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The *Chôra* of the *Timaeus* and Iamblichean Theurgy

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The *chôra* described in the *Timaeus* (52b) is said to be the receptacle (*hupodochê*) through which the world comes into existence. In some mysterious way she is the mother and nurse that allows the Forms to become manifest. Despite being essential to the work of the Demiurge, the *chôra* is unknowable, Plato says, except through an illegitimate kind of reasoning, more like dreaming than thinking. It is the scandalous nature of the *chôra*—denying a rationality that is desired in metaphysical systems and lying at the heart of the most influential metaphysical document in Western philosophy—that has attracted the interest of postmodern thinkers, Jacques Derrida and John Sallis most notably. My interest is to explore a related scandal in the Platonic tradition: theurgy, the performance of rituals by later Platonists to embody the gods. Iamblichus famously said that theurgists achieve union with the gods *not* by thinking but through hieratic symbols. Since theurgy is also a kind of demiurgy, a theurgic and demiurgic *hupodochê* was necessary to every theurgic ritual. This essay explores the role of the *hupodochê* in theurgy and its relation to the *chôra* of the *Timaeus*.

I keep secret in myself an Egypt
That doesn't exist.
Is that good or bad? I don't know.

Rumi[1]

How is the χώρα itself—if there be a χώρα itself—to be beheld?

How is the χώρα to be apprehended? How is it to be perceived, assuming that some sense of perception is pertinent to its apprehension?

In a dream. The χώρα is to be apprehended in a dream.

John Sallis[2]

[1] Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, 120.

[2] Sallis, "Daydream," 406.

Near the beginning of the *Timaeus*, Critias repeats a story told by his grandfather about the meeting between Solon, the great sage of Athens, and an Egyptian priest. After Solon recounts an ancient Greek story of creation, the Egyptian priest replies:

> O Solon, Solon, you Greeks are always children: there is not an old man among you. . . . You Greeks are all young in your souls . . . for you have in your souls no old opinion stemming from ancient oral tradition, nor any learning grey-haired with age.[3]

The ancient creation story that Solon shared was, in the old priest's estimation, relatively recent and "scarcely any different from children's stories."[4] In contrast, the wisdom of Egypt had been preserved for millennia; the Greeks, he maintained, have lost contact with their origins.

Nearly seven centuries later, the motif of a wiser Egyptian priest was adopted by the philosopher Iamblichus to criticize the lack of sanctity and the shallowness of Greek thinkers. In the words of his pseudonymous priest, Abamon, Iamblichus says:

> At this time the reason everything has fallen to decay—both in our words and prayers—is because they are continually being changed by the endless innovations and lawlessness of the Greeks. For the Greeks by nature are followers of the latest trends and are ready to be carried off in any direction, possessing no stability in themselves.[5]

In contrast, he explains that the Egyptians were the first race to participate in the gods. Having received their prayers in divine revelation, they left

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[3] Plato, *Timaeus* 22b–22c.

[4] Ibid., 23b.

[5] Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* (hereafter cited as *DM*), ed. Gustav Parthey, 259.4–10. All references follow the Parthey pagination; all translations of *DM* are from Iamblichus, *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries*, trans. Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell. A similar criticism of the Greeks in contrast to the Egyptians is found in the Hermetic corpus: "For the Greeks, O King, who make logical demonstrations, use words emptied of power, and this very activity is what constitutes their philosophy, a mere noise of words. But we [Egyptians] do not [so much] use words (*logoi*) but sounds (*phônai*) which are full of effects" (*Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. Nock and trans. Festugière, 232).

these invocations unchanged and thus sustain an intimacy with the gods lost by the Greeks.[6] Abamon is the voice of the philosopher Iamblichus; the Egyptian priest of the *Timaeus*, the voice of Plato. Through their imagined Egyptians both philosophers point to something lacking in the Greeks, and while Iamblichus' critique is more sustained and pointed in *On the Mysteries*, both see a spiritual shallowness in the habit of the Greek mind. The rationality that we associate with Greek thinking, the triumph of reason that is the glory of Western culture, was seen by Iamblichus as the loss of a divine way of life that he believed was inscribed by Plato into the very heart of the *Timaeus*, the most influential creation story in the history of Western metaphysics.

Yet the subtlety and nuance of Plato's vision, although it remained embedded in his most famous dialogue, was largely overlooked. Drawing from the *Timaeus* and other dialogues, Plato's rich and allusive metaphors were (mis)translated into a dualist system that has become the framework in which we have come to understand Plato.[7] In most introductions to philosophy, Plato's ideas are still presented as dualism, in which a world of eternal Forms is contrasted with a world of transitory images of those forms: a Realm of Being and a Realm of Becoming. This dualist Platonism was incorporated into much of Western thinking, including Christian theology, where it is expressed in Augustine's notion of the City of God and the City of Man, with a virtually unbridgeable gap between them.[8] I will argue that this dualist interpretation of Plato is a profound misreading and that Plato himself was not a dualist, nor was the Neoplatonist Iamblichus, whose theurgy is testament to a non-dual Platonism grounded in embodied experience. The goal of theurgic Platonism, as of all Platonism, is deification.[9] As Calvenus Taurus put it in the second century: "The will of the gods is to . . . reveal themselves (*ekphainesthai*) in human souls . . . to appear bodily . . . in the pure and faultless lives of souls."[10] To recover even

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[6] *DM* 258–59.

[7] Drew Hyland argues that this begins with Aristotle's critique of the Forms as well as his view that "truth" is propositional, in this sense reducing *noêsis* to *dianoia*; see his *Questioning Platonism*, 40–46.

[8] O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 156–57.

[9] Ibid., 31–40.

[10] *Iamblichus De Anima* 54.20–26. The translation of this passage is my own, but I consulted the translation in *Iamblichus De Anima*, trans. Finamore and Dillon, as well as that

a glimpse of this tradition, we must first recognize how influenced we are by dualism, especially those of us who study Plato. The late Proclus scholar Jean Trouillard warned against our reading the Platonists in this way. He wrote:

> We constantly run the risk of slipping into a scholarly Platonism that would double the world of objects by taking for a definitive system the mythic presentation of the theory of Ideas.[11]

Put bluntly, there is no realm of Forms separate from our world. It is only in our dualist conceptualizations, our discursively neat ordering of Plato, that the Forms are separable from their living expression.[12] As Drew Hyland argues, Plato himself was not a Platonic dualist.[13] But if Plato was not a dualist, how are we to understand the *Timaeus*, where he clearly asserts a world of Being in contrast to a world of Becoming?[14] Hyland argues that Plato was fully aware of our attraction to dualism yet subverted this and any other conceptually definitive reading of his work. Although a shallow interpretation of Plato results in the doubling against which Trouillard warned, a deeper reading of the dialogues undercuts this habit and invites us into discursively unthinkable paradoxes.[15] For the Neoplatonists, the *Timaeus* provided the cosmological imagery in which they contained these paradoxes and became gods.[16] Specifically, through their theurgic reading

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in Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 245.

