

## EROS IN PLATO AND IN EARLY CHRISTIAN PLATONISTS

EROS IN PLATO AND EARLY CHRISTIAN PLATONISTS:  
A PHILOSOPHICAL POETICS

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## Abstract

This dissertation will examine the role of eros in Plato's middle dialogues -- the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium* and *Republic* -- and the various exercises or techniques found there for the correction and guidance of desire, leading to participation in what is, for Plato, the height of philosophy, the contemplative life. The training to which Socrates subjects his primary interlocutors in these three dialogues arises in conversation, and is a series of "spiritual exercises," in the words of Pierre Hadot, or therapies, drawing his partners in dialectic to a capacity to be arrested by philosophical beauty. Such drawing and the exercises for this -- the inducing of shame in those interlocutors who hold mistaken models of eros (Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus*), meditation on accurate paradigms of philosophy (the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*) -- amount to a philosophical poetics, Plato's way of doing philosophy.

A comparable training of desire appears in the ascetical theology of such Christian writers as John Cassian, pseudo-Dionysius and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. As with Plato's dialogues, the works of these thinkers are accounts of "turning the soul around" (*Republic* 518d, 521c), and are themselves training documents for those who subsequently read them. They are less concerned with the assertion of dogma than with the drawing of such readers into the practice of the higher forms of contemplative prayer. This dissertation sees a continuous tradition of erotics and soul craft extending from Plato to Christian writers in spirituality in late antiquity and beyond.

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## Introduction

### Eros in Plato and Early Christian Platonists:

#### A Philosophical Poetics

George Grant, in his essay “In Defence of North America,” that rumbling jeremiad beginning *Technology and Empire*, claimed that descendents of European settlers never will be able to hold the gods of the New World as their own, so never will be “autochthonous” where they are, no matter how lengthy the history of their stay on the continent might have been.<sup>1</sup> This rootlessness was ours, said Grant, because of “what we are and what we did.” What we are: detached long ago, while still in Europe, from that part of the Western intellectual tradition which would have taught us the suitability of “living undivided from one’s earth,” we cannot value what we most need, indeed cannot name it. What we did: we met the new land as conquerors and subjugated it. We moved too quickly over the ground, omnivorous, self-deracinating on principle, marked by the inevitably anarchic character of late capitalism, to be formed by where our bodies were. This homelessness has proved disastrous both for human souls and for the colonized land.

Grant believed that the ability to be fed by place was impossible for North Americans of European descent because of our diminished capacity for the practice of attentiveness. Contemplation ceased to be ours when Reformation Europe severed its links to the thought of Greece, and turned to a literally read Bible and modern science for its sustenance.<sup>2</sup>



This dissertation attempts a resuscitation of a part of this jettisoned tradition, the erotics of Plato, as they are found in the middle dialogues and the *Seventh Letter*, which are, as well, the erotics of the Christian Platonists of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. It will be an extended exegesis of a series of books -- Plato's *Phaedrus*, *Symposium* and *Republic*; John Cassian's *Conferences*; *The Divine Names*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and *The Mystical Theology* of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite; and *The Cloud of Unknowing* -- in which a detailed phenomenology of desire is worked out. It also will include more sporadic, less comprehensive, readings of works on which the eight books under careful review depend -- the *Odyssey*; Origen's *On First Principles*; Evagrius' *Praktikos* and *Chapters on Prayer*; the *Enneads* of Plotinus; Proclus' *Elements of Theology*; and Richard of St. Victor's *The Twelve Patriarchs* and *The Mystical Ark*. These works comprise a strand of thought in the Western tradition so misrepresented as to be forgotten, a particular way of doing philosophy, a particular way of attending to the world. The dissertation will argue that eros plays a foundational role in the contemplative philosophy of Plato, who stands at the head of this tradition, as it does in the ascetical and mystical theologies of Christian students of Plato, indeed that the contemplative life articulated throughout these works amounts to the proper unfolding of desire, as it moves from the cramped, attached, pre-philosophical state of the passions to the homeless inventiveness of contemplative appetite. It further will argue that the incomplete description of desire flowering into contemplation in the dialogues is the essence of Platonic thought, precisely what he took philosophy itself to be.

The close reading of Plato that will begin the thesis will move against the grain of much scholarship in ancient philosophy. The Plato that will appear in these first three chapters will not be the philosopher of systematic doctrines, but of a contemplative practice arising from the correction, the training, of desire, for whom philosophy is therapeutic, the rescue of particular interlocutors from various jammed, contemplatively unfecund, erotic states. Such a reading of Plato while unusual is not novel; it draws inspiration from the work of Pierre Hadot in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* and *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*; from Zdravko Planinc in his *Plato's Political Philosophy* and *Plato through Homer*; and, with less confidence, from Leo Strauss in *The City and Man*. The readings of the Christian writers will be equally heterodox running counter to a tendency in patristic scholarship to see most documents of the early Church as preoccupied exclusively by dogma. The Christian works under examination are rooted in the same reading of Plato to be found in the dissertation, Plato the contemplative, Plato the ascetic, Plato the mystic; while not indifferent to doctrinal theology, they will be read as primarily contributing to the Platonic maieutics of eros.

The exegesis of the dissertation, it is hoped, also will suggest both a philosophical and a literary poetics -- a way of doing philosophy, a way of writing -- and a politics.

Contemplative philosophy or mystical theology, both accounts of the discipline of desire, provide the most trustworthy way of doing poetics, since poetry, like philosophy, like prayer, is more than technique: a poetics that is more than a study of craft is concerned with the life of desire and ascesis in which a particularly reaching sort of poem appears. The deep readings of Plato and early Christian students of Plato will reveal, as well, a broad

ecological politics, an apokatastasis of all things, non-partisan, non-anthropocentric, embracing human communities but reaching beyond their concerns: as Plato argues in the *Republic* ( *Republic* 520a-d ), the only authentic politics arises from extended contemplative practice.



Most critical accounts of Plato, many translations of his work, have the feel of having been written “on official paper,” as Osip Mandelstam says of renderings of the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>3</sup> The orthodox Plato is the Plato of towering, often inconsistent, theories on cosmology, the origin of the soul, epistemology, ethics and politics, an ontologically preoccupied thinker communicating “philosophical teachings”; it is not the Plato of the *Seventh Letter*<sup>4</sup> for whom philosophy is a “divine spark,” (the *Seventh Letter*, 340) is an arduous practice of following desire within the context of a relationship with a guide. The “scientific,” theory-laden Plato offers no logoi on poiesis, is silent on the soul’s return to nature; arch-rationalist, anti-poetic, he seems simply to signal confusedly toward the Enlightenment. This version of Plato, impelled by a jejeune evolutionary theory of intellectual history, flatters the present, but is not the Plato who will appear in the dissertation. The Plato presented there will not be familiar in an awkward, foreshadowing way, but strange in an oddly helpful way. The help he offers is psychagogic and touches on the erotic and the political.

Leo Strauss has reminded us that Plato’s works are not treatises but dialogues, and that “in none of his dialogues does Plato say anything.”<sup>5</sup> To lift a position on epistemology

from the exchanges between Socrates and the geometer-educator Theodorus in the *Theatetus*, for instance, and suppose that this represents Plato's own view, Strauss continues, is equal to believing that Shakespeare held that life is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. Nor will Strauss allow the argument that since Socrates widely is seen as the spokesman of Plato, what this figure says about cosmology or knowledge is Plato's own position, for Socrates is a master of irony, and "to speak through the mouth of a man who is notorious for his irony seems to be tantamount to not asserting anything".<sup>6</sup> besides, Socrates himself insists that he has no teaching, that he has knowledge on only the matter of erotics (*Symposium* 177d-e, 212b; *Lysis* 204b-c; *Phaedrus* 257a-b). This is not a knowledge on which Socrates pronounces, but which he enacts, and enacts differently with each of his primary interlocutors in the middle dialogues. The point of these exchanges is not to communicate information, or to draw an individual to a particular point of view, but "to educate human beings" so they may be "liberated from the charms that make them obtuse"<sup>7</sup>; they are therapies of desire, in other words, that Socrates practices, with modest success, on promising, well-to-do men. Should this liberation be successful, the interlocutor will be fit for philosophy, the contemplation of beauty. While Socrates' maieutics necessarily change with each conversational partner, each dialogue retains its capacity to act as a heuristic for any reader, that is, as a goad, a direction, to desire.



Patricia Cox speaks of Origen's mode of reading -- which will be discussed in chapter



four as an influence on John Cassian's ascesis of reading -- as a "theological poesis," that is, a discipline which is the making of a new life of deepened contemplative engagement.<sup>8</sup> Cox notes the unsystematic nature of Origen's thought, and chooses to call his approach to reading a hermeneutical style, instigating and directing the spiralling of the attentive soul. Etymologically, she observes, the roots of "style" lie in *στιγμα*, a word meaning "tattoo-mark" or "spot"; English cognates are the verbs "stick" and "sting."<sup>9</sup> Origen's is a poesis by which a reader is pricked and marked, the practice of an attention to imagery that provokes interior change.

Poetics is usually thought of as the study of the mechanics within the making of poems. It, thus, inquires into the nature of metaphor, into prosody, stances to language; but also, less usually, it is a study of the range of existential, spiritual, domestic, as well as literary, conditions within which poems grow -- the poet's habitual reading, for example, where she lives, her family arrangements, who her friends are, whether she takes walks, where she takes them and for how long.<sup>10</sup>

Poetics, in this dissertation, will be a consideration of the interiority in which poetry flourishes; this poem-welcoming innerness, I believe, is the same as the interiority of one who practices philosophy, understood in the Socratic sense as an erotic, contemplative undertaking: it is a positionless permeability, an availability to daemonic things. A similar ascesis lies on either side of the poem: the reader, just as the writer before her, is brought to such permeability: the poem growing from contemplative practice is the one most likely to engender it. A philosophical poetics is the way in which such an availability is fostered in an individual; it is the ascetical practice of such a way. A similar preparation is crucial for

the poems “written on the front and on the back” (*Exodus* 32: 15), poems that have an inner life, as well as a surface of music and image, and which can reach the inner life of a reader, works, that is, which permit an anagogic reading.



The politics inherent in Origen’s exegetical mystical theology, which are the completion of his therapeutics for the soul, are a healing, a return to nature, an apokatastasis, not just of the individual, but of the human world and the cosmos itself. Plato’s mystical politics are more modest: the life of contemplation urged in the middle dialogues and elsewhere is more readily discovered and led in a city influenced by those who have completed the contemplative ascent and returned to the soul’s first home (*Phaedrus*, 247a-248b), and who now practice lives of unbroken attention. Contemplation is the sole source of virtue with both: for Plato, this virtue is foundational for the state; for Origen and other Christian thinkers of late antiquity, the various antinomies in being are erased as one rises in contemplation. While this dissertation is not explicitly concerned with politics but the unfolding of desire within the life of contemplation, it recognizes that this contemplation does have a political telos -- kallipolis, the Kingdom of Heaven -- and that exegetical accounts of contemplative practice in Plato and Christian Platonists necessarily touch on the disposition of contemplative courtesy which is the antipode of “that self-propelling will to technology”<sup>11</sup> which George Grant says marks the versions of modernity of both the right and the left.



This dissertation also explores the epistemology of contemplation, the dependence of this form of knowing on discursive reason and on ontology, its noblest fruit, together with contemplation's ultimate opposition to such reason and its accounts of being, indeed contemplative knowing's important task of undermining both. Chapter Five considers the cognitive training to which pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite subjects his interlocutor in *The Divine Names*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and *The Mystical Theology*, a linguistic ritual in which the subjectivity of the one who reads and is instructed is trued by, among other things, a recurring reprisal of cosmology, even as his attachment to the construction of cosmology is continuously weakened. A significant part of this training is liturgical in which the presbyter to whom the three Dionysian works are addressed is formed by the observation and enactment of ceremonial gesture, his learning not rational but theurgical, an alteration won by the penetrative power of numinal movements and objects, in particular the "statues" of apt words. In his commitment to theurgic practice, pseudo-Dionysius reveals his debt to Iamblichus and Proclus, drawing Neoplatonist pedagogy into Christian theological formation.

