurgy. Rather than distinguishing theurgy simply by its 'ritual' component, Smith emphasized the 'direction' of its activity, so that higher theurgy, equivalent to Plotinian *θεωρία*, moved vertically, linking man with the gods through the power of *φιλία*, while lower theurgy moved horizontally and was restricted to the material world of humans and daimons bound by *σμπάθεια*.³⁵

Smith's description of the underlying similarities in Plotinus' and Iamblichus' approach to mystical union suggests persuasively that their differences were more semantic than substantive. Both emphasized that the *ένωσις* of the soul with the divine was caused entirely by the divine, while the soul's action was merely receptive or preparatory.³⁶ Smith follows Iamblichus' explanation of theurgy in the *De mysteriis*, which supports neither Dodds' portrayal of theurgy as an attempt to manipulate the gods, nor the views of Rosan and perhaps Lewy,³⁷ who relegated ritual to lower theurgy only. Yet

³¹ *L'un et l'autre* 173.

³² *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague 1974) 81–99.

³³ *The Philosophy of Proclus* (New York 1949) 213ff.

³⁴ Rosan 213ff.

³⁵ See Smith 90: '... It seems better to define lower theurgy as restricted to the area of *σμπάθεια*, the material world of humans and daemones. It is essentially a horizontal relationship. Higher theurgy involves the linking of man with his superiors, the gods, not through *σμπάθεια*, but through *φιλία*.'

³⁶ Smith 85ff.

³⁷ Lewy 462.

Smith retains the most significant part of this model, the high–low terminology, which leaves several problems unsolved:

1. First, high–low terminology seems to indicate there are better and worse forms of theurgy; if so, it calls for a clear criterion on which to base this distinction. Smith begins his treatment by discussing the ‘direction’ of theurgy, vertical or horizontal; he then speaks of the ‘ontological level’ of the operation and the ‘inner disposition’ of the theurgist,³⁸ and finally attempts to explain the role of ritual in magic, in contrast to its role in lower and higher theurgies. However, his remarks are sometimes contradictory and remain inconclusive.³⁹
2. Second, even if Smith’s equation of high theurgy with Plotinian *θεωρία* is accepted, we are still left with the task of explaining low theurgy. Though he appears to solve the problem of theurgy’s status *vis-à-vis* Plotinian contemplation, Smith’s solution simply shifts the locus of the problem to that of low theurgy’s relation to high theurgy. He fails to explain what unites the ritual-laden, horizontal rites of the common man with the less material and vertically oriented cult of the élite. Thus we are brought back to the problem of explaining how a Platonist philosopher could have practiced a ‘low’ theurgy;

³⁸ Smith 99.

³⁹ By adhering to a distinction of high and low theurgy, Smith seems to me to be forced into making contradictory statements. For example, after distinguishing high and low theurgy on the basis of the distinction between a ‘horizontal’ relation of the believer to divine reality (*συμπάθεια*) and a ‘vertical’ one (*φιλία*) (90), Smith notes that without the connective presence of *φιλία* lower theurgy would have no basis, for it is *φιλία* which connects the gods with the world (94). Since the only means for manifesting the supra-cosmic gods was through the unity and sympathy of the material world, the theurgies which worked in both orders (supra- and en-cosmic) had the same divine cause and were integrally related. Yet because Smith accepts Dodds’ view that theurgical divination was merely mediumistic (89) and thus unworthy of comparison to Plotinian *νόησις*, he is forced to emphasize low theurgy’s diminished status, geared to material needs, etc., in order to save the exalted status of high theurgy.

Smith distinguishes lower theurgy from the sympathetic magical rites criticized by Plotinus: ‘Magic in Plotinus is not really the same as even the lower theurgy of Iamblichus, since it is not really concerned with the *salvation of the soul* in any sense’ (122). Yet in his conclusion, where he discusses the presence of ritual in high theurgy, Smith says: ‘It is not enough to say that they [Iamblichus and Proclus] adopted a higher theurgy which was non-ritual. Although there is less direct manipulation of the forces in material objects in what we are calling the “higher” theurgy, there does remain a ritual element in at least some of its branches. The real distinctive mark is found in *the difference of goal*. There is a theurgy which concerns itself with worldly or material benefits from the intramundane gods working through sympathy, and another higher type of theurgy which makes use of the lower level of reality but which transcends it. The human agent is raised to the divine level by *φιλία* and communes with the transcendent gods for immaterial benefits which concern the very *salvation of the soul* and union with the divine’ (149, my emphasis). What Smith has done is to distinguish lower theurgy from higher by using the same criterion with which he distinguishes lower theurgy from magic.

for Iamblichus admits to practicing such rites and, moreover, asserted that *all* theurgy transcended intellectual comprehension.

3. Third, Smith's division of theurgy into high and low forms is based on his assumption that Iamblichus 'believed and accepted the magico-religious practices of his times and attempted to incorporate them into Neoplatonism.'⁴⁰ The admission of these 'sinister rites,'⁴¹ Smith contends, was a 'regrettable corollary' of Iamblichus' otherwise 'genuinely spiritual tendencies.'⁴²

In response to Smith's work, Anne Sheppard has recently added one more level to his two-tiered model of theurgy.⁴³ Sheppard limits her discussion to Proclean theurgy and finds a correspondence between his description of the degrees of theurgy and the *μανία* described in Plato's *Phaedrus*, as interpreted by Syrianus.⁴⁴ Sheppard understands Proclus to have described three levels of theurgy: 1) theurgy concerned with human affairs, 'white magic' ; 2) theurgy that makes the soul intellectually active; and, 3) theurgy that brings about mystical union, for which there is no ritual component.⁴⁵ Sheppard's work is influenced by her studies of Proclus' commentaries on poetic inspiration in the *Republic*; her description of the 'theoretical basis of theurgy' is especially valuable in showing how the contemplative experience of unification was amenable to a theurgical explanation, albeit a 'lofty' one.⁴⁶

Though both Smith's and Sheppard's work on theurgy has corrected Dodds' summary condemnation, they continue to accept unexamined his basic premise that ritual is inferior to rational contemplation. This, I believe, reflects a post-Enlightenment prejudice that ritual behavior exhibits a more 'primitive' and 'lower' stage in man's evolution than 'pure' thought, one from which Western man has already evolved. Smith's otherwise careful study of theurgy is hindered by this presumption, for it has led him to adopt a methodological structure inadequate to the material he has examined. Due to his thoroughness, however, Smith's study remains valuable, because he unwittingly proves the inadequacy of his own analysis. His division of theurgy into high and low forms simply does not help to explain how Iamblichus and other hieratic Neoplatonists could have practiced 'lower' theurgy in a 'genuinely spiritual' way; nor do I think we can assume, with Smith, that these lower theurgic rites were 'sinister' or 'regrettable.'⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Smith 89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 90

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ 'Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy,' *Classical Quarterly* 32 (1982) 212-24.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 214ff.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 217.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 221.

⁴⁷ Smith 89f.

Sheppard is right in saying that Iamblichus' and Proclus' theurgy 'deserve separate treatment,'⁴⁸ yet she, even more than Smith, reduces theurgy to a mysticism imagined as progressive mental abstraction, denying materiality and corporeality to advanced degrees of spiritual union. This kind of schematization ignores the emphasis made by both Proclus and Iamblichus on *προᾶξις*, the theurgical *action* which traces the descent of the divine into matter: a descent which, in any context, transcends intellectual schematization. I am not suggesting an entirely agnostic attitude toward Neoplatonic theurgy. But in order to understand it properly, we should, like Trouillard, follow the principles of the Neoplatonists themselves as guides for studying their work. This demands that we learn to share their sacramental world-view, not in opposition to the intellectual rigors of Platonism (or of scholarship), but as the matrix which, they believed, nourished their intellectual tradition.

Some of the questions raised by modern scholars can best be treated by turning to Iamblichus himself, for these were the kinds of issues Porphyry had raised in his letter to Anebo, to which the *De mysteriis* was an extensive reply. In an often-quoted passage which outlines the theurgic method, Iamblichus writes:

Intellectual understanding does not connect theurgists with divine beings, for what would prevent those who philosophize theoretically from having theurgic union with the gods? But this is not true; rather, it is the perfect accomplishment of ineffable acts, religiously performed and beyond all understanding, and it is the power of ineffable symbols comprehended by the gods alone, that establishes theurgical union. Thus we do not perform these acts intellectually; for then their efficacy would be intellectual and would depend on us, neither of which is true. In fact, these very symbols, by themselves, perform their own work, without our thinking; and the ineffable power of the gods to whom these symbols elevate us, recognizes by itself its own images. It is not awakened to this by our thinking. (*DM* 96.13–97.9)⁴⁹

Iamblichus emphasizes here that theurgic union is not an intellectual enterprise. Through the performance of ineffable acts endowed with powerful symbols, the soul is granted a divinization that would remain a mere speculative

⁴⁸ Sheppard 214.