[11] Trouillard, *La mystagogie de Proclus*, 135.

[12] Citing Proclus, Trouillard says: "The idea is only an object metaphorically to the degree that one projects on it what it illuminates" (*La mystagogie de Proclus*, 135). He adds: "The idea of greatness is it great? No, replies Proclus, if one takes it for an objective structure rather than considering it as a surpassing power" (ibid., 136). The idea as power, he says, "is not an abstract notion but a *law of realization* . . ." (ibid., 166; my italics).

[13] Hyland, *Questioning Platonism*, 104.

[14] *Timaeus* 27d.

[15] Hyland, *Questioning Platonism*, 109.

[16] The meaning of "becoming gods" is explored later in this essay. It entails a profound transformation of perspective, one that might be characterized today as a shift from the personal to the transpersonal, from a sense of being a separate and particular self to becoming an integrated whole that embraces all parts/selves. In Iamblichean terms, it is a shift from a life *under* Daimones (who rule particulars) to a life *above* Daimones: the life of gods who rule over wholes. As regards divinization, O'Meara reminds us that "we must . . . put aside an exclusivist, monotheistic notion of 'God' and remember the generous Greek sphere of the divine, which includes many different types and ranks of gods"

of the *Timaeus* and their ritual incorporation of the *chôra*, the matrix of creation, the later Platonists became incarnations of the Demiurge and shared in his divine action, his *theourgia*.

Neoplatonists read the *Timaeus* as mystagogy, as an initiation into gods that pre-dated even the Greeks.[17] These Platonic theurgists and mystagogues understood themselves as links in a golden chain joining heaven to earth: a tradition that continued until at least the sixth century C.E.[18] They were, themselves, living paradoxes: immortal mortals, human gods, incarnations of the divine. Such was the deep understanding of Platonism in the schools of Iamblichus, Proclus, and Damascius. Yet this hieratic aspect of their tradition is virtually impossible to imagine today. Most scholars ignore it or dismiss it as the irrational residue of a superstitious age, but for theurgic Platonists it was the core of their tradition. Even in antiquity this deeper current was not grasped by all Platonists, and there is evidence of tension among philosophers themselves—for example, between Iamblichus and Porphyry—as to how to understand Plato.[19] It is not surprising, perhaps, that the mystagogic reading of Plato was eventually lost. In its place a far more rational and discursively accessible Platonism was appropriated into Western metaphysics and Christian theology.[20] It is this rational Plato, the metaphysical dualist, who has become the Plato of our schools and textbooks. It is also this Plato who has also become the target of postmodern critics of Platonism and metaphysics. Having inherited an elaborately constructed straw man with centuries of weight and authority, postmodern critics like Jacques Derrida have explored the dialogues in order to discover paradoxes in Platonic texts that deconstruct the dualist edifice.[21] But it is a dualism that never existed, at least not

(*Platonopolis*, 31).

[17] Saffrey and Westerink, *Proclus, Platonic Theology*, vol.1, bk.1, 5.16–6.3.

[18] The image of the golden chain used by later Platonists is discussed by Athanassiadi, *La lutte pour l'orthodoxie*, 24–26.

[19] This is described by Rappe as a tension between a discursive/dogmatic reading of the Platonic and Pythagorean texts and a non-discursive/symbolic reading; *Reading Neoplatonism,* 11–21.

[20] Athanassiadi rightly describes this rationalized version of Platonism as a "heresy." As she puts it, for the later Platonists the most threatening was "l'hérésie de l'intellectualisme," the mistaken notion that ineffable mysteries could be expressed objectively in conceptual terms (*La lutte pour l'orthodoxie,* 213).

[21] Hyland, *Questioning Platonism*, 100. Hyland examines the postmodern critique of Plato

for the Neoplatonists, and certainly not for the theurgists who followed Iamblichus. Derrida deconstructs a house that was never built, at least not by Plato or his Neoplatonic successors.

Yet we live in that house, and the attention Derrida gives to the richness, ambiguity, and paradoxical aspects of Platonic texts is invaluable to us.[22] We have been raised in a mental architecture that makes us instinctively dualists habituated to a discursively defined worldview.[23] Derrida shared this architecture. He knew how effectively it holds us, so his deconstructive analyses free us to rediscover the richness and initiatory paradoxes both in the Platonic dialogues and in our own lives. Derrida's examination of the Platonic *pharmakon* and the *chôra* strips us of our unconscious habit to acquire discursive certitude in Platonic texts.[24] It is not surprising, however, that Derrida and other postmodern philosophers did not explore the mystagogic aspects of the later Platonists; they had been rendered invisible by our neglect. Yet his deconstruction of Platonic dualism, seen especially in his exploration of the *chôra* in the *Timaeus*, is in profound agreement with the Neoplatonic reading of Plato as mystagogue. Recognizing this deeper accord between Derrida and Plato, Hyland writes: "[P]erhaps the dialogues are not so much *texts to be deconstructed as deconstructive happenings themselves*."[25] In mystagogic terms, these "deconstructive happenings" would be the catharsis that strips initiate readers of our presumption to know and throws us into the transformative *aporia* for which Socrates was famous.

It is the not-knowing of *aporia*, the always deferred meaning—the lost certitude—that lies at the heart of Platonic initiation, and it is thanks

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in the work of Heidegger, Derrida, and Irigary. They all share, he argues, the view of a dualist Plato.

[22] *How* this "house" was built is not addressed in this essay. For an explanation of how the Christian model of creation promoted dualism and the separation of spiritual and material worlds, see Trouillard, "Procession néoplatonicienne et création Judeo-Chrétien," 1–30.

[23] As Trouillard put it: "In the West, rationalism and the primacy of technology have so thoroughly impregnated our thinking that they are most often unconscious. Hence the difficulty of entering into the thoughts of those like Proclos as long as we apply to him our models of intelligibility. . . . We must return to the essential theme of Neoplatonism according to which 'thought' is not the highest value. [The function of reason is simply to reveal] the ineffable that inhabits it" (*La mystagogie de Proclos*, 233).

[24] Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 61–171; Derrida, *Khôra*.