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a disciple of pseudo-Dionysius, is equally apophatic, similarly suspicious of discursive reason in contemplation, wary of a dominant preoccupation with dogmatic theology in the interior life. Nevertheless, like the other contemplatives considered in the dissertation, he is not a romantic vitalist, eschewing reason for some occult intuitive faculty; following Richard of St. Victor, he shows the role reason plays in contemplative practice, where, allied with the imagination, it both stirs and directs initial contemplative appetite. However, for *The Cloud* author, ontology, rather than being

the end of theology, is ascetical discipline breeding humility by placing the mind of one in training within the largest possible account of being. As well as being interior training, this ascetical exercise of reason is political formation, shaping deference in the contemplative before all things worthy of contemplative courtesy.



The dissertation will conclude with two meditative essays where enactments of the contemplative practice under review in the bulk of the thesis are described. We are not from where we are, as George Grant remarked; we, descendents of European settlers, do not come from this ground. We have our graves here; we have spent a few generations changing the land, but we have yet to take out chthonic North American citizenship. Some tasks are generational, and this one is so freshly started most of us are not even aware we have begun it, the work of making a home where we are.

Landscapes have demanding apprenticeships; these admit no shortcuts, such as the use of aboriginal stories as if they were one's own paradigmatic accounts. European descendents in North America must find their own way of being where they are, something in their past that will show them a path to their idiosyncratic way of residence, a route back for them. There is, of course, much that seems cataclysmic, place-erasing, in this past -- an arrogant, anthropocentric Christian ontology, a Baconian, privateering union of experimental science, technology and human enrichment. But it is from this past, some part of it, that we have to come: this, after all, is domicile as well.

I suspect that the way to where we are is through plain desire -- and on this, on eros, its poverty, its leaping, the Western intellectual tradition has much to say that is surprisingly acute. The dissertation will speak again a few of the essential works of Western erotics, beginning with the *Phaedrus*, in the hope that a probing, not-wholly-comprehending restatement can nudge a reader closer to what seems necessary but unenterable: the erotic life. This re-saying of books will be an re-enactment of the flow of experience they parse and will bring a small interior correction. The fact that these books can be read in this way sets them apart from almost all contemporary ones. The thesis will be not so much exegesis as apothegmata, especially, initially, of Socrates, his interlocutors, and of Odysseus, the one he remembers and re-imagines as model. We become what we attend to. The thesis will begin with the *Phaedrus*. The shape of Odysseus floats in this work, haunting, as it does in others.<sup>12</sup> So, first Odysseus, the sleepy one, the one who relentlessly sleeps.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), p.17.
- <sup>2</sup> Grant, pp.19-20.
- <sup>3</sup> Quoted in Seamus Heaney, "Introduction" in *Beowulf, A New Verse Translation* (New York: W.W.. Norton, 2000), p. ix.
- <sup>4</sup> On the authenticity and the philosophy of the *Seventh Letter*, see James Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom and Silence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).
- <sup>5</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 50.
- <sup>6</sup> Strauss, pp. 50-1
- <sup>7</sup> Strauss, pp. 59-60.
- <sup>8</sup> Patricia Cox, " ' In My Father's House Are Many Dwelling Places': κτισσα in Origen's *De Principiis*" in *Anglican Theological Review*, 62, 1980, p. 336.
- <sup>9</sup> Cox, p. 336.
- <sup>10</sup> Coleridge observed that the rhythmic regularity of Wordsworth's poetry was an aural replication of the author's habit of pacing on gravelled walkways as he composed; Coleridge himself preferred thrashing through thickets. Osip Mandelstam noted that the music of Dante, especially in the *Purgatorio*, glorified "the human gait, the measure and rhythm of walking." Osip Mandelstam, "Conversation About Dante," in *Mandelstam, The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, Jane Gary Harris, ed., trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), p. 400.
- <sup>11</sup> Grant, p. 27.
- <sup>12</sup> See Zdravko Planinc, *Plato's Political Philosophy* (Columbia: University of Missouri

Press, 1991) and “Homeric Imagery in the *Phaedrus*” in *Politics, Philosophy, Writing: Plato’s Art of Caring for Souls* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001) for discussion of Plato’s considerable debt to Homer.

# I



## Chapter One

### Philosophical Apokatastasis: On Writing and Return

Resourceful, rash Odysseus, from whom no trick is hidden (*Iliad*, XXIII. 730), the many-minded man, the man of many turns, acrobatically-witted, sleepy, skillful, much contriving Odysseus, wing-minded, must stay seven years in a cave on a island "where the navel of the sea is" (*Odyssey*, I. 50); here he comes to weep for home: none swears Menelaos, swears Antikleia (XI. 216), has suffered like Odysseus; none has touched his exemplary affliction. Calypso, his guard, celestial lover, sole permanent inhabitant of omphallic Ogygia, Odysseus' guide, is the daughter of Atlas, whose knowledge of the underworld ("the depths of the whole sea") is pre-eminent, Atlas who is the guardian of the tree-like way between heaven and earth. His daughter promises to conceal nothing from her weeping, unwilling lover, the versatile-minded wretch insatiate in tales (XIII. 293): she shows him how to build the ship that will take him to within sight of the island of a people who are equal to the gods (VI. 244), through whom the gods ventriloquize their hidden minds (VI. 12), the Phaiakians who eventually will deliver the thought-bright man home. She gives him the adz and the double-bladed axe, occult tools,<sup>1</sup> to build his ship; she takes him to the part of her island where alder, poplar, fir inch to the heavens: by means of the heaven-entering trees he will make his way. Calypso is Odysseus' psychopomp, overseeing his purification, his instruction, bathing and clothing him in preparation for his journey, teaching him that he must accomplish all that he must do without "escort of gods." Other guides are the daimonic Phaiakians themselves, renowned as eros-like intermediaries: they offer the man of rapid thoughts their own thought-

steered ships, "as swift as any wing or thought" (VII. 36), vehicles of ecstasy, as a means of going back, and lay him down in a leveling trance on the shores of Ithaka, exquisite goods from their perfect home stacked around him.

Odysseus' travels both before and after his incubation in the cave of Calypso -- place of beauty and poverty, encircled with blooming vines, surrounded by fields of violet and wild parsley, the source of four rivers, a place where the birds sleep, near which Odysseus groans and shatters his heart with tears (V. 3), place of ravishment and compunction, a school of fundamental desire -- his journeys to and from this hidden, infiltrating place are unlike ordinary voyages; like the hero Lemminkainen in the Finnish folk epic *Kalevala* -- the "handsome man with the far-roving mind" (*Kalevala*, 26. 31), the "reckless" one, the "rascal" -- Odysseus' is an enchanted form of travel, filled with unrealism, including an underworld descent. He leaves Troy and sacks Ismarus, city of the Cicones, Thracian allies of the Trojans: up to this point his adventures, though heroic, are not outsized; but as he rounds Malea, carrying a goat skin bag of black, sweet wine, one part mixed with twenty parts water, given him by Maron, priest of Apollo, who lives in the tree-thick grove of Phoebus Apollo, he's driven off course (IX. 80-1) and suddenly what happens to him takes on the enormity of vision or nightmare. Giants, monsters, implausible acts -- everything inflated, grotesque, the hyperbole of an unguarded psyche, shimmering with the exaggeration of ekstasis. Like the author-hero in the poem of Parmenides, like the sea-going servant hero in John Skaay's Haida epic *The One They Hand Along*,<sup>2</sup> Odysseus travels spiritually now along the *axis mundi*, through an interior place of mythic exploit.

Odysseus' numinous adventures after rounding Malea have numerous shamanistic

features, as has been often noted.<sup>3</sup> There is his ambivalent celestial marriage to Calypso, which, in part, launches his travels. There is the black wine of Maron, the "godly drink," known to few, resembling the trance-inducing mushrooms and tobacco juice Eliade says Ugrian and Jivaro shamans took.<sup>4</sup> Maron lives in the grove of Apollo in northern Greece, home place of Hyperborean Apollo; this double association with the god points unmistakably to an ecstatic calling: Aristeas of Proconnesus, a famous seer mentioned by Herodotus, a northerner as well, fell into a trance in which his soul was "seized" by Apollo: after this, he was capable of bilocation, his soul leaving him in the form of a raven as he accompanied the god.<sup>5</sup> Abaris, also a northerner, also with powers to end pestilences and quell earthquakes, carried a golden arrow, standing for his link with Apollo and his capacity for magic flight. Odysseus' seclusion in the cave on Ogygia, further, resembles the immurement of the traditional ecstatic candidate in the bush -- Odysseus' "bush" is not only Calypso's cave but also the wilderness of the sea -- during which his fellow villagers supposed him dead, devoured by monsters, by a god, so that when he returned he was not recognized but thought to be a ghost, just as Penelope supposes Odysseus dead and cannot see him as her husband when he speaks to her in their home. Odysseus' sleepiness, his "relentless sleep" (XII. 372) on several occasions throughout his journey, suggests the lethargic drowsiness typical of ecstatic candidacy, as well as the leaving of the body in trance; Chukchee shamans achieved their miraculous flight to the center of the world, to the underworld, then into the celestial spheres, during such states in the "canoe" of the drum, their trance called a "sinking": the man of rapid thoughts, sleepy Odysseus, accomplishes his transit to Hades "in a black ship" (X. 503) and returns to Ithaka in thick slumber in a mind-driven craft. Odysseus' remarkable suffering, his

god-fashioned disquiet, recalls the initiatory sickness or anxiety central to the shaping of ecstasies throughout northeast Asia.

The tree, poplar, birch, willow, appears repeatedly in the *Odyssey*; it is the same tree that in Siberian ceremonialism is the means by which one moves along the *axis mundi*, the cosmic tree itself, providing entry to the world of the dead and the heavenly regions. Odysseus enters Hades, following Circe's instruction, through the poplar groves of Persephone, near which, a short way on, is the "moldy hall" of the underworld (X. 509-512); he arrives at the island of the god-equal Phaiakians in a craft worked from Calypso's heaven-touching grove; he saves himself from the pull of the Sirens, insuring the continuation of his ecstatic journey, by having himself tied to the mast of his ship. The pattern and purpose of Odysseus' journey also has shamanic qualities: a descent to the dead, ascent to heaven, effecting a restoration of political equilibrium, the original conditions of home. Like all mythic, interior travel, Odysseus' adventures involve the re-establishment of communication between earth and heaven -- he eventually acquiesces to the gods -- which in turn achieves the purging of social corruption. His ordeal, as with traditional ecstatic undertaking, effects a political as well as personal purification. But Odysseus is more than shamanic: he is the advance scout of something newer, the possessor of a cluster of qualities that Socrates in the *Phaedrus* will associate with the practice of philosophy. Indeed Odysseus is a philosophical exemplar in his solitary apartness, in his large capacity for travel to extreme places both within himself and the numinal regions, in his burgeoning passivity to divine exigence, in his stripping, in his daimonic affliction, but above all in his affective apokatastatic nostalgia: the one thing he does not lose in the course of his unparalleled suffering is his longing for home:

it is to just this form of singleheartedness that he is stripped.