⁴⁹ οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡ ἔννοια συνάπτει τοῖς θεοῖς τοὺς θεουργοὺς· ἐπεὶ τί ἐκώλυε τοὺς θεωρητικῶς φιλοσοφούντας ἔχειν τὴν θεουργικὴν ἔνωσιν; πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς; νῦν δ' οὐκ ἔχει τό γε ἀληθὲς οὕτως· ἀλλ' ἡ τῶν ἔργων τῶν ἀρρήτων καὶ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν νόησιν θεοπρεπῶς ἐνεργουμένων τελεσιουργία ἢ τε τῶν νοουμένων τοῖς θεοῖς μόνον συμβόλων ἀφθέγκτων δυνάμεις ἐντίθησι τὴν θεουργικὴν ἔνωσιν. Διόπερ οὐδὲ τῷ νοεῖν αὐτὰ ἐνεργοῦμεν· ἔσται γὰρ οὕτω νοερά αὐτῶν ἡ ἐνέργεια καὶ ἀφ' ἡμῶν ἐνδιδομένη· τὸ δ' οὐδέτερόν ἐστιν ἀληθές. Καὶ γὰρ μὴ νοούντων ἡμῶν αὐτὰ τὰ συνθήματα ἀφ' ἑαυτῶν δορᾷ τὸ οἰκεῖον ἔργον, καὶ ἡ τῶν θεῶν, πρὸς οὓς ἀνήκει ταῦτα, ἀρρητος δύναμις αὐτῇ ἀφ' ἑαυτῆς ἐπιγινώσκει τὰς οἰκείας εἰκόνας, ἀλλ' οὐ τῷ διεγείρεσθαι ὑπὸ τῆς ἡμετέρας νοήσεως·

possibility for the intellect. Trouillard has noted that the *ex opere operato* understanding of the efficacy of Christian sacraments is prefigured in this passage, and he contends that theurgy and the sacraments respond to the same problem: how to provide the human person with a bridge to the absolute which remains beyond the grasp of human intellect.⁵⁰

The similarity to Christian sacramentalism has caused scholars such as Bidez, Wallis, and de Vogel to speculate that theurgy may have been the way Neoplatonists attempted to compete with the sacramental cult of Christianity and the revealed *logia* of Jesus. With theurgy, the Platonist also could offer to the common man a divinely revealed cult, and a sacred text in the Chaldaean Oracles.⁵¹ Admittedly, it would seem that Iamblichus' apology for animal sacrifice (*DM* 215.3–7),⁵² for chanting unintelligible vowels (*DM* 254.15)⁵³ and ritually arranging stones and herbs (*DM* 166.16f.),⁵⁴ implied theurgy was in some way a concession to the religious needs of the common man, a 'Platonism' tailored for a popular audience, of which Platonism proper had no need. This is the kind of thinking that underlies the contemporary division of theurgy into high and low forms; but it contradicts the general view of Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus, and other hieratic Neoplatonists, who believed that theurgy was the result of a more unified insight into the mysteries of the One, not a concession to lesser minds.⁵⁵

Theurgy was, for them, the highest virtue, that which lifted men up to the gods; its articulation by Iamblichus was understood by his school to come out of his reflection on Platonic themes in light of Neopythagorean arithmology, and, more importantly, out of his direct experience of these principles as they were concretely embodied in Egyptian and Chaldaean ritual. Theurgy was the fulfillment and the embodied complement of the law of procession, developed by Proclus in Proposition 57 of the *Elements of Theology*: the higher and more

⁵⁰ Jean Trouillard, 'Sacraments: La théurgie païenne,' *Encyclopaedia Universalis* (Paris 1968–73) 582.

⁵¹ See Joseph Bidez, 'Le philosophe Jamblique et son école,' *Revue des Études Grecques* 32 (1919) 35; R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (London 1972) 105ff.; Corneille de Vogel, 'Plotinus' Image of Man: Its Relationship to Plato as well as to Later Neoplatonism,' *Images of Man in Ancient and Medieval Thought*, ed. G. Verbeke (Louvain 1976) 167f.

⁵² ἡμᾶς τε ἀνάγει διὰ τῶν θυσιῶν καὶ τοῦ θνητοῦ πυρὸς πρὸς τὸ τῶν θεῶν πῦρ κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ τῇ τοῦ πυρὸς ἀναγωγῇ τῇ πρὸς τὸ πῦρ ἐπαγομένη καὶ ἀνελκούσῃ τὰ καταγωγὰ κἀντίτυπα πρὸς τὰ θεῖα καὶ τὰ οὐράνια. Cf. Ταῦτα τοίνυν κατιδοῦσα ἡ θεουργικὴ τέχνη, κοινῶς τε οὕτως κατ' οἰκειότητα ἐκάστω τῶν θεῶν τὰς προσφόρους ὑποδοχὰς ἀνευρίσκουσα, συμπλέκει πολλάκις λίθους βοτάνας ζῶα ἀρώματα ἄλλα τοιαῦτα ἱερὰ καὶ τέλεια καὶ θεοειδῆ, κἄπειτα ἀπὸ πάντων τούτων ὑποδοχὴν ὀλοτελῆ καὶ καθαρὰν ἀπεργάζεται (*DM* 233.11–16).

⁵³ Τί γὰρ βούλεται τὰ ἄσμη ὀνόματα πυνθάνη · τὰ δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν ἄσμη, δὲ σὺ νενόμικας ·

⁵⁴ τὸ γὰρ λίθους καὶ βοτάνας φέρειν τοὺς καλουμένους, δεσμεῖν τε. See n. 52.

⁵⁵ See above, nn. 5 and 23.

unified a principle, the wider its extent.⁵⁶ Because theurgy provided souls with a more direct, simplified participation in the One, it had a wider circle of application, as much available to the common man as to the intellectual. So, rather than falling outside the circumference of Platonism, theurgy was understood by Iamblichus and Proclus to penetrate to a deeper center, which extended the boundaries of the Platonic world. As a Platonist, Iamblichus was concerned that theurgical *πρᾶξις* did not contradict the authority of Plato; his portrayal of theurgy may be appreciated as the development of certain principles in the dialogues, in order to reach new dimensions in their application. It is only in this sense that we may understand the respect rendered to *θεῖος Ἰάμβλιχος* by his successors, some of whom put Plato and Iamblichus in a class by themselves.⁵⁷

Certain themes from the Platonic dialogues may indeed serve as a bridge for understanding Neoplatonic theurgy, for they provided Iamblichus' theoretic justification for his bringing Egyptian and Chaldaean rites into the Platonic curriculum. Theurgy, in turn, throws light on some Platonic themes, because it provided a concrete and practical solution to the problem of embodiment which Plato left unsolved.⁵⁸ This theme of embodiment, and of the descent of the soul, lie at the heart of understanding theurgy; depending on one's solution to this problem, the world and matter, all one's embodied existence, could be seen either as a punishment and burden or as an opportunity to cooperate in manifesting the divine.⁵⁹ Theurgy (*θεουργία*), as its etymology suggests,

⁵⁶ See E. R. Dodds, *Proclus, Elements of Theology* 54–57 and 230ff. John Dillon discusses this theme in greater detail ('Origen's Doctrine of the Trinity and Some Later Neoplatonic Theories,' *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* 22f.), and draws a distinction between Iamblichus' view that all higher principles are present in lower levels, though the higher a principle the more 'piercing' or 'intense' its presence, and Proclus' view that higher principles extend further in proportion to their elevation. For both Iamblichus and Proclus, this theme would provide justification for 'material' theurgy. So Dillon writes: 'The theory speculates that, in a powerful sense, the lower down the scale of nature an entity is situated, the more closely it is linked with higher principles. This provides excellent philosophical justification for making use of stones, plants, and animals in the performance of magical rituals; they are actually nearer to one god or another than we are, being direct products of the divine realm' (22f.). An example of this principle may be seen in *DM* 59.9–15.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Julian, *Oration* 146B. On the exalted status given Iamblichus by Priscianus, Carlos Steel, *The Changing Self* (Brussels 1978) 142ff.

⁵⁸ E. R. Dodds, *Pagan & Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York 1965) 1–37, esp. 24f.

⁵⁹ De Vogel has written an important article correcting misconceptions in our understanding of Plato's view of the body as a 'tomb.' She argues that, for Plato, the body was not simply the soul's prison but provided the soul with its limits, its enclosure (*περίβολος*), 'in order that it might be saved' (*Crat.* 400c). See C. J. de Vogel, 'The ΣΩΜΑ–ΣΕΜΑ Formula: its Function in Plato and Plotinus Compared to Christian Writers,' *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought* (London 1981) 79–99.

exemplifies the latter solution, for in theurgic rites man became the instrument and beneficiary of the gods.⁶⁰

III. EMBODIMENT OF THE SOUL AND THE ROLE OF THEURGY

In his *Commentary on the Soul*, Iamblichus discusses the views of Numenius, Porphyry, and Plotinus, who believed that the soul leaves a portion of itself in the divine world when it becomes incarnate. Subsequently, as Porphyry said, one need only purify the 'lower' soul in order for it to be lifted into the 'higher' soul, which never fell from the divine.⁶¹ Iamblichus attacks this view as un-platonic, citing the passage in the *Timaeus* where the soul is described as the mean between intelligible and sensible realms,⁶² containing the proportions whereby the intelligible is allowed to enter the sensible and the sensible is allowed to receive it. Functioning as a kind of cosmogonic prism, according to Iamblichus, the soul embraces the sum total of universal reasons, as it extends them into manifestation, and thus aids the god in the creation and salvation of the world.⁶³

In his commentary on the passage in the *Timaeus* that describes the soul's embodiment, Iamblichus again argues for the complete descent of the soul and cites a passage from the *Phaedrus* in which the soul's charioteer — its highest part — is said to ascend and descend alternately:

And if the charioteer is the highest element in us, and he, as is said in the *Phaedrus*, sometimes is carried aloft and raises 'his head into the region outside'⁶⁴ while at other times he descends and fills his pair with lameness and moulting, it plainly follows that the highest element in us experiences different states at different times.⁶⁵

In short, the soul does not leave a portion of itself behind unchanged when it is embodied.