[25] Hyland, *Questioning Platonism*, 101 (author's italics).

largely to postmodern critics that we once again feel its vitality. Through Derrida and through the writing of John Sallis, in particular, we have rediscovered an older and more authentic reading of the dialogues, one in which the *chôra* plays an initiatory role in Platonic discourse that Sallis terms *chorology*.[26] In their terms, "we are today on the eve of Platonism . . . the eve on which we stay awake, keep vigil, remain watchful for the Platonism that is to come."[27] Through their clearing of the deceptive strata of Platonic dualism we have reached, in theurgic terms, the *Egyptian* dimension of Platonism, the non-discursive and paradoxical—even hieratic—source in which the tradition is rooted. I will argue that this aporetic aspect of the tradition was integral to Iamblichean Platonism; it formed an essential part of what the Eleusinians called the "lesser mysteries." But our contemporary habit is to pass over the catharsis of not-knowing, so the mystagogy of later Platonism has remained hidden. Despite our best intentions, we read Neoplatonic texts from an exclusively intellectual point of view, as sophisticated artifacts in the museum of Western metaphysics. The value of Iamblichean theurgy and the *chôra* of Plato's *Timaeus* is that neither belongs in this museum, neither fits into a rational sketch of Platonic philosophy. As Plato himself put it, "the *chôra* can scarcely be thought at all except through a bastard kind of reasoning,"[28] and Iamblichus says that "thinking does not connect theurgists with the gods. . . ."[29] Let us begin, then, by descending down the rabbit hole of the *chôra* and see how it leads not only to a deeper understanding of the Demiurge and of demiurgy but does so precisely in the existential engagement of the *chôra* by Platonic theurgists.

I. Plato's Third Kind: Receptacle, Nurse, Mother, Space

Plato's initial creation story in the *Timaeus* describes a craftsman, the Demiurge, who builds a sensible cosmos based on an eternal paradigm.

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[26] Sallis, *Chorology*.

[27] Sallis, *The Verge of Philosophy*, 9. This is Sallis' extended reflection on the significance of Derrida's remark in "Plato's Pharmacy," 107, that we are on the "eve of Platonism" (understood by Sallis as the "verge of philosophy").

[28] *Timaeus* 52b.

[29] *DM* 96.13–14.

We are invited to see creation with clearly defined aspects—Demiurge, Paradigm, and Sensible World—that fit neatly into the dualist and rational scheme that has been associated with Plato. But the *Timaeus* is an unusual cosmogony. It seems to describe not so much creation itself as our appropriation of it. The first version, with the Demiurge, the eternal paradigm, and the generated world is how we might initially outline it for a classroom lecture.[30] The Demiurge brings order to the elements of the cosmos, makes them adhere to the paradigm. But at some point we, or a thinking student, will ask: Where do these elements come from? How do we explain their existence *before* creation?

This gives rise to Plato's beginning again, taking—as he says—a "fresh starting point,"[31] but this second cosmogony is not so simple, not as conceptually clear. It is not a creation story we can hold at arm's length; it is one we are already in. We can, for example, no longer assume the existence of fire, water, earth, and air, as we did in the first telling, but must turn back to a more archaic time, "before the birth of heaven," as Plato put it, to ask from what source these elements arise.[32] It is a story, Plato says, that only a god could tell, and he invokes "the savior god" to guide us to more archaic levels of existence, where conceptual clarity is lost, by the introduction of a third kind.[33] He explains:

> For our former exposition those two were sufficient. One, which we assumed, was an Intelligible Paradigm, always the same, and the second was the visible and changing imitation of the Paradigm. There is also a third kind that we did not distinguish at the time, thinking that those two were sufficient; but now the argument compels us to try to describe in words a Form that is difficult (*chalepon*) and hard to see (*amudron*). What must we suppose its power and nature to be? This in particular: that it is the receptacle (*hupodochê*) and, as it were, nurse (*tithênê*) of all generation.[34]

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[30] *Timaeus* 27–28; the first version extends from *Timaeus* 27–48.

[31] *Timaeus* 48b.

[32] Strictly speaking, it is not chronologically prior but a "time" before time itself. After all, it is before the birth of heaven, which, for Plato, *is* the origin of time. See Sallis' discussion of this passage: "The turn back will thus be a turn out of time, not from time to eternity, but to the cosmos in a condition which neither time nor eternity has any pertinence" (*Chorology*, 95).

[33] *Timaeus* 48d.

[34] *Timaeus* 49ab.

To describe the nature of the receptacle, Plato says, is difficult (*chalepon*).[35] Through the *hupodochê* the elements come to exist, but since they are in flux, sliding from one element into another, they lack permanence and can only be called "fire-*like*," "air-*like*," etc., because they are always changing. The receptacle itself through which the elements appear must be void of all formal qualities or it would be unable to express the Forms without distorting them. Plato compares the receptacle (*hupodochê*) to a matrix (*ekmageion*)—like wax or molten gold—that receives impressions, or to a liquid that receives odors in the making of perfumes.[36] In each case the receiving matrix must, he says, be "void of all Forms" or the copy would be impure, mixed, and distorted.[37] This *hupodochê*, which Plato also calls "the Mother of the world," lacks all formal qualities, yet in a most perplexing and baffling way she receives and reveals them.[38] Equally perplexing, the receptacle remains hidden even as it reveals the images that are born from it.

After insisting that the *hupodochê's* lack of formal qualities is—paradoxically—a condition for revealing them, Plato then gives this third principle its proper name. He says:

> Moreover, a third kind is that of the *chôra*, everlasting, not admitting destruction, granting a seat to all generated things, apprehended without sensation by a sort of bastard thinking, scarcely believable; we look at it indeed in a kind of dream and affirm that everything that exists must be some place (*topos*) and occupy some *chôra* and that that which is neither on earth nor anywhere in heaven is nothing.[39]

Since the *chôra* precludes all qualities, to ascribe to it *any* translation—such as "space"—is misleading. It is not the space of Cartesian physics or the empty void of Greek atomism; strictly speaking, it cannot possess any meaning at all, for all meaning derives from the Forms of which it is utterly lacking. The *chôra* is apprehended without sensation, *through a kind*

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[35] *Timaeus* 49ab.

[36] *Timaeus* 50c.

[37] *Timaeus* 50e.

[38] *Timaeus* 51a.

[39] *Timaeus* 52b.

of non-thinking; "scarcely believable," it is dream-like.[40] Conceptually, this is a mess! It is hardly any wonder that Aristotle reduces this mysterious third principle to a substrate (*hupokeimenon*), a clear and understandable concept that becomes, for him, the matter (*hulê*) that receives the forms.[41] This truncated version of the *chôra* is what we have inherited in our dualist version of Platonism. It mercifully strips from the *chôra*, and from the cosmos generated from it, the utter paradox, the bastard thinking, and the dream-like nature of its world.[42] Referring only to the artisan's model of the *chôra* as substrate and material matrix, Aristotle makes it into a metaphysically coherent entity (which is not what Plato struggles with great difficulty and admittedly *fails* to describe in the *Timaeus*). Rather than function as a conceptual abyss where souls descend into the mother of the cosmos; rather than inviting us into this primal creativity, *chôra* as substrate fits logically into the *technê* of an artisan-creator but ceases to initiate souls into demiurgy. Aristotle's clarity comes at the cost of mystagogy. John Sallis, however, leads us back to the abyss and paradox of the *chôra*,[43] and while he does not explore its mystagogic or theurgic appropriation by later Platonists, he moves in a theurgic direction by suggesting that the *chôra* might be better imagined as *activity* than as place. He writes:

> [S]uppose the χώρα of the *Timaeus* were not taken simply as the place where all sensible things are and must be in order to be at all. . . . Suppose, then, that one were to distinguish the χώρα from place [*topos*] *by thinking of it as an instituting operation*, as the operation by which something like a place would first open up; in this guise it would be a happening, an occurrence, not something done, for instance, by a subject.[44]

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[40] Sallis, *Chorology*, 115.