Socrates meets Phaedrus, the youngish man for whom the dialogue is named, just as he is about to leave the city for a walk outside the walls, where he hopes, in country silence, to learn by heart a talk given earlier that day by Lysias, his young beloved, on the preferability of the non-lover as a sexual partner. Phaedrus has appeared before, in the *Symposium*, where he was called the father of the speeches, instigating the praises of eros with the complaint that too little reverence was shown the god (*Symposium*, 177c). In his own encomium in that dialogue, he showed himself to be a romantic sentimentalist: love is a great god, of immeasurable benefit to humankind, of especial benefit to beloved youths. Here we find him amatively leagued with the sophist Lysias, a glittering, widely celebrated young author (*Phaedrus*, 228a), and while Phaedrus remains credulous, we discover that he has shifted his loyalties from one idealism to another: it is the efficiency, the muscle, of charm in seduction that he now esteems. He is completely bowled over by the virtuosity of the speech given by his beloved hours before -- a copy of it bulges priapically beneath his tunic -- its audacious trickery, purportedly usable by anyone, aimed at the importuning of a beautiful boy by someone who is not in love with him: the fact that the speech has nothing to do with any conviction on the part of the one who made it simply adds to its dazzle, makes it seem even more effortlessly masterful. Lysias has produced it as nothing more than a shimmering display of rhetorical ingenuity, an advertisement for his facility, yet Phaedrus is moved by the

elegance and cleverness of these remarks as if they were actually beautiful (227c) -- he responds to the glitter of Lysias' intelligence with Corybantic zeal (228b); as with love, the ersatz seems genuine to him. He greets Socrates with a shiver of delight (228b), seeing in him the perfect companion with whom to rehearse what he's heard this morning, since, he says, Lysias, "in a roundabout way," is interested in love, just as Socrates is known by all to be. Socrates agrees with Phaedrus' suggestion that he join him in his walk in the country and that he serve as an audience for Phaedrus' repetition of Lysias' speech; he repeatedly asks Phaedrus to lead him as they move away from the city; he seems helpless in his desire to hear what Phaedrus has heard; but as they begin their walk, it is Socrates who suggests that they "leave the path" and go along the Ilisus (229a). Phaedrus and Socrates are on a dialectical journey as soon as they go down to the river, an interior ranging.

The banks of the Ilisus, we soon see, are alive with psychagogic import: a plane tree, sacred to Dionysus, god of wine and mystic ecstasy, stands near the water; from beneath it, the water appears to flow. The scene recalls Calypso's cave, that place of erotic instruction, school of sorrow and remembering, the grove in which it is set, the source of four rivers (*Od.* V. 57-73), but also numerous other depictions of the Tree of Life with the Water of Life flowing either beneath it or from it. The presence of the tree sacred to Dionysus, maker of a descent to the underworld to rescue his mother and an ascent to heaven, recalls the shamanic labours of Odysseus.

Both Phaedrus and Socrates remark on the oddness of the place in Socrates' experience: he *never* travels outside the city walls; landscape and trees, Socrates himself declares, hold no interest for him (230c-d); he requires, it seems, Phaedrus' leading or that of another guide

(230d) to move at all in this alien terrain. But, unexpectedly, it is the urban, humanistic Socrates who is most affected by the scene they have come upon, remarking keenly on the beauty of the tree, the river, the grassy bank; Phaedrus is startled by his companion's strange effulgence. Further, it is Socrates who identifies correctly the mythical significance of the spot: it is near the place where Boreas, the god of the north wind, kidnapped Orithyia, daughter of Erectheus, king of Athens.<sup>6</sup> Socrates corrects Phaedrus, his supposed guide, faux psychopomp, who had assumed that the kidnapping had occurred precisely where they stood, not, as it did, two or three hundred yards downstream. Boreas lived in Thrace -- Dionysus as well had associations with Thrace, the shamanic location -- and had taken the king's daughter there, chthonic nature swallowing the city, where she gave birth to twin boys, both winged like birds.<sup>7</sup> Boreas also is known to have lived in the shape of a horse and sired by the mares of Erichthonius twelve colts so soft of hoof that they did not bend the heads of the wheat as they galloped over a field or cause a ripple on the water if they moved on the sea. All Borean associations with the place suggest the power of magical flight. An altar, Socrates tells Phaedrus, has been erected to the god of the wind, elemental force -- in human form, he is always bearded, muscular -- downstream where a walker would cross to pass into Agra (229c). Socrates later will speak of horses himself in religious ascent; horses, as well as ecstatic ships, as well as birds, were instrumental throughout the ceremonial religions of northern Asia, enabling ecstatic travel.<sup>8</sup> Socrates, though out of place, is peculiarly intimate with the significance and beauty of the river, the tree, the slope: in such surroundings, with their suggestions of Dionysiac passion and transcendence, however, Lysias' speech, unmodified by the city, is reconfigured and its shabbiness, when Phaedrus gets around to

reading it, shows clearly. In love matters, in matters of Dionysiac intensity, in the comprehending of the daimonic import of things in nature, the apparently bumbling Socrates proves to be surprisingly adept.



Yet Socrates, autochthonic, one who knows, declares himself to be unseated by Phaedrus' recitation of Lysias' speech: what puts him in ecstasy (234d), though, is not what Lysias says or how he says it but the effect of Lysias' words on his lover who is radiantly moved as he reads what his beloved has composed. Socrates is arrested by Phaedrus' permeability, the way the speech of another has placed a "Bacchic frenzy" in him; he is caught by Phaedrus' erotically intent passivity -- this, after all, is his own philosophical stance, part of the "ten thousandfold poverty" his "devotion to the god" has brought him (*Apology*, 23c). Phaedrus thinks Socrates is joking when he celebrates his delight; this is the second time Phaedrus doubts the seriousness of Socrates: the first time was when Socrates had been beside himself in praise of the Dionysiac scene they had entered, the bank slope, the river, the tree. Phaedrus does not think well about matters of emotional intensity: oddly, he does not recognize the category of things which includes the frenzy his beloved's speech has placed in him. Though he undergoes it, he does not note it or esteem it: it is not surprising, then, that he fails to cultivate it.

Socrates' own permeability, the substance of his philosophy, rests, in part, on his conviction of his ignorance -- the one thing, aside from "erotic matters," about which he



claims any knowledge (*Apology*, 21d, *Phaedrus*, 235c) -- his emptiness, positionlessness; Socrates carries no speeches beneath his clothes. His insistence upon his ignorance here (235d), his insistence, a little later, on his incompetence (236d), is not ironic but is an assertion of his philosophical poetics: none of his ideas are his own; he assembles no system; he is "an empty jar," the words of others streaming through his ears (235d). But Socrates' reachability, his affective availability to the speech of others, is unlike Phaedrus': it is modified by *phronesis*; through all that presses on him, he reaches for the one thing that corrects desire; he has not lost his wits as a lover (236a) as Phaedrus has; he has discernment. His self-awareness also means that he recognizes the frenzy his permeability places in him as a treasureable thing and he grooms it -- later we will see how this grooming involves attachment to a particular form of memory.

His response to Lysias' remarks is lukewarm -- the rhetorician, he says, just has "spoken in a clear and concise manner, with a precise turn of phrase" (234a), though, Socrates complains, he has repeated himself as if he had no real interest in his topic. The appraisal naturally staggers the enraptured Phaedrus. Socrates, with some clumsiness, goes further: he has no doubt that he can make not only a different speech -- his breast is full, after all; he is not without interest (235c) -- but a better one. He immediately regrets this boast, however, as Phaedrus presses him to give such a speech and sets conditions upon it -- what Socrates says must contain more and better points without repeating any of Lysias' observations except the one that claims that the lover is mad while the non-lover is not. It is impossible, Socrates protests, for him not to appear a ridiculous dilettante before the shimmering professionalism of Lysias (236d). Phaedrus threatens to deprive Socrates of all reports of speeches in the

reports of speeches in the future if he doesn't go ahead and make a competing speech, and Socrates, a "lover of speeches," feels his arm bent toward making some remarks of his own on the destructive madness of love, but he sets his own condition: he will cover his head as he speaks. Odysseus covered his head with his purple mantle in the court of Alcinoos out of shame for the tears he shed listening to Demodocos' account of events at Troy. (*Od.* VIII. 84-6). The shame that Socrates feels during his initial speech, is less for his words than for their effect on the impressionable Phaedrus: he cannot bring himself to read their monstrous effect on his interlocutor's unguarded face. Unlike Socrates, Phaedrus is not aware of his permeability; he doesn't make his wits qualify it; he doesn't profess it, practice it, as Socrates does: in his sentimentality, he is its victim.



Socrates' first speech, a head-covered speech, roughly traces Lysias': Phaedrus cannot imagine any other sort of speech on love (235b); Socrates, true psychagoge, carefully does not exceed his anticipations. Since the purpose of Lysias' talk is the duping of a young man into granting sexual favours to an older man with no emotional ties to him, it works hard to undermine the position of the lover. The lover is contemptible, mad, ill, says Lysias; the lover is an amorous calculator, "keeping his eye on the balance sheet," giving the boy no more than a fair return for his acceding to sexual requests. The lover is naturally boastful -- everyone will hear of his success with the boy -- and he is untrustworthy in the long run as well: he inevitably will move on from his present beloved; his insecurity, further, makes him devious:

he will starve the beloved of the friendships of the wealthy and intelligent, keeping him pathetically dependent. Everyone should feel sorry for the lovers, Lysias urges, not admire them (233b). Non-lovers, on the other hand, are disinterested, magnanimous, generous, because they are not crazed, made possessive or irritably protective of their own dignity by love; they do not "follow us, knock on our doors," embarrassing the wanted youth with their ridiculous importunacy. Love, says Lysias, is a disease so virulent that those who suffer it once lose all resistance to any new onslaught (231d). Even the lover himself is aware of himself as sick: he helplessly regards his inability to get himself under control; fully appreciating his chaotic state, he refuses to accept responsibility for decisions he made while in it.

Socrates pushes Lysias' strategic subversion of the lover over the top, writing the figure large as he does the "feverish city" in the *Republic* for his conversational partner, Glaucon, that young man with slightly sinister political enthusiasms, who, like Phaedrus, has insufficient prudence to read the soul -- and once more, the point of the distortion is to repel, nudging an interlocutor from a jammed erotic state. The lover, he says, has utterly lost his mind, is everything Lysias says he is, deceitful, irritable, as well as being "absolutely devastating to the cultivation" of the beloved's soul (241c); imperious in his demands, he works out of a mad insecurity to make his boy weaker and inferior to himself (239a); the lover, older, is also physically disgusting, with parts that are "a misery even to hear . . . mentioned, let alone actually handle them . . ." (240d). But Socrates unexpectedly stops when Phaedrus assumes he is only half way through: he has yet to praise the non-lover. He has, however, presented a lurid version of Lysias' lover -- one so grotesquely drawn it must

undermine even the tenability of the position of the non-lover -- from which a supporter of the Lysianic position might be expected to recoil: he has given Phaedrus grounds to regret his enthusiasm. He halts because, he says, he has heard " a voice coming from this very spot," (242c) the numinal river bank with its associations with chthonic gods, his daimonion, the divine voice that always turns him away from whatever "incorrect" thing he is about to do (*Apology*, 31d, 40a). He says he sees now he has been impious in his denigration of love, which is actually, he now understands, " a god or something divine," (242e), and having said what he did is in need of purification, the famous purification of Stesichorus, a palinode, a recantatory poem erasing what was said before.

Phaedrus misses much of this. He believes Socrates' speech to be an incomplete copy of Lysias' -- he has conflated the two individuals from the beginning of the dialogue; he fails to see Socrates' remarks as caricature; he does not recoil from their exaggeration -- and so for him Socrates' shame has a pedagogical significance: Socrates models for his interlocutor a way out of his infatuation with Lysias' glittering performance, his elegant simulacrum of insight; but Phaedrus is not reached by this piece of Socratic instruction: the nature of his permeability makes him ravishable, but not educable.