The debate on the soul's embodied status was central to Iamblichus' justification of theurgy, for if the soul never completely descends, then it already has the means to reascend and has no need of divine assistance through theurgic

⁶⁰ Trouillard, 'Sacraments' 582.

⁶¹ Porphyry, *De regressu animae* 27.21–28.15.

⁶² Stobaeus 1.365.5–366.11 (Wachsmuth). See Festugière's translation and commentary: *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* III (Paris 1953) 184f.

⁶³ Stobaeus 1.365.5–366.11 (Wachsmuth).

⁶⁴ Iamblichus says that the soul's 'vision on its divine circuit should not be understood as the gaze of one to another. . . . The term "spectator" is used not to signify that it [the Intellect/helmsman of the soul] directs its gaze on this object of intellection as being other than it, but that it is united with it and appreciates it on that level . . .' (Frag. 6; tr. J. Dillon, *Iamblichi Chalcidensis Opera* [Leiden 1973] 97).

⁶⁵ Tr. Dillon 97.

rites. If the soul completely descends, however, its access to the divine must be detoured though the Many. Since the soul's task, according to Iamblichus, was to extend limit and form into unlimited matter, it could return to its origin only by fulfilling all of its charges: by allowing the One to return to itself through every mode of concealment which it has assumed in its manifest expression. Thus theurgy is necessary, from the embodied soul's point of view, because of the limitations imposed on it in manifesting a body, which separate it from immediate contact with the gods. Yet theurgy expresses a larger cosmogonic function as well, and its salvific power for embodied souls is complemented by its expression of cosmogonic principles. For Iamblichus, the psychological problem is also cosmological, since the Platonic soul has a necessary role in perfecting the work of the Demiurge. The soul's ascent and salvation is necessarily the salvation of the world.

A Neoplatonist cosmogony, after all, may be described as the successive inversion of higher principles; the Neopythagorean model for this was the unfolding of numbers from the One.⁶⁶ As principle and root of numbers, the One could bring them into existence only by inverting itself, by becoming 'not-one,' but 'two,' 'three,' and so on, thus generating the entire series of numbers in a concealed way. Iamblichus believed that the Egyptians had preserved the traces of the manifesting One in rites of initiation, so that by means of ritual the soul could re-enter its participation at more archaic levels of existence and awaken to its role in cosmogony: the simultaneous veiling and revealing of the One. As Neopythagorean arithmology showed that the One was inverted to generate numbers, so the World Soul and individual souls were inverted to bring about their embodied manifestations: the soul concealing and revealing itself in a body in the same way that the One concealed and revealed itself in numbers.

The theme of inversion is central to Plato and recurs throughout the dialogues. Most significantly, in the *Timaeus* the soul is said to be turned 'upside-down' in embodiment, with the result that it sees everything in an inverted

⁶⁶ For a discussion of Neopythagoreanism and its influence on Neoplatonic thought, see Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* IV (Paris 1953) 33ff. See also Iamblichus' discussion of the significance of 'one' (ἓν) in *Theologoumena arithmeticae* (ed. de Falco; Stuttgart 1975) 1–8. Trouillard explains how the mathematical model of creation allowed for a greater intimacy of the soul with the One. The Neoplatonists '... ont préféré le schème mathématique à l'image artisanale d'abord parce que ce schème suggérait une intériorité plus stricte entre les dérivés et leur principe, comme entre le nombre et l'unité. Ensuite, il éliminait la distinction du possible et du réel, de la finalité, de l'efficacité et de la causalité formelle. Il fournissait la loi de séries ordonnées. Enfin, il figurait le déroulement d'une intuition que, partant de plus simple, progresse du tout aux parties et du centre à la périphérie, alors que la démarche artisanale semble œuvrer par analyse et synthèse discursives' (*La mystagogie de Proclus*).

way (*Timaeus* 43e). The moral equivalent of this inversion is exemplified in the *Gorgias* where the man of self-interest, Callicles, says that if he were to follow the advice of Socrates his whole life would be turned ‘upside-down’ (*Gorgias* 481c). In the *Republic*, the critical moment of dialectic ascent is described as the ‘turning around of the soul’ (*Republic* 521c). This reversion of soul, Plato says in the *Timaeus*, is its true education, one which culminates in a mystical vision, which he evocatively portrayed in the myths of the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*. Iamblichus inherited this notion of Platonic παιδεία⁶⁷ and transformed the mythic function into theurgic rituals, which allowed souls to enact concretely their return to the divine.

In theurgy, the soul participates in perfecting the divine descent by putting on the ‘final touches’ that transform manifest chaos into cosmos; this cosmological transformation is the correlate of its task as embodied soul, since its healing, as soul, is realized only through its participation in perfecting the demiurgy of the world.⁶⁸ Although the principle of inversion in the realm of Being simply unfolds the One into existence, in the context of the individual soul it brings about the personal confusion and suffering of embodied experience. Iamblichus says, in the *De mysteriis*, that the expression of continuity and connection is entirely good in the ‘whole cosmos,’ but in individual parts ‘contacts are experienced with passion and exaggeration’ (*DM* 196.10).⁶⁹ It was precisely in order to integrate and balance these passions that much of the Platonic argument — and Neoplatonic theurgy — was developed; in Plato, however, this was described as a process of recollection awakened through sensible objects, while in Iamblichus it was formally developed into theurgic rituals.⁷⁰

Theurgic ascent is not an escape from the body and matter, but the fulfillment of corporeal ‘measures’ pre-established by the Demiurge in creation

⁶⁷ Polymnia Athanassiadi-Fowden, *Julian and Hellenism* (Oxford 1981) 125f.

⁶⁸ Stanislaus Breton discusses this theme in a short essay on the Chaldaean Oracles: ‘Plus exactement, et si séparée qu’on suppose, l’âme, en sa singularité psychique, ne peut parvenir à son ultime individualité anthropologique, bref ne peut se définir comme “homme,” qu’en traversant, et en faisant advenir, un interval d’univers. Elle doit se faire monde, avant et pour se faire homme’ (S. Breton, ‘L’homme et l’âme humain,’ *Diotima* 8 [1980] 21–24).

⁶⁹ μετὰ πάθους ποιεῖται τὴν ἀλληλουχίαν .

⁷⁰ Describing a similar development among Neoplatonizing Muslims, Henry Corbin says: ‘There appears to be no need to oppose this, as an inconsistency, to Platonism, which admitted a simple “excitation” on the part of the sensible, provoking the intellect to remember the knowledge that the Ideas had originally caused in our soul. For the fact is that, in our philosophers, the Platonic ideas have given place to angelology; . . . each sensible thing or species is the “theurgy” of its Angel The sensible species does not divert from the Angel but leads to the “place” of the encounter on condition that the soul seeks the encounter’ (H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* [tr. Willard Trask; Dallas 1980] 115f.).

(DM 65.6–14).⁷¹ This allows souls, in their embodied descent and submission to fate, to be liberated from the constraints of matter and fate through theurgic rites. ‘The gods,’ Iamblichus says, ‘. . . habituate the souls of theurgists, while still in bodies, to be detached from their bodies and be led round to their eternal and intelligible root’ (DM 41.5–11).⁷² Theurgic rites are not designed to combat fate, for the dictates of fate are the manifest expressions of the same divine law (*θεσμός*) that liberates souls from their embodied confusion. It is not fate or embodiment which souls need to overcome, but their inverted condition, and even this is the expression of a divine plan which includes their return. The liberation from fate, says Iamblichus, ‘is not effected contrary to any original sacred law, causing gods to be changed by the performance of a sacred rite, but from their first descent, God sent souls here in order that they would return to him’ (DM 272.6–10).⁷³ Thus, the soul’s ascent was already realized when it learned to descend within the ‘eternal measures’ (DM 65.6)⁷⁴ established by the Demiurge, measures preserved in the theurgic symbols and rites of sacred races such as the Egyptians (DM 249.12–250.8).⁷⁵ For Iamblichus, the embodiment of the soul was no more a ‘fall’ than was the manifestation of the One-Being from ineffable unity; though its corporeal medium of expression included more plurality, discontinuity, and suffering than it had previously known, all of this was not evil in itself but simply the cosmological terrain over which the soul was given charge (DM 35.8–36.5).⁷⁶

⁷¹ [ἡ ἀγιστεία] μιμεῖται δὲ τὴν τῶν θεῶν τάξιν, τὴν τε νοητὴν καὶ τὴν ἐν οὐρανῷ. Ἐχει δὲ μέτρα τῶν ὄντων αἰδία καὶ ἐνθήματα θαυμαστά, οἷα ἀπὸ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ καὶ πατρὸς τῶν ὄλων δεῦρο καταπεμφθέντα, οἷς καὶ τὰ μὲν ἀφθεγκτα διὰ συμβόλων ἀπορρήτων ἐκφωνεῖται, τὰ δὲ ἀνειδέα κρατεῖται ἐν εἰδεσι, τὰ δὲ πάσης εἰκόνης κρείττονα δι’ εἰκόνων ἀποτυπῶνται, πάντα δὲ διὰ θείας αἰτίας μόνης ἐπιτελεῖται, ἥτις τοσοῦτον κερῶριται τῶν παθῶν, ὥστε μὴδὲ λόγον αὐτῆς δυνατόν εἶναι ἐφάπτεσθαι.