[41] Ibid., 152.

[42] In Sallis' terms, Aristotle assimilates the *chôra* "to the eidetic economy"; he succeeds in making it conceptually more coherent while losing its abysmal depths and paradox (Ibid., 153).

[43] Sallis coins the term *chorology* to describe the kind of initiatory discourse into which the *chôra* leads us, beginning where Plato introduces the term *chôra* at *Timaeus* 52a; Sallis, *Chorology*, 113–24.

[44] Sallis, *The Verge of Philosophy*, 107 (my italics).

II. The *Chôra* as *Hupodochê* in Theurgic Ritual

The instituting operation of the *chôra* that Sallis describes is the act of creation. It is demiurgy itself, and among Neoplatonists this activity is the highest aspiration of the soul.[45] While later Platonists adopted Aristotle's language and referred to the *chôra* as *hulê*, they transformed Aristotle's terminology into a hieratic discourse, preserving the richness and ambiguity of the *chôra* in full accord with their mystagogic reading of Plato.[46] To be precise, they integrated the paradoxical and conceptual nothingness of the *chôra* into their understanding of *hulê* in theurgic practice. The *chôra*, after all, was present in all things through its absence and utter receptivity. For later Platonists, the soul is continually born from this primal mother, bears her emptiness and fecundity, and has the capacity to enter the primal act of creation through this innate *chôra*. In psychological terms, theurgists understood that the mystery of the *chôra* and our path to deification was discovered not in what we can grasp conceptually but in our capacity to endure not-knowing and not grasping: to become receptive—as the *chôra* is receptive—to the divine influx.

The most striking expression of this principle among theurgists is found in Fragment #1 of *The Chaldean Oracles*. In the instructions given by the gods to theurgists, the oracle states:

> There exists a certain Intelligible which you must perceive with the flower of mind. But if you turn your mind to it and perceive it as perceiving a specific thing, you will not perceive it. . . . You must not perceive that Intelligible with vehement effort but with the extended flame of an outstretched mind that measures all things *except* that Intelligible. You must not perceive it intently but—bringing back the sacred eye of your soul—extend an empty mind (*keneon nous*) into that Intelligible to know it, for it exists outside your mind.[47]

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[45] Iamblichus says that the goal of Egyptian theurgy is to "establish the soul in the demiurgic god in his entirety" (*DM* 292.12–13), and this is achieved by uniting with his divine activities = theurgies.

[46] Iamblichus includes Aristotle with Plato and Pythagoras among those who followed the *ancient* wisdom (*Iamblichus De Anima* 30.23–27). See also Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, 15–16.

[47] *The Chaldean Oracles*, trans. Majercik, frag. 1. I have drawn from Majercik's translation

The flower of the mind, the *anthos nou* of later Platonists, is the organ through which the soul perceives and unites with divinities. The Chaldean gods insist that the *anthos nou* cannot be imagined as part of *our* mind, a mind that grasps, learns, and understands in the usual sense. This would place it within our discursive and intellectual control. If *we* try to perceive the intelligible; if *we* grasp at it; if *we* intently try to reach it—we fail. We must, the oracle says, relax and extend an *empty* mind in order to receive the intelligible. To access the divine we must become its receptacle, completely empty of ideas, plans, and intention. Not surprisingly, Proclus borrows Plato's language of the *chôra* to describe this organ of mystic receptivity for, like the *chôra*, there must be some aspect of the soul utterly lacking in intelligible qualities to receive and transmit them. Proclus refers to this as "the bastard intellect" (*nothos nous*) or simply "the bastard" (*nothos*), recollecting the "bastard thinking" by which we perceive the *chôra*, the receptacle of the Forms in the *Timaeus*.[48] And if the soul has this capacity, if we can become the *chôra* of intelligible realities, we also can also become nurse and mother; we can join the Demiurge in the creation of the world.[49]

According to Iamblichus, union with the Demiurge is the goal of theurgy: to "establish the soul in the demiurgic god in his entirety."[50] To enter this demiurgy requires that we provide receptacles for the gods that are revealed in creation. In the paradoxical language of the *chôra*, to function as the Demiurge, to express our most profound activity, requires utter passivity.[51] Yet this is not achieved by denying our activities, by

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in ibid., as well as from Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism,* 224; also see *Damascius' Problems and Solutions*, trans. Abhel-Rappe, 237–38.

[48] Proclus puts it bluntly: "The bastard (*nothon*) is better than the *nous*" (*Proclus: Commentary on Plato's Timaeus, Vol. 2,* trans. Runia and Share, 103; cf. Lankila, "Hypernoetic Cognition," 151–52. Lankila drew my attention to Proclus' use of this term.

[49] Proclus, in *In Tim.* 3.296.13–16, describes the human soul when it reverts to itself as "knowing all things without in any way 'departing from its own proper character' (*mêdamou tês oikeias existamenê dynameôs*)" (*Proclus: Commentary on Plato's Timaeus, Vol. 3*, trans. Baltzly, 293) which is precisely the way Plato describes how the Receptacle receives copies of the Forms: "for from its own proper quality it never departs (*ouk existatai dunameôs*)" (*Timaeus* 50b9).

[50] *DM* 292.12–13.

[51] The words engraved on the granite tombstone of the nineteenth-century Neoplatonist Ralph Waldo Emerson exemplify this condition: "The passive master lent his hand to the vast soul that o'er him did command." Emerson understood that his masterful creativity

overcoming them by force of will, for our choric passivity *already* underlies our activities. Theurgy was the art of learning how to discover the *chôra* hidden in the midst of our visceral attachments to the world. It was never an attempt to manipulate gods, or to call them down, or to achieve some kind of mastery over lower cosmic powers. Such portrayals of theurgy place it within a dualist framework, with gods far above the world, as if the goal of philosophy and theurgy were to escape from this lower world to enter the Realm of Forms unpolluted by materiality. Such dualist conceptions are far from Iamblichean theurgy. Theurgy is radically non-dual; the theurgic gods are already here. The work of the Demiurge is not in the past but is happening *now*, happening *here*. Theurgy is the art of initiating souls into what Sallis calls an "instituting operation"; and for Iamblichus, participation in this operation, this theurgy-demiurgy, is not limited to intellectual elites but is open to all human beings with varying degrees of skill and sophistication. Nor is it limited to human beings, for all things born from the *chôra*—plants, animals, and even stones—remain rooted in their archaic origin and express their innate filiation. As Proclus explained:

> Each thing prays according to the rank it occupies in nature, and sings the praise of the god to which it belongs . . . for the sunflower moves to the extent that it is free to move, and in its rotation, if we could hear the sound of the air buffeted by its movement, we should be aware that it is a hymn to its king, such as it is within the power of a plant to sing.[52]

To distinguish theurgy into higher and lower forms based on its materiality completely subverts the theurgic process.[53] It places a non-dual art, a kind of Platonic tantra, into a dualist metaphysics that misses the profound existential dimension of this tradition. There was undoubtedly a noetic form of theurgy that did not require the use of material objects, but those who see this as "higher" miss the fact that noetic theurgy is essentially no

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depended precisely on his passivity.