Socrates' reversal, his purification, is initially a defence of madness. Certain forms of insanity, he says, are wanted, the words, we can imagine, rising in the intense listening of the erotic, the philosophical, individual. The beneficial insanities are mantic, engined by the god,

driving one away from the lesser good of self-control (244d): they cause one to leave the path (229a); they drive one off course (*Od.* IX. 80-1), making those so afflicted out-of-place, disturbed (*Phaedrus*, 249a), estranged in the Socratic manner (*Theaetetus*, 149a)<sup>9</sup>, such a self-displaced, stirred craning, at its furthest reach, is the state of philosophy itself (249c-d), an alacrity, an erotic reachability not unlike Phaedrus' delight, but pulled by an object that does not contort it to the disadvantage of an individual -- a telos the pursuit of which unexpectedly unfolds the person into the musicality of virtue.

There is the madness of the oracle, says Socrates -- the prophetess at Delphi, the priestesses at Dodona (244b) -- who are "out of their minds when they perform that fine work of theirs for all of Greece"; there is the therapeutic madness, the sharp psychagogic, diagnostic inspiration, that discerns the individual in need of rites and purifications, lifting from them the guilt of ancient crimes (244d-e). There is the Bacchic frenzy the Muses place in particular poets, which drives their work past that of writers with mere technical mastery. A demonstration of such a superseding by one who has been driven out of his mind (245a) appears presently in the dialogue: Socrates, in the palinode, is Muse-goaded; Lysias is never anything more than clever.

Socrates then interrupts his taxonomy of benign, "god-sent" madness (245b) to give an account of what the soul is like, but admits that he can get no closer than an image to the actuality of the soul, since to say what the soul truly is would require, he claims, not only an exceedingly long account, but is a task only a god could manage (246a). The soul, he says, is like the union of a charioteer and a team of horses, both of which are winged, like the mind of Odysseus, like the offspring of Boreas and Orithymia: one of the horses is beautiful and good,

while the other "has the opposite sort of bloodline." (246b) The wings of the soul -- all of the soul is winged -- are what is most divine about it and, thus, divine things -- wisdom, beauty, goodness -- cause them to strengthen; foul, ugly things atrophy them (246e).

The winged human soul, at some early point, joins the procession of gods, led by Zeus, heaven's commander, whom the other eleven deities follow: the procession moves through heaven "looking after everything" (246e), each god accomplishing a particular cosmological task: anyone who wishes to follow them may -- there is no jealousy among those who are divine. They begin their ascent to the banquet at the rim of heaven, and the god's chariots move easily to that place -- they have exquisite balance, are compactly under control -- but human souls who follow them have difficulty, the bad horse, heavier, unruly, pulling the chariot back to earth. What is visible from the rim of heaven is beyond description, yet it speaks directly, nourishingly, to intelligence, offering it intuitively certain, non-reportable views of justice, interior order, knowledge -- contemplative clarities "of what really is what it is." (247e)

The soul that "follows the god most closely, making itself most like the god," (248a) gets at best only a partial view of the colourless, shapeless, intellectible things beyond heaven's rim: the head of the charioteer, struggling with his horses, rises a little "up to the place outside" and sees what lies beyond for a moment, then is pushed aside and down again as other chariots fight to the rim (248a-b): if its partial view of what is true is insufficient, it loses its wings entirely and falls back to earth. The soul's wings may be regrown, but this involves the lucky, relentless work of a number of lifetimes and requires that a soul consecutively chose the life of a philosopher, or, what is virtually the same but somewhat less

unlikely, a lover of beauty or a person tending to erotic love (248d).

A philosopher's mind grows wings because in memory it keeps close to what it has seen; like Odysseus, the philosopher does not fail to recall the quintessential nourishment of his original state. One does this by maintaining an alert receptivity to those reminders of the unparalleled, extra-celestial things, such as the beauty of a boy. Eccentricities flourish in this remembering; people think the person so recollected is "disturbed and rebuke him for this"; the divine possession is invisible to all (249d). Such recollections cause one to be cast out of one's life, manically alacritous: one, then, is caught up in the fourth, the paramount, the sublimating, madness, which is philosophy: the pre-eminent moment in this frenzy, this particular ekstasis, is the appearance, through memory, of apokatastatic desire.



Odysseus achieves his passage to heaven-like Phaiakia by way of trees cut from Calypso's grove, assembled into a boat under her instruction; the Atlaiic shaman enters the celestial home of Bai Ūlgān carried by the soul of a light-coloured horse which has been sacrificed in front of his specially erected yurt, its spine broken after a birch branch has been passed over its back, no blood being allowed to touch the ground or the sacrificer during this ceremony.<sup>10</sup> The traveler in the Socratic palinode moves to a point beyond the rim of heaven in a chariot pulled by one good horse and one bad horse, physical forms, it is usually thought, for the contesting powers of reason and the passions. For all three, the ascent is accomplished with sexual emotion -- Odysseus desires a return to Penelope; the philosopher's ascent begins

when an apokatastatic nostalgia is quickened in him by the repeated sight of a beautiful young man; the ecstatic travel of a Siberian shaman is powered by his erotic love for his *ayami* or tutelary spirit.<sup>11</sup>

The palinode has no ontological significance: it sets in place no dogmas about the nature of the soul or its life before birth; it makes no theological claims; it has nothing to say about the physical structure of the universe. The Socratic account of winged ascent is nothing more than a heavily wrought, action-filled image meant to render the soul (246a) for an interlocutor who loves speeches but has demonstrated an incompetence in the reading of souls. It is also a heuristic, a "disappearing ladder,"<sup>12</sup> intended to lure and shape desire, which evokes nothing other than the full range of desire's secret, almost unspeakable imagination, which the desirer, if he experiences it at all, experiences it strangely as nostalgia: full erotic reach appears as remembering. The beauty of the boy is not the only source of anamnesis: a heuristic tale like the ascent account in the palinode works just as well. Phaedrus repeatedly sees resemblances of the surpassing things -- he is quite attracted to such things, speeches, beautiful, young males -- but he does not remember because his senses do not discern adequately what is before them (249e): he cannot see moral beauty, of course, justice, moderation, but also he cannot fathom physical beauty or literary resonance. Neither takes him anywhere; neither quickens in him the eros which is philosophy.



So Phaedrus and Socrates sit on the river bank in the heat of the afternoon, talking.



The day is hot; the stream is cool.

Beauty is one of the radiant things the soul saw as its head momentarily lifted above the high rim before it was yanked downward by the team it could never control, that had never stopped pulling, before it was shouldered aside by other enthusiastic souls keen to see "that blessed and spectacular vision" in the hectic, noisy moment of rapturous insight: feathers broke off in the melee and forgetting immediately began. Other things were visible in this roiling moment - justice as it is, wisdom as it is -- but they receded further with the soul's descent into the body, so that now the only way to "follow the god's pattern" (253b) and return to what feeds the soul is through erotic love. The only way to do philosophy is through erotic love, philosophy as an interior availability to something that seems to be nostalgia and from which gathers a desire to re-experience the purity of what appears to be ultimate vision - - thus the philosophical need of the bad horse: all of the soul is winged (251b). Philosophy can be done only under these conditions because vision, says Socrates, is the least decayed the senses; beauty, as a result, is the only one of the ultimate things that still comes through to human beings. When it is manifest to a "recent initiate" in the form of a beautiful boy, the person is flattened by an erotic wind, pain and joy; what he feels is the residue of his recent heavenly ravishing; it is a longing for the past (250d), which he construes as a love for an individual. The soul, with some trauma, returns to its feathered state. One becomes manically single-minded -- propriety is forgotten, one's friends, family, one's affairs are forgotten -- thinned to one wanting. But pursuit is not all: the lover is impelled to secure an initiation for the beloved: his love madness must be transferred to the beloved and such a transferral is impossible if the beloved is not romantically captured (253c). Philosophy,

certainly, is the erotic reach for the boy, but it is also the boy's reception of the lover's maieutical good will; this communicates into him what the lover knows: displacement from his life, a sort of affliction, a leaving the path, which marks the beginning of a long apprenticeship in emulating the god (253b).



In the discussion of rhetoric that takes up the last third of the dialogue, the old issue of the difference between Phaedrusean and Socratic permeability is revisited. Phaedrus, a good Lysianic, rests lightly on his loyalties: his admiration for Socrates' palinode nudges him to turn on his beloved, reporting a recent conversation with a politician in which Lysias was attacked as a mere "speech writer." (257c) Socrates objects to the condemnation: it's not writing itself that is shameful -- one *could* write well, he claims -- but speaking or writing shamefully or badly. (258d) But then what distinguishes good writing from bad, he wonders. This question goes to the heart of Phaedrus' character; he is enamoured of books, of writers -- all writers are good, all books impressive. He admires Lysias' lack of roots, lack of place; his being a writer brings him this: the cleverness of Phaedrus' beloved means he never locates himself in a view, the writtenness of his speech means that what it says is portable, usable by anyone under almost any set of circumstances. Because he isn't embodied, nothing limits Lysias' audacity -- his shocking charm, his noble willfulness -- making him, in his caprice, appear *atopos* and godlike.

Socrates warns Phaedrus that as they try to answer the question of quality in writing,

they must be careful to pass by the Siren-like influence of the cicadas who overhear them. The cicadas, sounding in the trees throughout the afternoon above the two speakers on the river bank, were once human beings themselves, who when they first heard the Muses sing were overwhelmed by the pleasure of the experience, forgetting to eat and drink in their rapt delight; they died in this state without even realizing they had done so (259b).

Part of their role now is to report to the Muses human beings who are devoted to the arts and give to these persons "the gift from the gods they are able to give" (259b), that is, they can make those they report dearer to the Muses by making their devotion known. The cicadas themselves are not particularly dear to the divine singers -- they are granted the doubtful gift of being able to indulge their monomaniac listening without interruption for eating and drinking -- nor are they devoted: they perform no art. A being seduced by a thing is not an honouring it: such immolation is a form of willful self-absorption, not devotion, not honouring. The virtuosity of the cicadas is just in their voices; <sup>13</sup> they don't actually say anything; they are Lysianic; not only are they not dear to the Muses, they do not profoundly hear them; not hearing, they are not spoken through. Because they have been seduced, they can't bring a listener to any depth; they can charm but they can't bring one to divine places. They have greed but no madness. Phaedrus is cicada-like; he immolates himself before authorship and the fetishized artifact of the book, disappearing in his own ravishment; he is caught by the romance of the book and the romantic placelessness of the author: he carries a book under his cloak next to his skin. The charm of authorship not only immobilizes him; it keeps him on the surface of writing. He esteems the mere power of being able to move someone, to exploit a basic permeability in a listener, the muscle of the sophist, seeing this as

the height of achievement and not simply the "preliminary" of philosophical maieutics (269b-c) -- such is the primitivism of Phaedrus' own erotic availability.

Socrates, on the other hand, *is* dear to the Muses: he serves Calliope, muse of epic poetry, by doing philosophy (259d), that is by replicating in his acts, his erotic craning, the ecstatic heroism recounted throughout epic literature from Sumerian poems of Inanna's descent, through the *Odyssey*, to the unnamed servant's passage to the land beneath the ocean in Skaay's *The One They Hand Along*. The one difference between the psychagogery of Socratic rhetoric and ecstatic travel is that, though both involve the direction of souls in the underworld, Socratic direction is never funereal: it draw souls, as in the Cave allegory, into some unsayable light.