⁷² Διὰ τῆς τοιαύτης οὐδὲν βουλήσεως ἀφθόνως οἱ θεοὶ τὸ φῶς ἐπιλάμπουσιν εὐμενεῖς ὄντες καὶ ἴλεω τοῖς θεουργοῖς, τὰς τε ψυχὰς αὐτῶν εἰς ἑαυτοὺς ἀνακαλούμενοι καὶ τὴν ἔνωσιν αὐταῖς τὴν πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς χορηγοῦντες, ἐθίζοντές τε αὐτὰς καὶ ἔτι ἐν σώματι οὐσας ἀφίστασθαι τῶν σωμάτων, ἐπὶ δὲ τὴν αἰδίων καὶ νοητὴν αὐτῶν ἀρχὴν περιάγεσθαι.

⁷³ . . . οὐδὲν παρὰ τὸν ἐξ ἀρχῆς τι θεσμὸν ἐπιτελεῖται ἐν τῷ τοιῷδε, ἵνα μεταστραφῶσιν οἱ οἱ θεοὶ κατὰ τὴν εἰς ὕστερον γιγνομένην ἱερουργίαν, ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ τῆς πρώτης καθόδου ἐπὶ τοῦ τῷ κατέπεμψεν ὁ θεὸς τὰς ψυχὰς, ἵνα πάλιν εἰς αὐτὸν ἐπανέλθωσιν.

⁷⁴ Ἐχει δὲ μέτρα τῶν ὄντων αἰδία καὶ ἐνθήματα θαυμαστά,

⁷⁵ πρῶτον δέ σοι βούλομαι τῶν Αἰγυπτίων τὸν τρόπον τῆς θεολογίας διεξημεῦσαι. οὗτοι γὰρ τὴν φύσιν τοῦ παντός καὶ τὴν δημιουργίαν τῶν θεῶν μιμούμενοι καὶ αὐτοὶ τῶν μυστικῶν καὶ ἀποκεκρυμμένων καὶ ἀφανῶν νοήσεων εἰκόνας τινὰς διὰ συμβόλων ἐκφαίνουσιν ὥσπερ καὶ ἡ φύσις τοῖς ἐμφανέσιν εἶδеси τοὺς ἀφανεῖς λόγους διὰ συμβόλων τρόπον τινὰ ἀπειτυπώσατο, ἡ δὲ τῶν θεῶν δημιουργία τὴν ἀλήθειαν τῶν ἰδεῶν διὰ τῶν φανερῶν εἰκόνων ὑπεγράφατο.

⁷⁶ Ἀλλ’ οὐδ’ ὅταν εἰς τὸ σῶμά ποτε παραγένηται, οὔτε αὐτὴ πάσχει οὔτε οἱ λόγοι οὕς δίδωσι τῷ σώματι. εἶδη γὰρ εἰσι καὶ οὗτοι ἀπλοὶ καὶ μονοειδεῖς, ταραχὴν οὐδεμίαν οὐδ’ ἔκστασιν ἀφ’ ἑαυτῶν εἰσδεχόμενοι. Αἰτία δὲ ὅν τὸ λοιπὸν γίγνεται τῷ συνθέτῳ τοῦ πά-

IV. NEGATIVE THEOLOGY AND ITS RELATION TO THEURGY

As a consequence of embodiment, the soul is unable to return to the divine by its own power, intellectual or otherwise. The replies of Iamblichus to Porphyry in the *De mysteriis* constitute a rigorous critique of the intellectual *ἔβρις* on this issue which Iamblichus sensed in Porphyry's questions. Because theurgy deified the soul through unification, it could not be defined as an intellectual activity; writes Iamblichus:

... contact with the divine is not knowledge. For knowledge is separated from its object by a kind of otherness. But prior to this knowledge which understands the other as other, there exists a self-generated, ... uniform embrace, suspended from the gods. (*DM* 8.3–6)⁷⁷

Theurgy awakened this pre-existing contact through rites which, by definition, were ineffable; if they could be understood, Iamblichus says, they would become a matter of conjecture, 'taking its point of departure in time' (*DM* 9.15).⁷⁸ Since the presence of the gods in souls was innate, their contact was pre-intellectual and could only be awakened through specific pre-intellectual acts.⁷⁹ Thus Iamblichus says:

σχειν · τὸ δ' αἴτιον οὐκ ἔστι δῆπον τὸ αὐτὸ ὅπερ τὸ ἀποτελούμενον. Ὡσπερ οὖν γιγνομένων, τε καὶ φθειρομένων τῶν συνθέτων ζῴων γένεσις οὕσα πρώτη ἡ ψυχὴ αὐτὴ καθ' ἑαυτὴν ἐστὶν ἀγέννητος καὶ ἀφθαρτος, οὕτω καὶ πασχόντων τῶν μετεχόντων τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ μὴ καθόλου ἐχόντων τὸ ζῆν καὶ τὸ εἶναι, συμπλακέντων δὲ πρὸς τὸ ἀόριστον καὶ τὴν ἑτερότητα τῆς ὄλης, αὐτὴ καθ' ἑαυτὴν ἐστὶν ἀτρεπτος, ὡς κρείττων οὕσα κατ' οὐσίαν τοῦ πάσχειν ἀλλ' οὐχ ὡς ἐν προαιρέσει τινὶ τῇ ῥεπούση πρὸς ἀμφοτέρω τὸ ἐμπαθές οὐδ' ὡς ἐν μετουσίᾳ ἔξωθεν ἢ δυνάμειως προσλαβοῦσα ἐπίκτητον τὸ ἀτρεπτον. Although the soul, in itself, is free of suffering it is nevertheless the cause of suffering for composite lives (*DM* 35.9–12) and shares in this suffering due to its being inclined and turned toward those generated and composite lives which it sustains (*DM* 21.6–7).

⁷⁷ οὐδὲ γινώσκεις ἐστὶν ἡ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον συναφή. Διείργεται γὰρ αὕτη πως ἑτερότητι. Πρὸ δὲ τῆς ὡς ἑτέρας ἑτερον γινγνωσκούσης αὐτοφνῆς ἐστὶν . . . ἡ τῶν θεῶν ἐξηρητημένη μονοειδὴς συμπλοκή.

⁷⁸ ... ἀρχομένοις ποτὲ ἀπὸ χρόνου.

⁷⁹ Trouillard has discussed the notion of anteriority and the 'pre-intellectual' (not supra-intellectual) element in the soul with clarity and insight: '... selon le meilleur néoplatonisme, le plus élevé est toujours le plus fondamental. . . . La démarche régressive étant coûteuse et son terme impensable, il est normal que le *πρό* soit figure par *ὑπέρο* l'originel par l'ultérieur. . . . Le suressentiel est la projection de l'initiative absolue dont procèdent toute essence et toute forme de vie. Le "préessentiel" est ainsi ce qui fait tout apparaître, mais demeure nécessairement en deçà de toute appartition, parce qu'il est préalable a l'intelligibilité même. Il n'est pas même caché, ce qui supposerait encore une clarté voilée, mais, quoi qu'on fasse, il est "déjà là," puisqu'il est par toute question' (J. Trouillard, 'Note sur *ΠΡΟΝΟΙΑ* et *ΠΡΟΟΥΣΙΟΣ* chez Proclus,' *Revue des Études Grecques* 73 [1960] 87).

One must not suppose that one has the power to recognize or not to recognize this contact, nor represent it as ambiguous (for it has always been uniformly established in activity). (*DM* 8.6–9)⁸⁰

The emphasis on not-knowing in theurgy suggests that it was integrally related to negative theology, which developed out of the Neoplatonists' systematic reflection on the function of Socratic *ἀπορία* in the Platonic dialogues. Negative theology served as a safe-guard against reifying the Absolute in intellectual structures. As an apology for nearly every kind of religious expression of Late Antiquity, the *De mysteriis* seems to have little to do with negative theology; yet it should be remembered that it is an apology for *ineffable* rites, and Iamblichus' critique of Porphyry always focused on the latter's tendency to reify the gods in intellectual structures. The fact that Iamblichus defends all manner of rituals in the *De mysteriis* may, indeed, be the strongest possible statement of his apophatic position. The discipline of negative theology, which finds its Platonic model in the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, demands the negation even of one's negations. This results in a return to a kind of positive theology, but one based on henological ineffability rather than on ontological perfection. As A. H. Armstrong rightly suggests, the divine attributes, 'purified' by negative (henological) analysis, were no longer taken as descriptions of the divine — which would leave them as obstacles and idols — but were transformed into icons which allowed souls to enter the ineffable activity of the One.⁸¹ The purification of the soul from intellectual idols in negative theology worked on the same principles as its purification from corporeal idols, and it is in this sense that the *De mysteriis* should be understood. The entire cosmos and its daimonic powers are both obstacles to the soul and vehicles of transcendence, depending on the souls' relation to them. Theurgy establishes a proper relation, providing souls the means to transform their obstacles into icons, whether they were painted in the fine medium of interior prayer or in the darker colors of animal sacrifice.