[52] Proclus, *On the Hieratic Art of the Greeks*, 148.14–18. See translation and discussion in Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, 106. Proclus begins this treatise by stating that theurgic priests based their hieratic knowledge on the erotic attraction of all lives to the divine. See Copenhaver, "Hermes Trismegistus," 103–5.

[53] See my critique of this approach in Shaw, "Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus," 1–28.

different from the buffeting sound in the prayer of the sunflower. What is critical is not the object in the theurgic rite but the degree to which this object expresses our archaic connection to the divine, our "deep eros" as the Oracles put it, that draws us back to the Demiurge.[54] What is critical for theurgists is to determine what objects allow us to become receptive to the divine influx, and this requires hieratic insight into what receptacle is appropriate to each person.[55]

In *On the Mysteries*, Iamblichus lays out the rule for determining appropriate objects in one's sacrifice. He says:

> Each performs his sacrifice according to what he is, not according to what he is not. Therefore, the sacrifice should not surpass the proper measure (*oikeion metron*) of the worshipper.[56]

Consequently, theurgists distinguished their worship according to personal needs, and more generally according to different kinds of embodied souls: material (the vast majority), noetic (extremely rare), and the intermediate.[57] Each performed rituals with "objects" corresponding to their capacities. Again, this stratification was not based on dualist metaphysics, with matter seen as evil and progressively overcome, for matter was rooted in and expressive of the highest level of divinity. As a Pythagorean, Iamblichus saw materiality rooted in the divine Dyad—the "mother" of numbers[58]—and Plato's *chôra* is the cosmogonic equivalent: what the Dyad is for numbers the *chôra* is for the generated world.[59] Thus the goal of theurgy was not to escape matter or materiality but to embody it demiurgically. Beginning with material rites that address what we might call today the wounds and

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[54] *The Chaldean Oracles*, trans. Majercik, frag. 43.

[55] Such knowledge cannot be learned outside of experiencing the gods in theurgy. Iamblichus says that "only the theurgists know these things exactly *by having tested them in practice*; only they know the proper method of performing the hieratic art" (*DM* 229.13–230.2).

[56] *DM* 220.5–7.

[57] Iamblichus says: "Let us not disdain, then, to say this also: that we often have occasion to perform rites for the sake of bodily needs to the gods and good *daimones* that watch over the body . . ." (*DM* 221.1–3). For the distinction of types of human souls and their respective forms of theurgic worship, see *DM* 223.10–225.10.

[58] Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 32–33.

[59] Ibid.

traumas of life,[60] the theurgist weaves himself back into the demiurgic gods. As Iamblichus puts it, material rites "cut off what is superfluous in us, fill out our deficiencies . . . and bring into symmetry what is disordered."[61] They bring us back into alignment with the "eternal measures" (*metra aidia*) of the Demiurge.[62] This measuring/harmonizing of dyadic oppositions is consistent with the development of the virtues through which Platonists were progressively deified.[63] The hieratic virtues of theurgy were the culmination of this discipline, where even the passions of material life were brought into "intimate continuity" (*allêlouchia*) with the gods.[64] Through these rites the theurgist builds a subtle body, a spherical and luminous vehicle capable of receiving the Demiurge in his totality. Without this body and the material rites that build it, union with the Demiurge was impossible.[65]

As a non-dual and tantric Platonism,[66] theurgy's goal is not to escape from materiality and the body but to allow the gods to be "revealed bodily

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[60] Iamblichus lists the traumas of the soul in a body as including "divisions, collisions, impacts, reactions, changes, generation, and corruption" (*DM* 217.10–13).

[61] *DM* 221.11–13.

[62] The *metra aidia* are the cosmogonic measures sent down by the Demiurge (*DM* 65.5–7).

[63] O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 46–49.

[64] Iamblichus translated the Pythagorean principle of mean terms that unite opposites to the existential situation of embodied souls, allowing us to share in arithmogony/demiurgy by uniting opposites: the warring impulses experienced by souls. As Iamblichus puts it in his *On Nicomachean Arithmetic*, the *allêlouchia* (the weaving together of opposed principles) that is established dispassionately among numbers is experienced by souls in a passionate way. This Pythagorean term, *allêlouchia,* is used by Iamblichus to describe the intimate continuity throughout the cosmos and is translated as "indivisible mutuality" (*Iamblichus: On the Mysteries*, 25). Iamblichus maintains that it seamlessly holds together both numbers and the orders of the cosmos (cf. Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 116.15; *In Nicomachi Arithmeticam Introductionem* 7.10–18; *Theologoumena Arithmeticae* 3.8, ed. De Falco). For human souls, *allêlouchia* is experienced in a passionate way (*meta pathous*; *DM* 196.8–10), reflecting the condition of the embodied soul under the sway of the sublunary realm. The Iamblichean approach is not to escape these *pathê* but to ritually coordinate them into a receptacle for the god. The theurgic approach is comparable to that of tantra in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, in that theurgy stresses the continuity, integration, and transformation of "lower" impulses through ritual.

[65] As Iamblichus puts it: "According to the art of the priests, it is necessary to begin sacred rites from the material gods. For the ascent to the immaterial gods will not otherwise take place" (*DM* 217.8–11); cf. 220.1–4.

[66] On Neoplatonism and theurgy specifically as a kind of tantra, sharing essential features with Indian forms of tantra, see McKevilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought,* 585–94.