Good speaking and writing, Socrates argues, come from one who knows the truth of his subject (260e); it is devoted to "directing souls . . . not only in the law courts but also in private." (261a) Bad writing, then, simply ravishes those whose permeability is without discernment; it enchants but takes one nowhere: instead it immobilizes the soul, robbing a person of eros and its motility, its epektatic appetite, Agathon's performance, Glaucon's blueprint for the imperial city, working the erotic deformities of charm's fat sleep and dogmatism. Knowledge of the truth of one's subject comes through the dialectical practice of collection and division, where all things of the same kind -- all forms of madness, say, all forms of love -- are drawn together (265e), then separated into species, cut along "natural

joints," the "left-handed" sort of madness being discarded, the right-handed valued (226a-b). Not all can do this: only those who have undergone the anamnestic experience either through a self-quelling desire for a beautiful youth or through a speech inspiring apokatastatic nostalgia would be able to perform this dialectic: anyone unengined by such memory could be no more than self-ministering, holding in a partisan manner to whatever view of "justice" or "love" most pleased him, no play in his erotic life, conviction misconstrued consistently as understanding.

Good speech also requires a study of the nature of the soul, its various types and the effect different speeches are likely to have on various sorts of soul; such knowledge comes by means of "a long rough path," (272c) that no one would attempt unless he had an ambition "to be able to speak and act in a way that pleases the gods as much as possible." (273e) The ability to read souls taxonomically cannot come from written accounts of rhetoric, which systematize address, shrinking the complexity of maieutics to a manual; this perpetrates the deception that lies in all writing -- that the reproduction of an experience is equal to the undergoing of the experience; it does not confess the vicarious nature of writing itself. Codified, written instruction on rhetoric, like all writing that takes itself with a fatal seriousness to embody knowledge of lasting importance (277d), confuses representation, here analysis, with the thing itself (275c), imagines it identifies without remainder. Socrates has in mind works on the mechanics of rhetoric by the peers of Lysias, purporting to teach the skill of arguing what is likely -- an endeavour that, even with good will, he believes to be fraudulent. It distances one from what one would know -- it breeds forgetting (275a): apokatastatic remembering is an erotic enterprise and grows, at least in part, from an

experience of poverty. The conditions for this poverty are erased in the identification of system with understanding: writing that takes itself as apogee achievement truncates desire. Apodictic, exhaustive, it gives the impression that it yields clear and certain results (277d), analysis confused with authority: yet it is only the simulacrum of the term of inquiry. In fact, such writing is not even inquiry since it is no longer appetitive, epektatic. If system is taken as anything other than training or heuristic, if it is held to be a terminal state, it de-eroticizes inquiry. Phaedrus cannot imagine any inquiry beyond system and its application as technique.



Odysseus arrives home because it has not left his imagination since his heart was broken during his seven years sequestering in Calypso's cave: an Odyssean stripping is the mother of erotic imagination. The lover of the youth loses himself-- all sense of self-- protection, all dignity -- and the remembrance of home strides toward him: out of humiliation an erecting attention, out of an initiatory affliction an apokatastatic reaching. A systematic analysis of the soul that does not efface itself breeds a bogus sufficiency, inattention. But writing from someone with "a knowledge of the truth," who can defend his writing when challenged, who can make an argument that his writing is of little worth (278cd), reminds one of one's original nature, of what one has always known but never said to oneself. Such writing can contribute to the philosophical enterprise, the quickening of an affective apokatastatic nostalgia for an event that never occurred, the report of which draws in the whole of desire, its full stride, its unabridged imagination. The *Odyssey* and the Socratic

palinode have the power to entice into being the erotic endeavour they represent -- a vivifying, frightening undertaking, which will go on beyond the poem and the tale of chariots wrestling into the sky.

## Notes

- 1 In Minoan iconography, the sky-god, a winged, anthropomorphic figure, depicted rushing through air, carried a double-bladed axe; axes sometimes replaced thunderbolts in depictions of Zeus. See Albert Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1965), pp. 533-4; 544. Cook confirms that the axe belonged to the sky-god but was also associated with the earth-goddess. The axe depicted with a tree or pillar signified a union of both realms. See also Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California Pres, 1983, p. 183 for an association between the sacred axe and Dionysius.
- 2 Robert Bringhurst, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife. The Classical Haida Myth Tellers and Their World*. (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1999), pp. 76-99. Bringhurst argues for the comparability of Homeric and Haida epic poetry, in particular in the poems dictated by Skaay and Ghandl to ethnologist John Swanton in the early years of the twentieth century in Haida Gwaii, the Islands on the Boundary Between the Worlds. Bringhurst makes his claim on the basis of structural and thematic similarities: he seems less aware of shared psychagogic patterns.
- 3 Zdravko Planinc, "Homeric Imagery in Plato's *Phaedrus*"; E.A.S. Butterworth, *Some Traces of the Pre-Olympian World in Greek Literature and Myth* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966), pp. 98-173; E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), pp. 135-78; Agathe Thornton, *People and Themes in Homer's Odyssey* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 16-37.



- 4 Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (New York: Bollingen, Pantheon Books, 1964), pp. 84, 223.
- 5 Dodds, p. 141; Eliade, p.338.
- 6 Pierre Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p.77.
- 7 Ibid, pp. 76 – 77
- 8 Eliade, pp. 190 ff.
- 9 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), pp. 158 ff. Socrates' strangeness, his *atopia*, Hadot argues, his disconcerting unclassifiability, is a mimesis of eros itself, as the force is described by Diotima in the *Symposium*: as erotic reaching displaces an individual, so does assimilation of the Socratic model.
- 10 Eliade, pp. 190 ff.
- 11 Ibid, pp. 71 ff.
- 12 Kenneth Dorter, "Three Disappearing Ladders in Plato", *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 1996, p. 279-99. Socratic rhetoric, Dorter says, is both positive and negative: it must point the interlocutor to the place where the truth may be encountered, but its formulations must not be misunderstood as foundational statements; they are only provisional, helpful, and thus must contrive to efface themselves.
- 13 G.R.F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 28. Ferrari rightly sees the skill of the cicadas as only verbal, but does not fully recognize their danger, their Siren-likeness, to Phaedrus:

they model for him the enervation of seduction; they do not distinguish between absorption in the Muses and an honouring of them. Ferrari sees too little of the tragedy of Phaedrus, casting him as a philosophical impresario, comfortable in his collections of speeches, not a victim of an unexamined, untrained delight.

## Chapter Two

### Where Desire Goes

Socrates reports that he had two teachers when he was young, the physical philosopher Anaxagoras and a woman from Mantinea, the mysterious city of prophecy, Diotima. He further reports that he also spent two periods as an autodidact, one before his encounter with Anaxagoras' thought and the other following it, when he tried to work Anaxagorean mechanisms into a complete teleological explanation of the universe. At the end of his education, he claimed to know a single thing -- the "erotic matters" taught him by Diotima: these, he insisted, made up the whole of his mature philosophy (*Symposium*, 177d-e, 212b; *Lysis*, 204b-c, *Phaedrus*, 257). But Socrates' knowledge of erotics is peculiar: putative lovers complain of his unerotic nature; Socrates himself insists on his own sterility (*Theaetetus*, 149b): he brings nothing out of his own. This knowledge that he claimed to possess, moreover, is remarkable slight, just as his powers of divination are (*Phaedrus*, 242), just as is his capacity to distinguish among beautiful persons (*Charmides*, 154c): he presents it at one place as the meagre ability to distinguish lover and beloved at a glance (*Lysis*, 204c). What is it exactly that Socrates, with strange imperfection, with such modest reach, knows? And how does this constitute a philosophy? The singularity of his oddly qualified knowledge of desire also seems to demand an explanation. Is the fact that Socrates knows *only* erotics a coincidence or is something meant by the solitariness of this knowing?

His earliest intellectual efforts were spent attempting to find a complete explanation of physical reality, a line of inquiry directed by "the general question of the cause of coming into being and perishing." (*Phaedo*, 96a) He says he experienced "a remarkable enthusiasm

for the kind of wisdom known as natural science" in this search, thinking it "magnificent to know the causes of everything." (96a) He was first drawn by an account of cosmogenesis, which theorized that life grew from primordial slime, itself the putrefactory result of a meeting of cold and hot substances, a view associated with Archelaus. He later sifted through a number of theses concerning the origin of thought -- that it came from the blood, from air, that it came from fire; later still, he considered the possibility that reason grew from the brain's ability to manage hearing, sight, smell, these forming the basis of memory, the beginning of knowledge. He said that he went "backwards and forwards" on these ontological and epistemological questions, finding no clarity, until he came to a moment of epistemological crisis, where struck with "such complete blindness," he seemed to be unlearning what he previously knew. He became convinced then that he had no gift for the sort of physical inquiry that had driven him and decided to give it up immediately.

He happened to overhear someone reading aloud from a fragment of Anaxagoras in the street a short time later and was delighted to discover in what he believed he heard a cause, Mind, which "arranges all things in order and causes all things." (97c) His interest in physical philosophy was revived. But, in fact, he had misheard Anaxagoras' position. Socrates wanted Anaxagoras to give him the fullest possible account of physical reality -- teachings on the roundness of the earth, the geocentricity or nongeocentricity of the universe, the velocities and orbits of the stars -- and also to show him how these features were best (97d - 98a). A closer investigation revealed to him that Anaxagoras was not interested in design but in efficient causality and he was hurtled down again "from a marvelous height of hope." (98b) He entered yet another crisis in thought. He had believed that Anaxagoras would

have revealed a universal final cause, the good that bound all things together and made each individual in the most providential way. In his disappointment in finding such a cause -- the presence and source of benevolent design -- by examining physical reality, he entered a second period of self-directed thinking, in the course of which he came upon "a second best method" by which he decided to work from hypotheses rather than observation. This is the method of *dianoia* sketched in the figure of the divided line in the *Republic* (*Republic* 511a). He saw this new method as failure even before he seriously set out on it, however, a looking at things in their images that he was nudged into because he was afraid of complete blindness of mind if he looked at them directly with his eyes (*Phaedo*, 99d). Hypotheses are rather weightless, simply the propositions that one judges to be soundest and thus honours. His subsequent examination of hypotheses themselves eventually led him to the ultimate teleological account of being he sought -- but this discovery hinged on a later knowledge of the beautiful.

Socrates came to be troubled at the end of his enthrallment with the natural sciences by the reductive tendency in physical accounts -- such and such is beautiful because it "has a bright colour, or a certain shape or something of that kind" (100d): attachment to such explanations made the emotional shadow of an encounter with beauty -- the jolt, the humbling of such an encounter -- vanish; it plucked eros from inquiry, made inquiry a form of greed. There seemed to be no communication between the two *logoi*: attachment to one foreclosed on the other: the older, erotic Socrates thus "can no longer understand or recognize those other learned causes" of which the physical theorists speak (100c). Little of his previous training in physical philosophy -- except this disappointment about the explanatory limits of

physical accounts -- seems to have been transferable to what the mantic woman wished to teach him. With her, he proved to be a remarkably unpromising student, passive, speechless, inspiring scant confidence in his teacher. She seemed a poor pedagogue as well: she repeatedly discouraged her pupil from wonder; she questioned his ability; she kept her instruction incomplete.

With Diotima's teaching, Socrates was forced to recognize that his education could not be an unbroken progress; in fact, his earlier interests acted as a block to receiving her new teaching; they could not be added to what she revealed about erotics. He himself later came to see the construction of complete systems as items of knowledge as a false start in philosophy, naive, merely scholarly, laughably detached (*Theaetetus*, 174a-b). The place of science is within the erotic life about which the pure, Thalean speculator knows nothing.<sup>1</sup>

Socrates' pre-Diotimean impulse was to acquire knowledge: she sought to substitute an inclination to be ravished by beauty; thus she discouraged his ambition to comprehend and urged on him an erotically alert passivity. She endeavoured to nurse him from his noetic activism; this deprivation would leave him vulnerable to the blow of beauty.<sup>2</sup> He would be drawn by beauty, would be disappointed by it; he would be unmanned, uncentered, dislodged from self-consciousness, rendered selfless in the pull exerted by beautiful things -- and he would come to see this erotic wrestling as knowledge. He would no longer reach for circumscription, apodictic naming, because something beautiful manifest as beauty -- rather than as an item of knowledge whose beauty is discountable -- is experienced as out of reach, and one is inevitably epektatic, on the way, with regard to it. Thus, the encounter with beauty breeds humility; what one wants is always distant, unlike. The individual will be hurtled

along by this not having, will be erotic. A training, then, an ascesis, takes place within the attraction to beauty, a quickening of virtue: one's pleonexia, concupiscence, the amassing of sufficiency is muted. A deluded sense of interior prosperity, that particular stasis, home-owing, is altered into a fleet poverty.