Iamblichus was praised by Damascius as the only one of his Neoplatonic predecessors to have had a sufficiently radical conception of the ineffable.⁸² It is unlikely, then, that Iamblichus understood the theurgic rituals described in the *De mysteriis* as anything less than icons. This explains why he stressed that these rites were to be performed, not understood. Damascius showed the utter contradiction involved in making positive statements about the One, including those expressed in negative terms; he argued that the goal of negative

⁸⁰ Οὐκ ἄρα συγχωρεῖν χρὴ ὡς δυναμένους αὐτὴν καὶ διδόναι καὶ μὴ διδόναι, οὐδ' ὡς ἀμφίβολον τίθεσθαι (ἔστηκε γὰρ αἰεὶ κατ' ἐνέργειαν ἐνοειδῶς).

⁸¹ 'Negative Theology,' *Downside Review* 95 (1911) 176–89.

⁸² J. Combes, 'Damascius et les hypothèses négatives du Parménide,' *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 61 (1977) 104 n. 147.

theology was not to reach the purity of the One, because there was no ‘one’ to reach. The word *ἐν* itself was merely a symbol for the ineffable.⁸³ Yet the humiliation of the soul in the awareness of its intellectual limits allowed it to experience the One, not as a unity — something known — but as *unifying*.⁸⁴ This, in Iamblichus’ view, was theurgy’s specific responsibility: to initiate souls into a unifying, and thus deifying, activity.

The One’s radical ineffability did not allow it to be opposed to plurality and matter; thus, Iamblichus argued, its unifying power was no more or less present in the intelligible than in the sublunary world (*DM* 27.8–17).⁸⁵ The opposition of ‘the One above and matter below,’ which Porphyry implied in his question on the location of the gods (*DM* 23.9–13), suggests a reification of the One that Iamblichus believed unworthy of its transcendence, and that would have left the soul trapped in intellectual otherness. Iamblichus criticizes Porphyry’s cosmography, which limited the presence of the gods to certain parts of the world. This, he says,

would entirely subvert sacred ritual and the theurgic communion of the gods with men by rejecting from the earth the presence of superior beings. (*DM* 28.6–9)⁸⁶

Negative theology was a guarantee against reifying the gods. It insured that the intellect, no less than the body, accepted its proper limits, for the unchecked exercise of discursive thought was as much an obstacle to the soul as its unchecked indulgence in corporeal passions.⁸⁷ It was undisciplined discursive

⁸³ Damascius, *Dubitaciones* I (tr. Ruelle [Paris 1889] 104.16), quoted by Trouillard, *L’un et l’âme* 113.

⁸⁴ Proclus, *In Parmenid.* 6.1088.33, 1095.23; *In Plat. Theol.* 2.4.95; quoted by Trouillard, *L’un et l’âme* 108. Trouillard says that the word ‘One’ functioned as an evocative symbol for the Neoplatonists, a ‘conceptual icon’ in Armstrong’s terminology. ‘Si l’un se justifie comme le meilleur symbole de la divinité sur le plan spéculatif, il est aussi le plus incantatoire. Car la théologie néoplatonicienne n’est pas simple théorie, mais également conversion. Elle ne peut être entièrement détachée de la théurgie et du mythe “initiatique” dont elle sort et vers lesquels elle nous tourne. Son efficacité déborde le langage rationnel pour employer celui de la poésie inspirée’ (*La mystagogie de Proclus* 99f.).

⁸⁵ *τί δὲ δὴ καὶ τὸ διακωλύον ἐστὶ τοὺς θεοὺς προῖέναι πανταχοῦ καὶ τὸ ἀνεῖργον αὐτῶν τὴν δύναμιν ὥστε ἵεναι μέχρι τῆς οὐρανίας ἀψίδος; ἰσχυροτέρας γὰρ ἂν εἴη τοῦτο αἰτίας ἔργον, τῆς κατακλειούσης αὐτοὺς καὶ περιγραφούσης ἐν τισὶ μέρεσιν. Καὶ τὸ μὲν ὄντως ὄν καὶ καθ’ ἑαυτὸ ἀσώματον πανταχοῦ ἐστὶν ὅπου περ ἂν βούληται, τὸ δὲ θεῖον καὶ πάντα ὑπερέχον, εἰ ὑπερέχεται ὑπὸ τῆς τοῦ ὅλου κόσμου τελειότητος καὶ ὥς ἐν μέρει τινὶ ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ περιείληπται, ἐλαττοῦται ἄρα καὶ τοῦ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα μεγέθους.*

⁸⁶ *Ὅλως δὲ τῆς ἱερᾶς ἀριστείας καὶ τῆς θεουργικῆς κοινωνίας θεῶν πρὸς ἀνθρώπους ἀναίρεσίς ἐστιν αὕτη ἡ δόξα, τὴν τῶν κρειττόνων παρουσίαν ἔξω τῆς γῆς ἐξορίζουσα.*

⁸⁷ In Neopythagorean terms, it was the principle of *ἄπειρον* unchecked by *πέρας*. These principles were present as the foundation in every context of the cosmos; it was the task of the soul to find and establish itself within the proper measures of these *ἀρχαί*.

thinking that constituted the ‘double ignorance’ Plato condemned as the ‘root of all evil’ (*I Alc.* 117e), and Iamblichus repeats Plato’s critique in the *De mysteriis*.⁸⁸ The notion that the soul could ascend to the One by its own power reflected, for Iamblichus, a habit of thinking with material self-interest and of improperly translating this into a spiritual context. Such thinking made the ascent to the One a discursive fantasy, a mere abstraction of conventional security. In Iamblichus’ view, the soul can never accomplish its own ascent through discursive thought, nor did it need to try, since a means of ascent was already given in embodied experience if the soul were to integrate it properly. Theurgic rites effected this integration through concrete acts that awakened the divine symbols embedded in the soul, drawing the believer to recognize and worship their corresponding expressions in nature (*DM* 136.7–10).⁸⁹

As the One transcend all measures of value, being their source, so theurgy was seen to transcend all human virtues and could not be measured according to human values. Theurgy, like the gods who worked through it, was ineffable. It was not a human response to the call of the divine but was the divine call itself, manifest in the sacred rites (*DM* 46.16–47.11).⁹⁰ Theurgy was misunderstood, Iamblichus said, because men believed they could penetrate divine mysteries intellectually:

Being unable to lay hold of knowledge of the gods by reasoning, but believing they are able to do so, men are completely carried away by their human passions and make assertions about divine things drawn from their personal experience. (*DM* 65.16–66.1)⁹¹

It was precisely Porphyry’s attempt to understand theurgy as if it were an ordinary dialectical problem to which Iamblichus objected.

You seem to think that knowledge of divine things and of anything else is the same, and that each step is derived from oppositions, as is usual with

⁸⁸ *DM* 65.15–66.16.

⁸⁹ *Καθάπερ οὖν δι’ εἰκόνων γεννώσι πάντα, καὶ σημαίνουσιν ὡσαύτως [καὶ] διὰ συνθημάτων · ἴσως δὲ καὶ τὴν ἡμετέραν σύνθεσιν ἀπὸ τῆς αὐτῆς ἀφορμῆς εἰς ὀξύτητα πλείονα ἀνακινῶσιν.*

⁹⁰ *Εἰ δέ σοι ἄπιστον εἶναι καταφαίνεται πῶς φωνῆς ἀκούει τὸ ἀσώματον καὶ ὡς αἰσθήσεως προσδεήσεται καὶ δὴ ὧτων τὰ λεγόμενα ὕψ’ ἡμῶν ἐν ταῖς εὐχαῖς, ἐκὼν ἐπιλανθάνη τῆς τῶν πρώτων αἰτίων περιουσίας ἔν τε τῷ εἰδέναι καὶ τῷ περιέχειν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς τὰ ὕψ’ ἑαυτῶν πάντα · ἐν ἐνὶ γὰρ δήπου συνείληφεν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ὁμοῦ τὰ ὅλα · οὔτε δὲ οὖν διὰ δυνάμεων οὔτε δι’ ὀργάνων εἰσδέχονται εἰς ἑαυτοὺς οἱ θεοὶ τὰς εὐχάς, ἐν ἑαυτοῖς δὲ περιέχουσι τῶν ἀγαθῶν τὰς ἐνεργείας τῶν λόγων, καὶ μάλιστα ἐκείνων οἵτινες διὰ τῆς ἱερᾶς ἀγιστείας ἐνιδρυμένοι τοῖς θεοῖς καὶ συνηνωμένοι τυγχάνουσιν · ἀτεχνῶς γὰρ τηνικαῦτα αὐτὸ τὸ θεῖον πρὸς ἑαυτὸ σύνεστι, καὶ οὐδ’ ὡς ἕτερον πρὸς ἕτερον κοινωνεῖ τῶν ἐν ταῖς εὐχαῖς νοήσεων.*

⁹¹ *Ἀδύνατοι γὰρ αὐτῶν οἱ ἄνθρωποι λογισμῷ τὴν γνῶσιν ἐπιλαβεῖν νομίζοντες δ’ εἶνα δυνατόν φέρονται ὅλοι πρὸς τὰ οἰκεία ἑαυτῶν τὰ ἀνθρώπινα πάση, καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν παρ’ ἑαυτοῖς τὰ θεῖα τεκμαίρονται.*

dialectical propositions; but it is nothing like that at all, for the knowledge of divine things is entirely different and is separated from all contradiction. (*DM* 10.1–7)⁹²

Porphiry's tendency to separate gods and men, to oppose the higher and lower worlds, reflects a literal adherence to the discursive mode of thought, which necessarily expresses itself sequentially, separating in thought what is inseparable in reality. Though discursive thinking is an important aspect of the soul's experience and is a necessary aid, Iamblichus says, in preparing the soul for theurgy (*DM* 98.8ff.),⁹³ it can never initiate the concrete transformation of the soul to union with higher principles, because it lacks the necessary power that comes only from those principles.