. . . in the faultless lives of human souls."[67] This theurgic embodiment is effected through a progressive reception of and unification with the Demiurge—to be precise, with the activity that sustains creation—and the modes of reception were theurgic rituals. In *On the Mysteries*, Iamblichus says explicitly that theurgy "imitates the nature of the universe and the demiurgic power of the gods."[68] It is of crucial importance to Iamblichus that theurgy participates in demiurgy, and he distinguishes it from sorcery based on whether or not the ritual is, as he puts it, in *analogia* with the demiurgy of the cosmos.[69] Sorcery fails to be theurgy precisely because it fails to be demiurgic. The sorcerer performs rites that divert the energies of creation to serve personal ends, but Iamblichus warns that ultimately "the damage from that wicked action falls on him alone."[70]

According to Iamblichus, although each embodied soul is alienated from divinity,[71] we bear an "innate *gnôsis* of the gods [that] is joined from the beginning with its cause and is interwoven with the soul's essential yearning for the Good."[72] This *gnôsis* is erotic, a yearning that cannot be known, discussed, or analyzed: it is, Iamblichus says, "superior to all judgment and choice; prior to all logic and argumentation."[73] We cannot access this *gnôsis* through intellectual effort but only through our nothingness, the emptiness of the *chôra* we bear within us. Iamblichus speaks to this specifically. He says: "the awareness of our own nothingness (*oudeneia*) when we compare ourselves to the gods turns us spontaneously (*autophuôs*) to prayer."[74] We become Proclean sunflowers: we rotate back to the gods. This *gnôsis* is not subject to our control, our intellectual grasp.

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[67] See note 10 above.

[68] *DM* 249.11–250.1. Regardless of the complexity of the sacrifices and the daimonic powers engaged, the cosmos is "a single living being" (*DM* 210.11–12) and the causes of the efficacy of sacrifices are "the demiurgic and supremely perfect powers" (211.3–5).

[69] *DM* 168.12.

[70] *DM* 182.16. Cf. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 169. In light of our alienated embodied state, one might argue that all uninitiated souls are sorcerers, albeit ineffective ones.

[71] Iamblichus characterized the upside-down (*anatropê*) effect of embodiment described by Plato in the *Timaeus* 43b–43e as self-alienation: "self-alienation" (*allotriôthen*), Iamblichus says, "constitutes our very essence." See Simplicius, *In Libros Aristotelis* 223.26, ed. Hayduck.

[72] ". . . *emphutos gnôsis tôn theôn* . . ." (*DM* 7.11–8.1).

[73] *DM* 7.12–13.

[74] *DM* 47.13–15.

It does not come from us. It comes *to* us, *spontaneously*. As Iamblichus puts it: "prior to the knowledge that knows another as being itself other, there is a unitary connection with the gods that is spontaneous (*autophuês*)."[75]

This tradition of a non-dual and innate *gnôsis* defined the thinking of the remaining Platonists in late antiquity. The sixth-century teacher Damascius—the last and perhaps most brilliant link in the golden chain—described Iamblichus as "the best interpreter of divine reality"[76] and followed his teachings despite their often paradoxical conclusions.[77] The soul, Damascius says, is so fundamentally alienated that despite our best efforts to fathom the Intelligible we are pulled by our "nothingness" (*oudeneia*) to lower levels.[78] And yet, he says, "we must resign ourselves to this fallen state."[79] For theurgists, it is only the acceptance of our nothingness that allows us to become receptacles for the god. Even in his most exalted reflections, describing the One as "the ineffable and inaccessible sanctuary," Damascius recognized his incapacity and failure.[80] "These names and concepts," he says, "describe *our own* labor pains (*ôdinôn*). . . . [T]hey reveal *our own* aching, *aporia*, and failing concerning the One."[81] Yet beneath Damascius' pessimism, the mystagogy is revealed. For these are *labor pains* born from choric nothingness, and they allow us to divine (*manteuetai*) ineffable reality.[82] Proclus discussed the same mystery. He writes:

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[75] *DM* 8.3–5.

[76] Damascius, *Damascius*, *Traité des Premiers Principles*, 3.119.6–9. Cited by Athanassiadi, *La lutte pour l'orthodoxie*, 215.

[77] See Athanassiadi's fascinating discussion of Damascius' attempt to preserve the teachings and mystagogy of Iamblichus (*La lutte pour l'orthodoxie,* chap. 6).

[78] Athanassiadi, *La lutte pour l'orthodoxie,* 212. The awareness of one's *oudeneia* was the result of catharsis. It is exemplified in Socrates, who says of himself in the *Apology* 23A: "The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless (*oudeneia*)." This sense of emptiness, worthlessness, and nothingness, conveyed by the term *oudeneia*, is rooted in the Greek term οὐδέν = 'nothing'; it is the psychological equivalent of the cosmogonic *chôra*. Derrida suggests that Socrates is portrayed as a human analogue of the *chôra*. He writes: "Socrates is not the *khôra*, but he would look a lot like it/her if it/she were someone or something" (Derrida, *Khôra,* 111).

[79] Athanassiadi, *La lutte pour l'orthodoxie,* 212.

[80] Damascius, *Damascius*, *Traité des Premiers Principles*, 1.8.12.

[81] Ibid., 1.8.12–19.

[82] Damascius suggests that while we cannot grasp the intelligible by any kind of definition, the soul may divine (*manteuetai*) it (*De Princ.* I 4.13–15), but this comes, he says,

> All things are what they are by virtue of the yearning (*pothôs*) that the One impresses on them towards itself, and it is according to these labor pains (*ôdina*) that each is filled with the unity which is fitting to it and is assimilated to the one and universal cause.[83]

From the uneducated farmer who erects *phalloi* to engage the vernal powers of the cosmos to the Pythagorean sage who performs geometric exercises to align with cosmogenesis, each expresses his yearning, his erotic connection with the divine.[84] Each offers a receptacle that serves as the means to bring unity into multiplicity and multiplicity back to the One. The requirement for all these theurgies was finding the appropriate receptacle to contain the gods. Iamblichus explains:

> Since it was proper that even terrestrial things not be deprived of participating in the divine, the earth received a share in divinity sufficient to receive (*chôrêsai*) the gods. The theurgic art, recognizing this principle in general, and having discovered the proper receptacles (*hupodochas*) in particular as being appropriate to each one of the gods, often brings together stones, herbs, animals, aromatics, and other sacred, perfect, and deiform objects of a similar kind. Then from all these it produces a perfect and pure receptacle (*hupodochê*).[85]

For theurgists the cosmos is a living manifestation, an *agalma* of the Demiurge, so it is not as if objects like stones or plants lacked divine presence until theurgy awakened it. Rather, as Iamblichus puts it:

> Since earthly things possess their being in the totalities of the gods, whenever they have the capacity (*epitêdeia*) to participate in the divine they *immediately* find the gods pre-existing in them prior even to their own essence.[86]

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only after our failings "stimulate the ineffable birthing pains (*arrêtous ôdinas*) in us—I don't know how to put it—toward the ineffable awareness of this sublime truth." *Damascius, Traité des Premiers Principles*, 1.14–16.

[83] Proclus, cited by Trouillard, *La mystagogie*, 77.