When Socrates returned from the army following the defeat at Potidaea, as Plato tells this story in the *Charmides*, he immediately visited the palaestra of Taureas to meet old friends and learn the current state of philosophy in Athens. Who, he wanted to know, stood out among the young in wisdom or beauty or both? Charmides, he was told, towered above the rest, chiefly because of his astonishing good looks; these were matched, his cousin Critias assured Socrates, by preternatural intellectual achievement: the boy already was a philosopher and a strong poet (*Charmides*, 155a); Critias himself had assisted him to these heights. Socrates expressed a keen desire to speak with the boy; his subsequent meeting with Charmides provides an instance of the operation of beauty.

Charmides' appearance is as the others said: it creates astonishment and confusion in all around him (154c), including Socrates who is tongue-tied when the beautiful boy sits beside him on a bench in the gymnasium. His confidence that he could handle this exchange leaves him immediately; he is awkward (155c), humbled, inept before the marvelous youth. Then, as Charmides leans toward him to ask a question, Socrates happens to catch a glimpse of the inside of his tunic -- the garment of one who is absolutely perfect in his nakedness --

and he is upended by the buck of desire. Astonishment, appetite, abashment -- the hallmarks of an encounter with beauty. Socrates stumbles through the first few moments of his conversation with the Charmides, overwhelmed by the lion-like aspect of the beloved (155e), yet hurtled forward by an insistent eros. Beauty speeds and thins: it breeds a disarming singlemindedness.

Socrates sees before long, however, that Charmides' charm is somewhat other than it appeared at first: Critias has claimed that his cousin was flawless in both mind and body, his temperance (*sophrosyne*) equaling his remarkable appearance. It is as if his beauty were of such magnitude that it seems obvious that it would be total, spiritual as well as physical, but something appears to be missing. Charmides may not have allowed his good looks to turn his head -- he aspires to an orderly "quietness" in behaviour -- but he shows no real knowledge of the virtue he is said to possess. Either Critias' lack of understanding concerning wisdom (his confusion of this matter becomes clear as the dialogue progresses) or the false confidence Charmides's beauty provokes has inspired his misidentification as someone wise. As Socrates' conversation with him continues, the boy himself comes to realize that he has not even the knowledge he previously believed he possessed: he ends by confessing his complete ignorance of the nature of any virtue attributed to his (176a). Entering a period of epistemological crisis himself, he perhaps becomes teachable. The dialogue ends shortly after. Socrates, in this exchange, has correctly told the lover from the beloved, as he said he could, and has drawn circumstances toward the truth he has discerned. The beloved becomes the lover at the end of the dialogue, Charmides pronouncing himself ready to be charmed daily by Socrates, who himself agrees not to resist the younger man. There may be a beauty



that does not erase one's poverty, something that remains distant, always the beloved, that allows one to remain erotic before it, but it is not, unfortunately, what Charmides has to offer.



The narrative arrangement of the *Symposium*, Plato's dialogue on desire, is almost comically convoluted. Apollodorus tells the story of Agathon's party, and the speeches there praising eros, to an unnamed interlocutor by reporting an earlier account delivered to Glaucon, who has heard a confused, misleading version from someone who has received it from a man named Phoenix. He (Phoenix) had heard it, but mixed up what he heard, from Aristodemus, an epigone of Socrates', who had also told large fragments of the story to Appollodorus, a current follower of Socrates. Appollodorus has checked some of the details of Aristodemus's ragged story with Socrates himself; satisfied with its rough truthfulness, he says he will tell it in the very words Aristodemus used. The party, about which surprisingly much curiosity still remains, occurred "a very long time ago"; at its most dramatic point, the conversation contains an account of an even more ancient exchange between the young Socrates and his mysterious teacher of erotics. One gathers from all this complexity that philosophy by nature is removed from the everyday, just as the philosopher is inevitably apart from ordinary society; the distance in time of the reported conversations underscores this as well: philosophy is difficult of access; a maze stands before its entrance; philosophy is a hidden thing. Further, these conversations on desire are reported as taking place at night within an enclosed garden: philosophy is hidden. Still it frailly lives, in a partial form, in a

series of imperfectly remembered conversations that are handed down;<sup>3</sup> in his form, it continues to exercise its attractive power.

Socrates appears at the beginning of Aristodemus' account uncharacteristically shod and bathed; he's gone to unusual lengths to prepare himself for this social encounter, but not, apparently, out of honour for Agathon; he's not taken the trouble after all to attend Agathon's victory celebration the previous day, an event that amounted to a public anointing. Trepidation, it seems, stands behind Socrates' fussing with his appearance: he begs a reluctant Aristodemus to accompany him to Agathon's dinner, drawing a comparison between their going and Diomedes and Odysseus' infiltration of the Trojan camp in Book X of the *Iliad* (*Symposium*, 174d). Hector has laid a dispiriting defeat on the Greeks, and, as the night advances, a sleepless Agamemnon finds his courage fading as he stares out at "the innumerable fires burning in front of Ilium," as he listens to "the music of the flutes and the reed pipes, and the voices of the troops." (*Iliad*, 10.10) So, it seems, does Agathon's raucous celebrity appear to Socrates. The enmity of the other guests to Socrates, however, is not immediately clear; he is welcomed, and when Eryximachus suggests that their drinking accompany encomiums to eros, Socrates readily agrees: what they wish to praise is the one thing he knows with any facility. But what Socrates says stands apart from the speeches of the others: all other symposiasts, we see, treat eros as distant, treat it objectively as a god, a force of nature, an exigence in the psyche - none attempt phenomenology to speak of eros, but resort to theology, physics or psychology. None of the other symposiasts are erotic, impoverished and in pursuit of what is beyond having; all angle for some easy advantage, sexual, professional; Socrates alone has taken on the identity of eros itself. Eros, among those

who praise it, yet are unerotic, is in an enemy camp. There the daimon also is bumptious. Socrates has none of the fluency of the other speakers in their praise speeches: he can do little more than report what eros has done to him as he's been caught up in this momentum and altered by its dumbfounding.



Agathon, the host of the dinner at which desire is praised, has won a competition for poetry with a tragic poem that astounded thirty thousand Athenians; he has hosted a large victory party from which he still has a hangover; he now hosts yet another celebration for a select group of friends -- a Dionysiac *par excellence*, it seems, an adept at nearly all the god's undertakings. Socrates, a renowned drinker himself and thus perhaps a favorite of the god, has snubbed Agathon at his previous celebration, and Agathon now is on tenterhooks to see if Socrates will play the same trick again, this time before Agathon's closest friends and his lover: he sends for Socrates shortly after Aristodemus' unexpected arrival, but Socrates, who has fallen behind his friend and is now standing in a neighbour's doorway absorbed in some contemplation, has sent the boy back. As the dinner begins, Agathon repeatedly orders his servant to go again and demand that Socrates follow him to the courtyard, but each time Aristodemus dissuades him. The combat between Socrates and Agathon -- Ais and Hector, Diomedes and Hector-- has already begun.

Socrates finally arrives, interrupting the dinner at mid-point, momentarily usurping Agathon as the center of attention; the latter attempts to remedy this by inviting Socrates to

lie beside him at the far end of the table, thereby drawing the eyes of all once more. He takes a dig at Socrates just as the other is settling in beside him, saying he wishes him near so that by touching him something of the wisdom that occurred to Socrates in the doorway will be transferred to him like wine moving along a twist of wool. Socrates expresses doubt that touch, sensuous or otherwise, communicates insight, remarking further, tellingly, on the flash, youthfulness and conspicuousness of Agathon's own wisdom (175e). Agathon notes the insult, and promises that he and Socrates will "go to court" about their respective wisdoms in time, with Dionysus himself appearing as judge. This is in fact what happens at the end of the dialogue with Socrates emerging as the Dionysiac victor: he drinks both Agathon and Aristophanes into oblivion and instructs them on a unitary version of the tragic and comic arts about which both are in ignorance (223d).<sup>4</sup>

But Agathon's non-dionysiac nature is clear well before the end of the dialogue: he confesses to Erxymachus even before the speeches begin that he lacks the strength for heavy drinking (176c). Agathon is not a genuine initiate of Dionysus, and one must wonder therefore just what he can know of eros, for as Alcibiades later insists, erotic madness is identical with Dionysiac madness (215d-c). The other symposiasts also must fall under suspicion: they find much to praise in Agathon's encomium to eros and none object when Erxymachus makes him Socrates' equal in desire (193e). All agree, moreover, to drink little. Agathon has not truly entered the mysteries of Dionysus nor of Eros, though his glittering reputation claims otherwise. Socrates, on the other hand, is indisputably Dionysiac, as Alcibiades makes clear in comparing him to sileni and satyrs, both known to be followers of Dionysus,<sup>5</sup> just as he is an authentic initiate into the mysteries of eros (212b).

Socrates enters the enemy camp when he enters Agathon's courtyard, though only he is fully aware of this. And he enters in a brilliant, comic, insolent disguise, ready for philosophical combat:<sup>6</sup> he enters in the form of his host's beauty; bathed, shod in "fancy slippers", he wears as camouflage the ersatz, accessorial "beauty" that is all Agathon can muster. Socrates looks slightly ridiculous ("fancy slippers") in this guise: he mocks the man he visits by going to lengths to replicate his host's thin beauty in a body far from beautiful. Even in his writing, Agathon aims only for the shimmer of physical beauty, mistaking it for depth. And in this Agathon has been Hector; in this, he's inflicted a wound on Socrates, on eros since Socrates is eros, on philosophy since eros is philosophy. He's disarmed thirty thousand Greeks two days earlier, winning them over to the supremacy of mere attractive speech by simply entertaining them; being so entranced has been offered as a substitute for the interior life poetry might quicken. He's de-eroticized them, those whom he regards as fools (194b).



The matter of drink absorbs much time at the beginning of the dialogue, the question of how to drink, various disinclinations to drink, Agathon's lack of strength in drinking, the health risks of drunkenness -- there are signs everywhere that Dionysus is being eased out as a presence in the coming discussion of eros, so that the desire addressed here will be without madness.<sup>7</sup>

Eros without Dionysus is useful like salt (Phaedrus); is a ready apologia for the

seeking of ignoble sexual gratification (Pausanias); is a force of nature, a corporealized divine providence understood as a principle of science (Eryximachus). But in all this, it is not eros that the symposiasts praise; what the others talk about are mechanisms leading to one's self-enhancement: there is not a whisper of self-transcendence in all of the pre-Socratic positions. None, aside from Socrates, are erotic; none are reaching, though all are full of theory about eros. Agathon's own encomium is decorative, melodious, and says nothing. Socrates pointedly offers it faint praise; all the others acclaim it. Socrates' own remarks provoke little comment, aside from a complaint from Aristophanes that it steals some of this thunder. There is no understanding here. Aside from the unreliable Aristodemus, who seems to be paying only partial attention and who eventually nods off, then one truly erotic man is alone until nearly the end of the dialogue.