Theurgy, in the later Neoplatonist system, was not simply man's effort to purify his lower soul, as Porphyry held; it was man's way of participating in a cosmological procession and conversion that included every part of nature. Proclus said that even plants and animals performed theurgical acts in modes appropriate to their orders.⁹⁴ Following Neopythagorean teachings, Iamblichus saw the cosmos as the measured expression of the principles *πέρας* and *ἄπειρον*; even matter was not evil, in this scheme, but was divinely created (*DM* 265.6–10).⁹⁵ In this sense, every expression within the Whole contained the Whole in a different manner and measure of the *πέρας/ἄπειρον* formula. Thus, every soul was able to *embody* a cosmological return through the theurgic rites, which properly situated it in the 'world' with which it was identified. By being 'upside-down' in the appropriate way, by descending into matter in the measures established by the Demiurge, the embodied soul itself became a direct participant in the perfection of the cosmos.

Theurgic rites transformed the soul from being its own idol, in an inverted attitude of self-interest, into an icon of the divine, with its very corporeality changed into a vehicle of transcendence. So Iamblichus writes:

All of theurgy has two aspects. One is that it is a rite conducted by men, which preserves our natural order in the universe; the other is that it is empowered by divine symbols and is raised up on high through them and

⁹² σὺ δ' εἰκας ἡγεῖσθαι τὴν αὐτὴν εἶναι τῶν θεῶν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὁποιωνοῦν γινώσκων, δίδοσθαι τε ἀπὸ τῶν ἀντικειμένων τὸ ἕτερον μέρος, ὥσπερ εἶθε καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ταῖς διαλέκτοις προτεινομένων · τὸ δ' οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδαμῶς παραπλήσιον · ἐξήλλακται γὰρ αὐτῶν ἡ εἰδησις, ἀντιθέσεώς τε πάσης κεχώρισται.

⁹³ Ἄλλ' οὐκ ἄνευ μὲν τοῦ γινῶναι παραγίγνεται ποτε ἡ δραστική ἐνωσις, οὐ μὴν ἔχει γε πρὸς αὐτὴν ταυτότητα,

⁹⁴ See *Catalogue des Manuscrits Alchimiques Grecques VI*, ed. J. Bidez (Brussels 1928) 139–51.

⁹⁵ Ὑλὴν δὲ παρήγαγεν ὁ θεὸς ἀπὸ τῆς οὐσιότητος ὑποσχισθείσης ὁλότητος, ἣν παραλαβὼν ὁ δημιουργὸς ζωτικὴν οὖσαν τὰς ἀπλᾶς καὶ ἀπαθεῖς σφαίρας ἀπ' αὐτῆς ἐδημιούργησε, τὸ δὲ ἔσχατον αὐτῆς εἰς τὰ γεννητὰ καὶ φθαρετὰ σώματα διεκδόσμησεν.

joined to the gods and proceeds harmoniously toward the fulfillment of their purposes. This latter aspect can rightly be [called] ‘putting on the form of the gods.’ (DM 184.1–8)⁹⁶

Certainly there were different contexts in which theurgic rites were performed. Iamblichus said that different kinds of rituals were suited to different types of souls, which he distinguished by their involvement in matter and multiplicity (DM 5.18–20). Smith’s division of theurgy into high and low forms is based, in large part, on these remarks.⁹⁷ Yet if theurgy itself is defined as high or low because of the degree of materiality involved in the ritual, we fall into the same error as Porphyry did, defining the transcendent — of which theurgy is a concrete expression — according to the parameters of a spatial scheme that places souls on a track leading them from matter to the One above matter. Iamblichus, and later Damascius, remind us that the One has no such *place*, and was as present in matter as in the intelligible world.

It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish clearly between theurgical activity and the contexts in which theurgy is performed. To employ Smith’s ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ terminology, but with a significant change, I believe that according to Iamblichus *all* theurgical activity should be defined as ‘vertical’: it was the thread which passed through all spheres of the manifestation of reality, and of souls’ involvements in that manifestation. Theurgy provided a path of unbroken continuity; its unifying power remained the same, while being expressed differently in different psychological and material contexts. To consider these contexts specifically, however gross or spiritual they may be, is to consider the ‘horizontal’ aspect of theurgy, the environments in which its unifying (vertical) power was expressed; but to define theurgy by the materiality of those contexts would reduce it to a ‘natural’ art, whose power would be present in greater or lesser degree in different souls. Iamblichus firmly opposes this kind of reduction. In his distinction of divine *μαντική* from humanly derived forms of divination, he argues that natural divination is a gift of nature that comes under the principle of ‘more and less’ (*μᾶλλον ἥττον*) (DM 165.9–17);⁹⁸ hence, it is measured out differently with different people. Theurgical

⁹⁶ Τῆς ὅλης θεουργίας διπτόν ἐστι πρόσχημα, τὸ μὲν ὡς παρ’ ἀνθρώπων προσαγόμενον, ὅπερ δὴ τηρεῖ καὶ τὴν ἡμετέραν τάξιν ὡς ἔχει φύσεως ἐν τῷ παντί, τὸ δὲ κρατννόμενον τοῖς θεοῖς συνθήμασι καὶ ἄνω μετέωρον δι’ αὐτῶν τοῖς κρείττοσι συναπτόμενον, περιαγόμενόν τε ἐμμελῶς ἐπὶ τὴν ἐκείνων διακόσμησιν, ὃ δὴ δύναται εἰκότως καὶ τὸ τῶν θεῶν σχῆμα περιτίθεσθαι.

⁹⁷ Porphyry’s *Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* 90–94.

⁹⁸ Εἰ δὴ τοιοῦτόν ἐστι τὸ ὄντως μαντικὸν θεῖον ἔργον, τίς οὐκ ἂν αἰσχνθεῖν τὴν ἄνεν διανοίας καὶ οὐ τὰ γιγνόμενα αποτελοῦσαν φύσιν παραφέρειν, ὡς κατασκευὴν τινα ἀπεργαζομένην ἐν ἡμῖν μαντικὴν, καὶ τοῖς μὲν μᾶλλον ἐντιθεῖσαν τοῖς δὲ ἥττον τὴν ἐπιτηδειότητα ταύτην; ἐν οἷς μὲν γὰρ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν τελειότητα ἀφορμὰς εἰλήφασιν παρὰ τῆς φύσεως, ἐν τούτοις καὶ τῆς φύσεως προηγοῦνται τινες ἐπιτηδεότητες.

divination, on the other hand, is not a human work, nor does its end pertain to our concerns. Divine *μαντική*, Iamblichus says, is not present in souls in greater or lesser degrees, as with natural divination, but is derived from a divine principle ‘more ancient than our nature’ (*DM* 165.17ff.)⁹⁹ and equally present in all souls.

From the perspective of the One, if we can speak in this way, there is nothing better about silent prayer than animal sacrifice. What is important is the degree to which the ritual unifies the soul, and this depends on its suitability to the soul who performs it. Iamblichus succinctly expresses this point in the *De mysteriis*:

Each man performs his service to the Holy according to what he is, not according to what he is not; after all, the sacrifice must not surpass the proper measure of the worshiper. (*DM* 220.6–9)¹⁰⁰

For his own part, Iamblichus says that he sometimes engaged in material rites:

Let us not, then, disdain to say this also: that we often have occasion to perform rituals, for the sake of genuine bodily needs, to the body’s tutelary gods and to good daimons. (*DM* 221.1–4)¹⁰¹

Indeed, it was necessary for the theurgist to be thoroughly integrated with material daimons and their gods in order to extend his participation in the spiritual realms of the cosmos. Iamblichus stresses that theurgy was a ‘life-long labor’ (*DM* 92.8ff.);¹⁰² starting from the particularity of one’s embodied condition, the soul had to render service to all the daimons and gods, as it extended itself to become united with greater wholes and eventually with the all-containing Demiurge.

⁹⁹ ἐν οἷς δὲ ἀνθρώπινον μὲν οὐδὲν ἔργον πρόκειται οὐδὲ τέλος ἡμέτερον, θεῖον δέ τι προτέτακται πρεσβύτερον τῆς φύσεως ἡμῶν ἀγαθόν.