[84] On erecting *phalloi* in the spring, see *DM* 38.14–39.3. On the theurgic function of mathematics, Iamblichus says the Pythagorean study of numbers is "god-inspired, anagogic, cathartic, and initiatory" (*De Communi Mathematia Scientia* 69.26–29).

[85] *DM* 233.6–13.

[86] *DM* 29.1–3 (my italics).

As the gods are the pre-essential *archai* of all living things, they are necessarily the *archai* of human souls. Theurgists orchestrated rites in which they recovered this presence and established their identity with the gods by entering their divine activity, their demiurgy/theurgy. Union with the Demiurge, therefore, was not an ascent to a creator above the cosmos; it was to participate in what Sallis calls the "instituting operation" *that is the chôra*: receiving and simultaneously revealing the "eternal measures" (*metra aidia*) of the Demiurge.[87] Iamblichus repeatedly uses the term *chôra* and its cognates to describe this reception and transmission.[88] Virtually every act of theurgy is dependent upon it. Since this is the case, "to establish the soul in the demiurgic god" requires that we receive and embody all the gods of cosmogenesis. Iamblichus explains:

> He who propitiates all these [divine] powers and offers to each gifts that are pleasing and as similar to them as possible will remain secure and free from error since he has completed, perfect and whole, the receptacle (*hupodochê*) of the divine choir.[89]

Gifts offered to the gods include not only physical objects such as stones and plants but also subtler "objects" such as incantations, prayers, concoctions, characters traced on the earth, water, the recitation of divine names, and the performance of melodies and hymns.[90] Each serves as receptacle (*hupodochê*) of the gods appropriate to the capacity of the theurgist.[91] This reception of the gods creates a paradox that is impossible

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[87] *DM* 65.5–7.

[88] Describing the prophet at Colophon, Iamblichus says the purification of his subtle body, the luminous vehicle, allows him "to receive (*chôrein*) the god" *DM* 125.5–6; the collection of material symbols allows us "to receive (*chôrêsai*) the gods" (233.7–8); the offering of symbolic objects "receives (*chôrei*) the gods when they appear" (234.1–11).

[89] *DM* 229.1–6. The divine choir (*theios choros*) is a platonic expression for the totality of the gods, derived from Plato's *Phaedrus* 247a; see Iamblichus, *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries*, 263 n. 331.

[90] For references, see Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 50. On prayer specifically, an essential component of every theurgy, Iamblichus says: "The time we spend in prayer nourishes our intuitive mind and greatly enlarges the soul's receptacle (*hupodochê*) for the gods" (*DM* 238.15–239.2).

[91] As noted above, to be "appropriate" the object must engage the soul's "deep eros" for the Demiurge.

for us but integral to theurgist. We become simultaneously mortal and immortal: we take on the shape of the gods.[92] Iamblichus explains:

> 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 being empowered by divine symbols it is raised up through them to be united with the gods and is led harmoniously into their order. This can rightly be called taking the shape of the gods (*to tôn theôn schêma*).[93]

Theurgy ensured that Platonic philosophers were not simply intellectuals, which is our contemporary caricature. They were divine men and women and possessed supernatural power. In the sixth century, Hierocles characterized Platonic philosophy as follows:

> Philosophy is united with the art of sacred things since this art is concerned with the purification of the luminous body (*augoeidês*), *and if you separate philosophical thinking from this art, you will find that it no longer has the same power*.[94]

The Platonic dualism inherited and criticized by postmodern thinkers does not include the purification of the *augoeidês* described by Hierocles, nor does it include the hieratic art of theurgy. The Platonism we have inherited is conceptually manageable and clear, but it no longer has power; its bifurcated body is virtually dead, and its interpreters . . . intellectual morticians. It is no wonder that Derrida and other postmodern critics resisted the metaphysical tomb that goes by the name of Platonism. Platonic dualism—apart from its simplistic misreading of Plato—lacks *praxis*, including a theurgic expression that transforms philosophers into divine beings.[95] The Demiurge in this dualist Platonism has been utterly

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[92] Such paradox was part of Iamblichus' definition of the human soul. Due to its embodiment "that which is immortal in the soul is filled completely with mortality and no longer remains only immortal"; cited in Simplicius [Priscian], *In De Anima* 90.32–24. Carlos Steel has argued persuasively that the author of the Simplicius commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* was Priscian. See Steel, *The Changing Self*, 16–20.

[93] *DM* 184.1–6.

[94] Hierocles, *In Carmen aureum* 48:26.24–28 (my italics). See Hadot, *Studies on the Neoplatonist Hierocles*, 48.

[95] Deification remains a stumbling point for us because "becoming god" is imagined within a Christian and dualist framework. The Christian creator stands apart from and

removed from our world, spatially and temporally, and the mysterious *chôra*, the matrix that continually gives birth to the world, has been made into a mere substrate, a concept that fits neatly into our picture of a craftsman creator.[96]

We have forgotten the rich tradition in which Platonists lived in the body of a Demiurge whose powers are expressed in nature and through whom—in theurgy—we become divine incarnations. For Iamblichus, this was the ancient and universal religion preserved by Egyptians, received by Pythagoras and Plato, and sustained by theurgists. Yet this tradition was at risk because Greek intellectuals wanted to gloss over the *chôra* and the catharsis required in mystagogy. Iamblichus recognized that it is precisely through this nothingness—through giving up our intellectual grasping and making our minds passive, a receptacle, a *chôra*—that we enter the labor pains of demiurgy.[97] It is then that the purified soul realizes its cosmogonic function defined by Iamblichus as "the contribution of power, life, and activity from wholes to parts."[98] By transforming ourselves into the *chôra*,

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above creation, a demiurgic craftsman with sole ruling authority; becoming god would in some way usurp this authority. In the processional model of the later Platonists, the Demiurge is not separated from his creation but *is revealed in it.* As Trouillard put it: "The highest perfection must inform the lowest orders in a germinal way and assume them *as the condition of its realization* [my italics]. Thus one is led to conceive of the supernatural as the 'pre-essential' (*proousios*) that engenders essence and establishes nature as its mediation. . . . The superiority of the supernatural is thus an anteriority. The beyond (*au-delà*) is equivalent to a within (*en-decà*); *huper* [above] is better expressed by *pro* [before]" (Trouillard, "Procession néoplatonicienne," 14). In the processional model, becoming divine completes the work of the Demiurge and is, in the deepest sense, *the purpose of our embodiment.*

[96] Trouillard, again, explained the absence of the Demiurge from our world as based on the Christian model with the Creator separate from his creation vs. the Neoplatonic model of procession (*prohodos*) in which the highest levels are present in the lowest. This is the single most important distinction between what underlies our contemporary worldview and the worldview of the ancient Platonists. See "Procession néoplatonicienne," 1–30.

[97] See Athanassiadi: "L'ὠδίς, qui, par un jeu de mots cruel, deviant la seule ὁδός, est un ὁδός ἄποροs—une impasse" (*La lutte pour l'orthodoxie*, 209).