Socrates announces that what he will say about eros will not be beautiful, suggesting that beautiful speech, distinguished by fluency and comprehensiveness, speech taking a pleasing shape determined by its author, marks a misunderstanding of eros. His words will be halting, arranged without pattern, falling "as they come." (198e) Socrates, though he places himself among "those who do know" (198e), is not fully articulate on the matter of eros; he cannot give an architectonic account; he cannot begin his remarks in full possession of the logoi of what he describes; and in this, his speech mimics the range of eros itself, which knows in a manner between wisdom and understanding, hitting correctly on what is (202a),

but unable to offer a full account of it, unable to speak systematically on the nature of reality and how one knows it. All the individual who knows erotic matters can do is report what he underwent; to be in possession of a theory of desire, of beauty, of goodness is to betray one's uninitiated state.<sup>8</sup> Those who are erotic, like Eros itself, then, both know and do not know; like Aristophanic lovers who remain with one another through life, yet cannot say what they seek from the other (192c), who would accept in a moment fusion with the other --this would mean a return to their ancient nature -- but who can say little of this, the soul divining what it wants dimly and speaking it in riddles (192c-d), the erotic individual is both expressive and dumb.

Socrates' halting, ragged, awkward speech, placed largely in the mouth of another, is one way of saying roughly what the god is (199c); his demeanor, however, is a more eloquent revealing of eros. His inarticulacy is eros', as his lit- yet- darkened understanding. Socrates' estrangement at Agathon's gathering is also a rendering the daimon. He has set himself out of place, arriving late, refusing to give the same sort of eulogy as the others; this is of a piece with his general eccentricity, illustrated by the incident of his standing in a nearby doorway, contemplative alert, abstracted, refusing repeated requests to come to dinner. Socrates is neither of nor not of the party. Eros, as well, is neither within nor without, neither god nor mortal, yet, as daimon, in communication with both (202e). Eros, further, as Diotima's ascent account underscores, throws persons out of place; to be erotic is to be ecstatic; eros perpetually renders one homeless. Socrates bears this mark of eros: he is *atopos*; he is "always dwelling in neediness" (203d), never unaware of his incompleteness. He communicates placelessness to others as well, drawing them from fixed views, as in

Charmides' case, or from entrenched ways of life, as he does with Alcibiades. Estranged, finally, he is an intermediary, like the daimon, standing here between what the mantic woman teaches and those enchanted by mere beautiful speeches. One report of eros is the contortion a person undergoes in becoming erotic.



Eros is a physician (186c); eros is a skilled hunter who "plots to trap the beautiful and the good." (203d) Eros is a magician, druggist, sophist (203d), and a diviner. Eros is a philosopher, necessarily because it "is love in regard to the beautiful" (204b); it philosophizes through all its life, the reaching inevitably endless (203d); it is a philosopher, moreover, who cannot give an account of what he knows (204b).

The multiplicity of Eros' identifications has the variety of praise; it also has the appearance of apophatic speech where names are subverted -- the residue of the affirmation retained, however, in the negation -- in an effort to push language toward a rendering of ineffability. It also resembles, like the noesis of hitting correctly on things that is the single type of knowing of which eros is capable, the knowing which is a true sort of pointing.

Eros is a philosopher, and so lies between being wise and being without understanding; its philosophizing reaches no term; it cannot say what it does since it has no overview of its activity, yet it does have an aim.<sup>9</sup> Nothing in the dialogue, however, accounts for eros's internationality, except for the weak assertion that it serves and attends beauty -- which it also relentlessly hunts -- because it was conceived on the day of Aphrodite's birth.



Such hunting is a healing, a divining, a conjuring, a balm, a knowing.

Eros also is Socrates, later in his life, shoeless, homeless, far from beautiful, always poor, but, Poros-like, alacritous, "always weaving devices," epektatic, courageous, inventive, keen for practical wisdom, never without a scheme to trap the object of his headlong pursuit.



Socrates, from all his soon-to-be-uncovered erotic nature, is remarkably passive throughout his exchange with Diotima. He twice places himself unequivocally in her hands (206b, 207c), declaring an unbudgeable ignorance on erotics: he can see no headway possible outside of her teaching. During the latter part of Diotima's account of the lesser mysteries of desire and throughout the whole of her "perfect revelations" about eros, Socrates is utterly speechless, as if he's effaced himself entirely from the conversation. He may be a pliant student, but he is not a promising one: when Diotima asks him why animals "are all ill and of an erotic disposition" when it comes to procreation and the care of their young, and he confesses he can think of no reply, she asks him disparagingly whether he really thinks he will ever become skilled in eros at all (207c). She doubts his ability on other occasions as well, most pointedly when she questions whether he has any hope whatsoever of being initiated into the higher disclosures of desire. She chastises him for his amazement at three points in her instruction (205b, 207c, 208b), the first time when she speaks of the universality of eros and the latter two times when she touches on the sexual and domestic activities of animals. His amazement is a kind of helplessness before what appears to be extravagance in

her teachings; it amounts to a refusal to go as far as she leads, a general preference for what he has always known.

Socrates had a theory of eros before meeting Diotima even while something has led him to seek her out. He believed that eros was a great god, that he was beautiful, and lived in human beings as a love of beautiful things (201e); that while everyone desires, only a few love, while the great many do not (205b); that loving, the desire of good things, is not endemic to human nature. Indeed, his earlier views have the elitism of such noble pederasts as Pausanias and his lover Agathon. Diotima's interest in animal sexual intercourse no doubt would sit ill with the fineness of Socrates' early erotic beliefs; she goads him; troubled and uncomprehending about this unusual preoccupation of hers, he can say little. Diotima does not supply Socrates with another position on eros so much as she impoverishes him in what he previously held. In the revelation of the lower mysteries of desire, it is not that he is being instructed but that he is being emptied. Thus he becomes more like eros itself in the course of their initial conversations: he is made homeless from his positions; he is abashed, needy: then, after this stripping, after he has been shrunk to silence, he is given an image to pursue in his emptiness, an erotic heuristic.



Socrates responds with incredulity to Diotima's claim that eros is universal, part of the quixotic effort of mortal nature to be forever; this eros-driven exigency for immortality, she says, governs everything from animal sexual activity to the study habits of human beings

(207d - 208b). But after this eruption, we hear nothing further from him. Socrates is silent during Diotima's long disquisition on the spiritual progeny of eros that precedes the perfect revelations of erotics, silent, too, throughout her later revelations. Socrates' silence is remarkable because many of Diotima's observations before she embarks on her description of eros' ascent are counter-intuitive. She speaks of a pregnancy of soul -- she adumbrates an erotics of interiority -- that is preferable to physical pregnancy. The issue of these pregnancies, which are brought to term by contact with a beautiful, generous soul, are virtues, poetry and law. These provoke the admiration of all because they engender every sort of virtue. (209e) And so people erect monuments only to the just, poets and jurists. How to account for the odd equivalency of virtue, literature (poetry in particular) and law? The three appear to belong to different phylums. And how do these activities sprout virtue? Diotima mentions this last thing as if it happened with the inevitability of scientific law.

There is no resemblance among these three things except that each of the offspring of spiritual pregnancies appears to act as a paradigm for behaviour, enticing it, shaping it: they achieve this effect by arousing admiration. One explanation for Socrates' silence in the later part of Diotima's pre-ascent remarks is that he has indeed become transfixed by the aptness of what she proposes -- she gives him something that holds his gaze and resists interpretation, something that seems outlandish yet intimate. Socrates learns nothing from Diotima, but he is altered. Here an Agathon-like attachment to physical beauty, underwritten by a belief in a beautiful god, is edged aside by a new capacity to discern and be drawn by something more hidden. He is disarmed, but collects no new information. To the list of the offspring of the pregnant soul, then, a fourth sort might be added: the speech of an erotic individual.



Her lesser teaching on eros, Diotima tells Socrates, are a "means" to the perfect revelations "if one were to proceed correctly on the way." (210a) It is tempting to think that she means this gnostically, that she's claiming now that she has presented Socrates with a gleaming intellectual key to unlock the higher mysteries she is about to reveal, or a model that replicates them, a propaedeutic of some sort to a more esoteric understanding. But what Diotima has said is incoherent as system: eros is a magician, a druggist, a sophist, a servant of Aphrodite, a priest (203a), a hunter, the bastard child of a god, a philosopher (203d). She says almost too much: the variety of identifications edges toward randomness; if one scans her remarks for knowledge about eros, an accurate replication of desire in thought, one comes up with nothing, each epithet -- eros is a hunter of beauty, is a servant of beauty -- cancelling the other. The lesser revelations of eros, it is important to remember, are the speech of someone sufficiently erotic to initiate another in eros, and who therefore philosophizes as eros does: Diotima's remarks lie, then, between wisdom and lack of understanding and their substance is the altering effect they have on the interlocutor -- here it is the effacing of Socrates' youthful erotic piety that resembles his own later demolition of Agathon's delicate encomium. What Diotima's teaching points to is eros as the awareness of one's profound lack, a persistent poverty, and an attempt to rectify this by reaching for things, by seeking to be brought to such things that are adamantly distant, ungainsayably beloved, to be brought into the company of things that are unassimilably beautiful. And in this pointing, Diotima's lesser revelations have a psychagogic rather than a scientific effect: they do not reveal the nature of

a force but hasten a participation in it.

The erotic life, the philosophic life, begins properly when someone who is young goes "to beautiful bodies" (210a), Diotima's revelations unremarkably begin; then, guided correctly, he must be induced to love a single body, and in the company of this individual experience the generation of beautiful speeches. Then he must be brought to the realization that the beauty of this particular body, the object of his devotion, is really the same as the beauty of all beautiful bodies; there is only a single form of physical beauty, he must be made to see, and it is petty for him to focus his erotic intentions upon one person; he will feel contempt for his frenzied misapprehension and will slacken his pinpointed, amorous intensity. Next he must come to believe that the beauty in souls is superior to the body's comeliness, so that even if the beloved has only "a slight youthful charm" but a decent soul, he, the lover, will be satisfied with him (210c), and, generating beautiful speeches that will improve his young beloved, he, the older lover, will experience a compulsion to consider the beauty found in activities and laws. This will serve to deepen his conviction concerning the triviality of physical beauty. Then the lover must lead his beloved, the beautiful, charming boy, to consider the sciences, so that he, the lover, may note himself the beauty the sciences contain, a vast beauty he will be drawn to look on. Here the lover will undergo a conversion: he will make a "permanent turn" to "the vast open sea of the beautiful" which his attention to the sciences will expose, giving birth "in ungrudging philosophy" to even more beautiful speeches and thoughts (210d); here he will set aside the slavish attention to the beloved, the typical devotional stance of lovers, will cease to be a "petty calculator" in matters of love. He will turn away from the beloved, recover some of his dignity, and "increased" will make out a

particular form of philosophical science the object of which is something surpassingly beautiful, complete and invariant, universally drawing, singular, the root of all other beautiful things (211b), boys, bodies, activities, laws, sciences. The intensity, the zeal which the apprehension of "the beautiful itself" arouses will be like the self-abnegating excitement the sight of the beautiful beloved provoked but more profound: the one who has had this sight will wish always to behold it, be with it, neither eating nor drinking if necessary. In this contemplation, he will give birth to true virtue, become dear to the god and, perhaps, be made immortal.

It is difficult to see how truly odd Diotima's revelations are because her remarks historically have been interpreted as a program for the spiritualization of desire, a ladder of perfection, as the titles of so many medieval treatises on the interior life put it. As such, they have been the source of bromides on the control of the passions for many Christian readers of Plato. They are far stranger, however, than a guide to a particular understanding of Christian spiritual growth. For one thing, Diotima claims her account to be nothing other than a detailing of "the correct practice of pederasty" (210e, 211c); she suggests that philosophy is the result of a complete sifting of the amorous involvement of an older man with an attractive boy: the way of eros, the way of philosophy, is an asceticism conducted in the context of such a relationship, in the end abandoned, in which the lover leads the beloved while still being drawn by him, yet is guided himself over all by an unnamed guide. This involvement benefits the beloved -- he becomes "better" -- yet chiefly rewards the lover who, in striving, becomes dear to the divine and is offered whatever sort of deathlessness a mortal may be granted. The relationship, in all of its transmogrifications, is marked by zeal, the very quality which

Diotima hopes will distinguish her revelations; it breeds and fosters the wanting of one thing, though the nature of this single thing shifts. It is a kind of madness, a being swept along, where the lover, correctly guided, is presented with a series of things, which before did not compel him, but which now lift him utterly from himself.