¹⁰⁰ Καὶ ἅμα ἕκαστος καθότι ἐστίν, οὐ μέντοι καθὸ μή ἐστι, ποιεῖται τῆς θυσίας τὴν ἐπιμέλειαν· οὐκ ἄρα δεῖ αὐτὴν ὑπεραίρειν τὸ οἰκεῖον μέτρον τοῦ θεραπεύοντος. I follow the emendation by Gale and Sicherl of *θυσίας* for *δσίας*. The *οὐσίας* preserved in V was probably a copist’s error due to the similarity of omicron and theta in the uncial script (O, Θ). The *δσίας* preserved in M, therefore, represents a subsequent attempt to emend the error of *οὐσίας*. On the confusion of theta and omicron in uncials see R. Renehan, ‘Isocrates and Isaeus: Lesefrüchte,’ *Classical Philology* 75.3 (1980) 253, who was kind enough to direct me to his article.

¹⁰¹ Μὴ ἀτιμάσωμεν τοίνυν ἔτι καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα εἰπεῖν, ὥς πολλάκις τῆς τοῦ σώματος ἔνεκα ἀναγκαίας χρείας διαπραγματενόμεθα τι πρὸς τοὺς ἐφόρους τοῦ σώματος θεοὺς καὶ δαίμονας ἀγαθοὺς·

¹⁰² Μὴ τοίνυν μηδ’ ἐνταῦθα τὰ μόλις καὶ διὰ μυρίων ἀγώνων κατορθούμενα ἀπὸ τῶν ἐξ ἐπιδρομῆς ἀμαθῶς ἐπιπηδόντων τῇ θεαγωγίᾳ χαρακτηρίζε. Cf. *DM* 131.9f.: ἐν πολλῷ χρόνῳ τῶν πόνων ἐμμογήν ἀτιμάσαντες, θεσμούς τε καὶ ἐντυχίας καὶ τὰς ἄλλας ἀγιστείας παρῳσάμενοι.

He who does not pay to all [these powers] that which is fitting, and who does not show to each the appropriate honor, will depart imperfect and destitute of the participation of the gods. (*DM* 229.1ff.)¹⁰³

Those who aggressively ‘leap after the gods,’ Iamblichus observes in another passage, fail to reach them, and the violence of their efforts only makes them morally more perverse.¹⁰⁴

According to Hierocles, initiations into theurgical mysteries worked on the same principle as purifications in mathematical analysis.¹⁰⁵ Like breaking down a complex number to its roots, the theurgic process moved the soul to greater simplicity, while integrating all steps in the process. Just as mathematical analysis preserved the continuity from simple root numbers to their complex expressions, theurgy accomplished a continuous movement from the multiplicity of a partial perspective to the simplicity of wholeness. Iamblichus says:

The more we go up to the peak and sameness of those things that are first in form and essence, and lead ourselves up from parts to wholes, so much the more do we discover the eternally existing union, and see that it is the anterior and commanding principle, which contains in and around itself otherness and multiplicity. (*DM* 59.9–15)¹⁰⁶

Having brought the passions of its particular embodied condition into equilibrium, the soul is drawn into a proportionately wider participation in the cosmos as it is led into that ‘anterior and commanding’ principle that contains otherness and multiplicity. Although the theurgist did not cut himself off from material life, in Iamblichus’ view, he was nevertheless freed of its constraints by awakening in his soul the divine measures that sustain, and are independently present in, matter.

V. CONCLUSION

It should be clear by now that ‘high–low’ terminology is methodologically unsuited as an explanatory structure for theurgy, not only because of the pejorative connotations associated with ‘low’ theurgy, but also because such

¹⁰³ ὁ μὲν μὴ ἀπονείμας πᾶσι τὸ πρόσφορον καὶ κατὰ τὴν ἐπιβάλλουσαν τιμὴν ἕκαστον δεξιωσάμενος, ἀτελὴς ἀπέρχεται καὶ ἄμοιρος τῆς μετουσίας τῶν θεῶν. . . .

¹⁰⁴ See *DM* 176.13–177.6.

¹⁰⁵ Hierocles, *In Carmen aureum* 26.116.21ff. (Kohler); quoted by Hadot, *Le problème* 105 n. 112.

¹⁰⁶ ὅσῳ δ’ ἂν ἀνίωμεν ἐπὶ τὸ ὕψος καὶ τὴν ταυτότητα τῶν πρώτων κατὰ τὸ εἶδος τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν, ἀπὸ τε τῶν μερῶν τὰ ὅλα ἀναγάγωμεν ἑαυτοὺς, τοσούτῳ πλεόν τὴν ἔνωσιν τὴν αἰδιον ὑπάρχουσιν εὐρίσκουμεν, προηγουμένην τε αὐτὴν καὶ κυριωτέραν θεωροῦμεν καὶ περὶ ἑαυτὴν καὶ ἐν ἑαυτῇ ἔχουσιν τὴν ἑτερότητα καὶ τὸ πλῆθος.

a structure reduces theurgy to the sort of schematization against which Iamblichus so strongly objected in Porphyry's critique. Nor does a distinction on the basis of *συμπάθεια* and *φιλία* hold, for Iamblichus says clearly that although *συμπάθεια* is present in the generated world and is included within theurgic rites, the 'sympathies' (whether attractions or repulsions) are merely auxiliary components of theurgy, never its cause or goal (*DM* 207.10–208.1).¹⁰⁷ Iamblichus says that reference to the *συμπάθεια* which exists throughout the cosmos does not explain theurgy, because the power of theurgy is rooted in the gods, who utterly transcended the sympathies of which they are the *ἀρχαί* (*DM* 208.1–6).¹⁰⁸ In another passage, Iamblichus says that the kind of divinization which works with 'sympathies' is 'entirely different' from real theurgy (*DM* 244.13f.).¹⁰⁹

Iamblichus explains in fascinating detail what is *not* theurgy. This makes it easy to overlook that his extensive discussions of natural sympathies — for example, his explanation of the effects of the soul of a sacrificed animal on humans and daimons (*DM* 243.18–244.6)¹¹⁰ — are intended as *contrast* to his theurgical explanations, which always emphasize the piety of the ritual performance and its connection with the gods who transcend the complexities of the cosmos. Iamblichus wanted to stress the difference between theurgic rituals, whether divinization or sacrifice, and merely human rituals based on natural sympathies. In this regard, I believe Smith was correct in finding the 'inner disposition' of the performer to be a critical criterion of theurgy, but it is one which distinguishes theurgy from non-theurgy rather than high theurgy from low.¹¹¹ In an effort to find different 'theurgies' to match the types of men, who, Iamblichus said, have different cultic needs, Smith mistakenly assumes that the theurgic rites performed by physically-oriented men was a 'lower' theurgy, was merely sympathetic ritual and hence no theurgy at

¹⁰⁷ Ἐὰν δὲ λέγωμεν ὡς ἐν ἐνὶ ζώῳ τῷ παντὶ καὶ μίαν ζωὴν τὴν αὐτὴν πανταχοῦ ἔχοντι κοινωνία τῶν ὁμοίων δυνάμεων ἢ τῶν ἐναντίων διάστασις ἢ τις ἐπιτηδεϊότης τοῦ ποιοῦντος πρὸς τὸ πάσχον συγκινεῖ τὰ ὅμοια καὶ ἐπιτήδεια, ὡσαύτως κατὰ μίαν συμπάθειαν διήκουσα καὶ ἐν τοῖς πορρωτάτω ὡς ἔγγιστα οὖσι, λέγεται μὲν τι οὕτω τῶν ἀληθῶν καὶ τῶν συνεπομένων ταῖς θυσίαις ἐξ ἀνάγκης, οὐ μὴν ὃ γὰρ ἀληθὴς τρόπος τῶν θυσιῶν ἐπιδείκνυται.

¹⁰⁸ Οὐ γὰρ ἐν τῇ φύσει καὶ ταῖς φυσικαῖς ἀνάγκαις ἢ τῶν θεῶν κεῖται οὐσία, ὥστε πάθει φυσικοῖς συνεγείρεσθαι ἢ ταῖς διατεινούσαις δι' ὅλης τῆς φύσεως δυνάμεσιν, ἀλλ' ἔξω τούτων καθ' ἑαυτὴν ὤριστα, οὐδὲν ἔχουσα πρὸς αὐτὰ κοινὸν οὔτε κατ' οὐσίαν οὔτε κατὰ δύναμιν οὔτε κατ' ἄλλο οὐδ' ὅτι οὖν.

¹⁰⁹ ἔστι μὲν οὖν ὁ τρόπος τῆς μαντείας οὗτος τοιοῦτος μάντη διεστηκὸς τοῦ θεῖου καὶ ἀληθινοῦ τρόπου

¹¹⁰ Αὐτὴ γὰρ ἔχει τινὰ οἰκειότητα πρὸς ἀνθρώπους μὲν διὰ τὸ ὁμογενὲς τῆς ζωῆς, πρὸς δαίμονας δέ, διότι σωμάτων ἀπολυθεῖσα χωριστὴ πως ὑπάρχει · μέση δὲ οὕσα ἀμφοτέρων ὑπηρετεῖ μὲν τῷ ἐφεστηκότι, ἐξαγγέλλει δὲ τοῖς ἔτι κατεχομένοις ἐν σώματι ἅπερ ὁ ἐπιβεβηκὼς προστάττει, κοινὸν δὲ σύνδεσμον ἀμφοτέροις τούτοις πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἐνδίδωσι.