[98] Iamblichus, *Iamblichus De Anima*, trans. Finamore and Dillon, 70.1–10. Iamblichus says that cleansing the soul from its bodily fixations was merely a preliminary stage of catharsis to be followed by an active cooperation with the gods. He explains: "[T]he most useful goals of catharsis are: (1) withdrawal from foreign elements; (2) restoration of one's own essence; (3) perfection; (4) fullness; (5) independence; (6) ascent to the creative cause; (7) conjunction of parts to wholes; and (8) contribution of power, life, and activity from the wholes to the parts." According to Iamblichus, this is the ancient teach-

the "pure and divine matter" that is prior to creation,[99] we become creators of the world with the Demiurge. In the *Symposium*, Diotima reveals to Socrates that this is our deepest desire. What eros wants, she tells him, is not beauty but *to give birth* in beauty,[100] for it is through this activity we partake of immortality.[101] What the initiates of mystagogy want is not divinity—that is the exoteric explanation: what they want is to give birth to the world. They want to embody the Demiurge.

III. In Lieu of a Conclusion

If Plato's difficult description of the *chôra* was distorted to fit a more coherent and less difficult definition, the theurgic tradition that embodies it presents an even greater challenge, especially in trying to make sense of theurgists as incarnations of the Demiurge. Because we are either radically egalitarian and secular materialists or are hidebound by our religious orthodoxy, the idea that Platonists (and other philosophers) made deification the goal of their tradition is unthinkable to us. And if we are forced by the evidence to admit that they spoke in this way, we tone it down; we make it a purely conceptual process portrayed in mythical terms. In short, they didn't really become divine. It was simply their rhetoric, and this is easier for us to accept. But the truth is that these sages were different both in their thinking and in their energetic presence. There is a long and attested tradition of what today we would call the paranormal powers of these sages, including Pythagoras, Socrates, Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus, and many others. Rather than believe the veracity of the stories of their supernatural powers, we either ignore or dismiss them because these stories do not fit into our rational and materialist view of the world. And theurgy most certainly does not. Because theurgy explicitly maintains that propositional thinking and syllogistic logic must be superseded by rites of divination and sacrifice, it has become an embarrassment to

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ing, which he contrasts with the view of certain modern Platonists who see catharsis as simple withdrawal from the body and separation from the material world. These, he says, are merely the "lesser goals" (*smikra telê*) of catharsis.

[99] *DM* 232.13–233.2.

[100] *Symposium* 206e.

[101] *Symposium* 212a–b.

those who see themselves as the heirs of Platonic rationalism. Theurgy does not fit, yet the fact that Iamblichus was recognized by the leading Platonists of antiquity as the "best interpreter of divine reality" suggests that either we don't understand Platonism or that the Platonists themselves didn't understand their own tradition. Sadly, we have opted for the latter conclusion.

Iamblichus' *On the Mysteries* is, as E. R. Dodds put it, "a manifesto of irrationalism."[102] He might have said it exemplifies a bastard kind of thinking, or that it presents a dream-like world where gods incarnate in human beings. Precisely. For theurgy incorporates the *chôra* as *praxis*. Instead of disparaging this tradition as not fitting *our* definition of Platonism, perhaps we should dare to reenter the choric abyss through myth and dream. By reengaging the *chôra* through dream-like thinking, we might begin to recover a sense of the paradox these later Platonists so elegantly held.

To John Sallis' credit, he has done just that. He explores the myth of Orpheus as imagined by Maurice Blanchot to enter the mystery of the *chôra*. For Blanchot, Eurydice exemplifies radical concealment, the utter darkness of Hades that Orpheus wishes to bring into the light. Quoting from Blanchot (who sounds like *The Chaldean Oracles*), Sallis writes:

> "He [Orpheus] can draw it upwards, but only by keeping his back turned to it. This turning away is the only way he can approach it: this is the meaning of the concealment revealed in the night." In other words, [Sallis continues], he must bring it into the daylight in such a way as also to let it remain concealment; he must draw it up into the open in a way that also lets it remain closed in the depths. In still other words, the depth, the night, does not submit to the gaze [of Orpheus], which would divest it of its very character as concealment. If it is to be revealed, it must be revealed as concealed . . . "it only reveals itself by concealing itself in the work."[103]

In the same way, the Demiurge and the *chôra* remain concealed in the work of creation. One response to this work is to violently grasp at it, try to control it, and drag it into the light. This is the path of sorcery, according to Iamblichus. It is what Damascius calls the Titanic mode that

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[102] Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 287.

[103] Sallis, *The Verge of Philosophy*, 132–33.

further alienates us from our depths.[104] The theurgist, however, remains in the *chôra*, the anterior and generous mother, and from its concealment creates light. Sallis notes that in *The Republic*, at the culmination of the soul's ascent, Socrates speaks of seeing the sun, the image of the Good. "I suppose," Socrates says, "he would be able to look upon the sun—not its appearances in water or in some other base but the sun itself, by itself in its own χώρα—and behold how it is."[105] For Platonists, the *chôra* is the anterior receptacle not only of the sensible world but of the intelligible as well. More precisely, she is the receptacle *before* sensible and intelligible can be distinguished. As *The Chaldean Oracles* put it:

> She is the source and stream of blessed noetic realities . . . she receives the birth of all in her inexpressible womb and pours forth this birth on the cosmos as it runs its course.[106]

Lest this sound too esoteric, dream-like, and—to borrow Plato's term—*difficult*, the utter darkness of the *chôra* is necessary to create breathing space for *any* relationship, community, conversation, or creative activity. It is a negative capability, one that allows us to endure uncertainties without, as John Keats put it, "any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[107] It allows us to receive the mystery of the other; it allows us to mirror the mystery of the world.

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KEYWORDS | chôra, hupodochê, theurgy, Demiurge, non-dualism and dualism, cosmogenesis

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[104] As Damascius put it in his commentary on the *Phaedo*: "Having fled the undivided Dionysian life and fixed their actual existence on the level of the Titanic and confined way of life, souls are in shackles and in 'custody'" (*Phaedo* 62b4). See Damascius, *Damascius, Traité des Premiers Principles*, trans. Combès and Westernick, 166.2–3.

[105] *Republic* 516b. Sallis, "Daydream," 404–5. Sallis disagrees with Derrida on the sense of the *chôra* in *The Republic*. He sees it as having "continuity," even a "unity" of meaning with the *chôra* of the *Timaeus*. Derrida did not. He saw the *chôra* of *The Republic* as "only a homonym, almost another word"; see Sallis, *The Verge of Philosophy*, 104–6.

[106] *The Chaldean Oracles*, trans. Majecik, frag. 56, 70–71. This verse is in praise of Rhea, whom I take to be equivalent in function to the *chôra*.

[107] Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works*, 277.

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