¹¹¹ See Smith 99.

all, if we follow the rigor of Iamblichus' distinction. What Iamblichus in fact was pointing out in his discussion of different sacrificial modes for different types of people was that the ritual performed should be suited to the person who performs it. For a rite to be theurgically effective, it had to unify the soul; it could only do this if it had elements that corresponded to the qualities of that soul, and that perfectly contained its attention. In theurgy the soul *becomes* the ritual; since the ritual is the revelation of the god, man becomes divinized in the rite. As Iamblichus says, 'he takes on the shape of the god' (*DM* 184.8).¹¹²

If a theurgic rite must be perfectly suited to its performer to unify his soul, Iamblichus also says that theurgy 'imitates the order of the gods' (*DM* 65.4).¹¹³ Inasmuch as the god invoked in the rite is its administrator (*ἡγεμών*) (*DM* 236.5),¹¹⁴ there is no place for innovation or for the service of personal whims in theurgy; one simply obeys the choreography of the rite, as established by the Demiurge in his creation. The 'imitation' of the order of the gods demands that attention be shifted from one's particularity and from one's passionate, 'horizontal' relation to other lives (*DM* 196.10f.)¹¹⁵ to the 'whole' that is anterior to parts and yet vitally revealed through them. Iamblichus reiterates that unless a rite embraces all orders and gods in an appropriate way, it fails to be theurgic (*DM* 230.10–13).¹¹⁶ The expression in theurgic ritual of the incomprehensibility of the Whole was the only way to make accessible the ineffability of the One. In accordance with a soul's context and condition, the theurgy would be performed with different emphases, calling for different 'steps' to involve the soul in the rhythm of creation; prescribing the right steps was a diagnostic skill known only to theurgists (*DM* 229.17–230.2).¹¹⁷

The law of theurgy was the law of cosmogony in ritual expression; hence one could never ascend to the gods by favoring one 'part' of the soul over another, however transcendently the soul was imagined (*DM* 231.14).¹¹⁸ To do so was to be fixed in horizontal particularity and caught in the veils of the indefinite dyad, opposing one's 'self' to an 'other' (*DM* 8.3–6).¹¹⁹ In this sense, Neo-

¹¹² δ δὴ δύναται εἰκότως καὶ τὸ τῶν θεῶν σχῆμα περιτίθεσθαι.

¹¹³ μιμεῖται δὲ τὴν τῶν θεῶν τάξιν.

¹¹⁴ νῦν δὲ θεός ἐστιν αὐτῶν ἡγεμών ὁ ἐπὶ θυσίῳ ὄντω καλούμενος.

¹¹⁵ μετὰ πάθους ποιεῖται τὴν ἀλλήλων χρίαν.

¹¹⁶ 'Ὁ δὲ ἀγέραςτὸν τινα ἀφείξεν συνέχεε τὸ ὅλον καὶ τὴν μίαν καὶ ὅλην διακόσμησιν διέσπασεν· οὐχ ὥς ἂν τις οὖν νομίσειεν, ἀτελῇ τὴν ὑποδοχὴν ἐποίησατο.

¹¹⁷ μόνοι δὲ οἱ θεουργοὶ ταῦτα ἐπὶ τῶν ἔργων πειραθέντες ἀκριβῶς γηγνώσκουσι, μόνοι οὗτοι καὶ δύνανται γιγνώσκειν τίς ἐστιν ἡ τελεσιουργία τῆς ἱερατικῆς.

¹¹⁸ οὐ χρὴ ἐκ μέρους τινὸς τῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς συνυφαίνεσθαι πρὸς τὰ προηγούμενα αὐτῶν θεῖα αἷτια.

¹¹⁹ Διείργεται γὰρ αὕτη πως ἑτερότητι. Πρὸ δὲ τῆς ὥς ἑτέρας ἑτερον γιγνώσκουσας αὐτοφνῆς ἐστιν. See n. 77.

platonic theurgy was profoundly anti-gnostic, for it never allowed the disoriented condition of the embodied soul to be projected on the cosmos as an ‘ontological’ conflict. Iamblichian theurgy was even less dualistic than the spirituality of Plotinus, who spoke of matter as ‘evil in itself’ (καθ’ αὐτὸ κακόν) (*Enn.* 1.8.3.39–40) — something hieratic Neoplatonists would never have said.¹²⁰

Nevertheless, the question remains how we might understand the differences in theurgic rituals, for their contexts at least determined their particular expressions. I would suggest that the most appropriate methodological structure to describe these differences may be drawn from Iamblichus’ Neopythagoreanism. For Iamblichus, Pythagoras was the exemplary divine man; in his Syrian school, a series of books on Pythagoras and his mathematics was read as part of the Platonic curriculum.¹²¹ Recent scholarship on Pythagoras has portrayed him as both Antiquity’s ‘shaman’ and its ‘scientist,’¹²² and Iamblichus — as ‘theurgist’ and ‘mathematician’ — may be seen as Late Antiquity’s Pythagorean counterpart.¹²³ Because of this *imitatio Pythagori*, Iamblichus has been said to have a ‘double personality,’¹²⁴ but rather than implying a disorientation in Iamblichus, I believe these apparently divergent aspects of his life were integrally related, and that his mathematical teachings may hold an important key for understanding his theurgy. In turn, theurgy may put some flesh on Iamblichus’ arithmological writings.

I would like to suggest two directions where further studies might proceed in this regard. Neopythagorean teachings helped Iamblichus to resolve the problem of embodiment by allowing him to see the presence of numbers in corporeality, and to understand that the unfolding of geometric measures into manifest spatial volumes was the measured ‘flow’ that expressed the beneficence of the Good, a ‘geometrizing’ or ‘numbering’ of the cosmos that could not be considered complete or perfect until it achieved corporeality. The Pythagorean tradition symbolized this process in the geometric progression from point to line to plane to volume, with the pyramid as the first ‘body’;¹²⁵ the problem of matter’s association with evil, its opposition to good, was resolved by Neopythagoreans by transforming the conflict of good and evil into the generative principle of the cosmos, expressed as πέρας and ἀπειρον, the first deriv-

¹²⁰ See Trouillard, *La mystagogie* 50f.

¹²¹ For a discussion of the place of Pythagoras and Pythagorean teachings in the school of Iamblichus, see Dillon, *Iamblichi Chalcidensis Opera* 18–21, and B. D. Larsen, *Jamblique de Chalcis, exégète et philosophe* (Aarhus 1972) 66–147.

¹²² Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* (tr. E. L. Minar, Jr.; Cambridge, Mass. 1972) 120–65, 208–17.

¹²³ From the evidence of Iamblichus’ extant works, he was certainly as much a mathematician as a theurgist; on his ‘scientific genius,’ see Sambursky, n. 18 above.

¹²⁴ E. des Places, ‘La religion de Jamblique,’ *De Jamblique à Proclus* (Geneva 1975) 77–78.

¹²⁵ See A.-J. Festugière, ‘La pyramide hermétique,’ *Museum Helveticum* 6 (1949) 211–15.

atives of the One and Good.¹²⁶ These teachings provided Iamblichus with a metaphysical solution to the problem of embodiment, and as an essential part of his understanding of the soul form the background to his theory of theurgy. This metaphysical solution, however, would not have been complete without its ritual complement.

In the *De mysteriis*, Iamblichus says that the gods themselves were the administrators of theurgic rites, and in his *Theologoumena arithmeticae* Iamblichus identifies the gods with ἀριθμοί.¹²⁷ From the monad through the decad, numbers were deities, each revealing specific characteristics and functions in manifestation. Since theurgy ritually imitated the laws of cosmogony, it necessarily imitated the laws of arithmogony, which was the Neopythagorean way of explaining creation. Thus to account for the differences in theurgy while retaining its universal transcendent effect as unification, the Pythagorean notion of distribution referred to in Plato's *Gorgias* may be suggestive. Socrates mentions the 'great power of geometric equality amongst gods and men': that to each there was an appropriate measure, and that this proportionality was the law of justice and friendship, which gave order to the world and made it a 'cosmos' (508bc). Applied to theurgic experiences, this principle retains the transcendent sameness of the rites while taking into account their contextual difference. We may, then, speak of *geometrically equivalent theurgies*, bestowing proportionately the same degree of unification in each ritual. Such unifications could be represented arithmetically, using quantitative 'differences' to represent the degrees of involvement in multiplicity, while following a law of proportionate 'sameness' and thus preserving a geometric equality. In this way, one could account for different individuals' having equally effective unifications, though the 'instruments' of their theurgic rites and their modes of action were vastly different. This speculation, of course, calls for corroboration and correction by a careful study of Iamblichus' arithmological writings. However, I believe it is now time to study these writings, in order to establish a more appropriate vocabulary — one capable of explaining theurgy in a manner that Iamblichus himself would have recognized as consonant with his own.

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¹²⁶ See Festugière, n. 18 above.

¹²⁷ I have retained the Greek word ἀριθμοί because modern associations with the word 'number' are antithetical to the Pythagorean understanding of number. Plato used the term λογιστική for the kind of number with which we are familiar, e.g., the use of numbers in keeping accounts in our business affairs. Their use was for the service of empirical man. Arithmology / ἀριθμητική, however, was the contemplative — and perhaps ritual — use of numbers which served no 'practical' end but the purification of the soul (*Republic* 525cd).