The maieutic significance of Diotima's remarks is paramount; she is teaching Socrates -- endeavoring, that is, to alter him -- after all, not seeking to add to his store of knowledge on the erotic life. Her perfect revelations are neutral on the matter of ontology;<sup>10</sup> she makes no claims about the nature of the psyche, even though she insists on the universality of eros; there is no necessity in this particular unfolding of desire, though, in retrospect, it may appear providentially to bear the signature of a luminous inevitability. Further, the maieutic significance of the ascent of desire is double: Diotima traces it for Socrates and Socrates repeats her account to his dinner companions: Socrates' story about his instruction from Diotima continues his refutation of Agathon. The psychagogic import of the image of the lover moving from one sort of desire to another is crucial in Diotima's use of it with Socrates and Socrates' reuse of it with Agathon.

Diotima's ascent story offers a taxonomy of lovers that is like the taxonomy of souls Socrates presents to Glaucon in books eight and nine of the *Republic*; it is an extended thought experiment proposed to Socrates in which he participates imaginatively in a number of discreet desires, assuming in this a series of interior dispositions, some of which -- perhaps especially the earlier sexual ones -- will be strange to him. Diotima's descriptions of the various erotic conditions is necessarily brief: their object is the activation of her interlocutor's imagination, not the articulation of an erotic doctrine. The shortness of her

account, and the quick changes that occur within it which bring speed -- zeal, the dionysiac element -- to her telling, encourage Socrates to practice in imagination the erotic absorption into which she wishes to initiate him. Her whole description of erotic ascent is an elongated form of linguistic rapture like Socrates' period of abstraction in the doorway that delayed his arrival at dinner and the transport of intellectual ecstasy Alcibiades later describes him undergoing during the campaign at Potidaea (220c). More: as Socrates interiorly participates in these erotic states absorbedly, he uses them up, and so comes to experience the moment in each stage when the beloved ceases to be the beloved, no longer calls, where each place confesses its deficit. And, savouring this in his imagination, he experiences the craning of hybristic self-regard that will reach further. It is true that part of the imperative in the ascent account, the exigency forcing erotic change, is the insistence of the guide, charged with keeping the lover "correctly on the way," but also what provides movement is such hybristic appetite, reaching past the present lover to a more compelling love, this done out of an experience of poverty, this nevertheless drawing the superseded loves along. The erotic transmogrifications Socrates enacts in his imagination at Diotima's bidding are a building, not an enervation, of desire, coming to the desire of all things in the desire for the beauty in which all things "share" without its being diminished or augmented (211b), a beauty that is total, that never tests belief in itself (211a), that is apart, nonarticulable, unstudyable (211a). By attending to this without comprehension, its complete gracefulness, one becomes it; one is taken over by what it is. An adoption occurs at the end of pursuit, and this quickens true virtue (212a). Socrates, having rehearsed the schema, is enraptured by it, placing his life in its form, honouring erotics and training himself "exceptionally" in them (212b), by re-enacting



them interiorly as he does when he reports them to Agathon and the rest, urging them on others by practicing their enthusiasms and alterations with acquaintances as we soon learn he has done with Alcibiades.



The form of Alcibiades' eruptive speech which ends the dialogue is the same as Socrates': he reports the erotic conversion he has undergone with his teacher, although unlike Socrates he has not experienced a refutation and ravishment but the "outrage" of being deprived of his sustaining confidence in his own attractiveness (222b). Nevertheless, like Socrates before him, he has been disarmed and drawn disconcertingly to a beauty he had not known before. He enters Agathon's courtyard as Dionysus himself, crowned with the ivy and violets of the god,<sup>11</sup> drunk and shouting, accompanied by flute players, in a roaring, imperious state of bacchic possession, haranguing the others at the party for their sobriety: he soon has them drinking from the wine cooler itself, eight pints altogether at once, he the self-declared new leader of the drinking. He has come to crown Agathon for his victory in poetry, but he does this seemingly with half a heart: like Socrates, he had been absent from Agathon's euphoric victory celebration the previous day. Alcibiades then sees Socrates and begins to take apart the wreath he has just placed on Agathon in order to crown him who "conquers all human beings with speeches, not just the day before yesterday . . . but at all times." (213e) There is no question who the favorite of the god is. The others have received Socrates' remarks on eros with bemusement; the speech has summoned Dionysus himself to bestow on

its maker the marks of victory, made by stripping apart Agathon's crown; here is a divine recognition reminiscent of the Pythia's declaration in favour of the wisdom of Socrates in the *Apology*.

Eryximachus tells Alcibiades he must give an address eulogizing eros if he is to enter the spirit of the party. As an erotic individual, he is incapable of such a formal account of what drives him; he elects to praise Socrates instead, saying he fears hyrbistic revenge if he praises anyone else in his presence; besides, Alcibiades admits the equivalency between eros and Socrates without difficulty. He praises him, however, by comparing him to Dionysiac figures, sileni and the satyr Marsyas, whose flute playing, which has a divine source, causes possession and reveals "those who are in need of the gods and initiatory rituals." (215e) The possession that Socrates causes is comparable, but his music -- the music of philosophy, which is initiation into and passage through the erotic life -- is made with plain words without instruments. Socrates is more than Dionysiac, however; the god himself does him homage: eros -- philosophy -- includes and extends bacchic frenzy. While Marsyas challenges Apollo to a musical duel, loses and is flayed, Socrates is acquiescent to divine things, going "where the god is leading" (*Crito*, 54e); his is the alert, appetitive, non-contentious passivity of the erotic individual.

The lover is the favoured person in Diotima's account of erotic ascent; Alcibiades, in tracing his involvement with Socrates, tells the same story from the perspective of the beloved. It is an account of an upending where the Socratic lover overshadows the physical beauty of the beloved with an interior beauty of his own; Alcibiades complains he's not the only victim of such treatment: Charmides, Euthydemus and others have experienced such

reversal and found themselves entrapped in the eros of philosophy (222b). Alcibiades is ravished by Socrates' speeches and Socrates' true identity as the lover is surfaced; though homely accounts about pack-asses and blacksmiths, Socrates' words have an unusual "sense inside" that arouses Alcibiades' moral imagination, exercising all his interior senses: he has seen something "golden" and been drawn (217a). "Bitten and struck" by what Socrates has said, he is in the erotic life; excited, turned to himself, ashamed (216d), he is engaged, as he tells the story, in doing philosophy, though he soon will exile himself from the practice.

## Notes

- 1 Socrates should not be understood, however, to be an anti-rationalist or opposed to science; he does, though, following Diotima, place inquiry into the nature of being within the erotic undertaking: one approaches such inquiry rightly through appetitive craning and consequent virtue; appetite and virtue are both deepened by it. One enters scientific inquiry, in Diotima's schema, after contemplating the beauty of laws and institutions (*Symposium*, 210c-d). Reason outside of eros, so-called disinterested reason, reason with an exclusively ontological ambition, represents a mutation of desire and, Socrates suggests, leads to private and political folly.

In the *Theaetetus* the educator Theodorus champions the quintessential value of detached reason: for one who so reasons, like the speculative philosopher Thales, pronouncements on the natures of things are "domestics"; no power supervizes how the speculative thinker marshals them; his power is absolute: it obeys the bidding of no god. The Thalean reasoner does not feel even the strictures of ordinary life. He is disengaged from such life -- he doesn't even know, jokes Socrates, whether his neighbour is a human being, though he expends much energy in investigating human nature (*Theaetetus*, 174b): thus he dishonours in every way the things of the city. (173e-174a). Interested only in the magisteriality of his comprehension, he takes pride in not knowing the way to the market place or law courts, but his investment of the whole of intellect in the construction of systematic replications of being nevertheless has a potent political effect --such an investment evacuates the powers of thought from politics itself. His distraction reinforces the status quo, even if it happens to be tyrannous; the

Thalean thinker feels no pull to consider private or public morality; he feels no maieutical tug; he does not even see the ground beneath his feet. He, however, will defend the importance of system building as the highest endeavour in a culture and himself and his colleagues as its only authorities. Niels Bohr is an example of a scientist who is the opposite sort of thinker, an erotic inquirer.

- 2 Simone Weil, "God in Plato," in *On Science. Necessity, and the Love of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 124ff. Weil speaks of the "shock" of an encounter with beauty as the beginning of a higher spiritual life: it quickens contemplation by arousing alacritous admiration for a thing while provoking a disinclination to touch it in any way out of fear that such a touch might mar what is beheld. The ravishment beauty produces is an interior training, then, working a singleness of attention.
- 3 Daniel M Halperin, "Plato and the Erotics of Narrativity," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 98. Halperin discusses at length the complex peculiarity of Plato's narrative structure, offering a stemma of the oral transmission.
- 4 Helen Bacon, "Socrates Crowned," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 35, 1959, p. 424.
- 5 Bacon, pp. 424-5.
- 6 Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Symposium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 22-3. Rosen remarks on Socrates' insolence in inviting Aristodemus to Agathon's party, insolence Rosen attributes to Socrates' hybristic nature. Rosen claims Plato underscores Socrates' hybris here in order to show his incapacity for treason -- his pursuit of the extravagant ends of philosophy makes him indifferent to the *nomos* social and

religious, as well as to politics itself. But Socrates is not as otherworldly as Rosen believes: he knows his neighbour is a human being, and he obeys the city, even when this obedience means his death. Rosen's explanation reads too generously into Plato's motives as a writer; it also has the unfortunate effect of de-emphasizing the fundamental enmity between Socrates and the others at the gathering, an enmity Rosen seems not to see. The nature of Agathon's celebrity adequately accounts for Socrates' insolence.

- 7 Rosen, p. 31. Rosen argues that a hierarchy exists among the drinkers that mirrors the order of "erotic excellence" among the guests. Socrates alone occupies the highest level both as a drinker and a knower of erotics; the second level, according to Rosen, holds Pausanias, Aristophanes and Agathon, while on the third level we find Eryximachus, Aristodemus and Phaedrus. It is unclear what tells Rosen the drinking capacity of any of the guests aside from Socrates, Aristophanes, Agathon and Alcibiades, but even more troubling is that his taxonomy fails to grasp the essential difference between Agathon and Socrates, which is the source of their true enmity: Agathon is not somewhat less erotic and dionysiac than Socrates; he is unerotic and pseudo-dionysiac.
- 8 Pierre Hadot, "Preface," in *Dictionnaire des philosophes antique*. pp. 11-2, quoted in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), pp.29-30. Hadot discusses at length the distinction between lived philosophy and theoretical discourse in antiquity.
- 9 David L. Roochnik, "The Erotics of Philosophical Discourse," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April, 1987, pp. 167-8.

10 Roochnik, p 125. Roochnik insists that the ascent account expresses only "the side of the subject" and therefore is ontologically neutral: to have a character in a work of literature express a desire, say, for immortality, he reasons, does not mean that the author argues for the possibility of immortality itself. Roochnik, however, fails to note the maieutic intent of all Diotima's remarks. She is, of course, confessing nothing.

11 Hadot, p. 169.

## Chapter Three

### Turning the Soul Around

Socrates notoriously advances no positions: his interlocutors complain that he says nothing of his own views while quizzing them repeatedly about theirs (*Republic*, 337a); he admits he is "incapable of giving birth" to ideas (*Theaetetus*, 149b); he declares himself incompetent to speak on the natures of things (*Republic*, 337a). He is either silent or maddeningly perverse on ontological matters: "Socrates does injustice, and is meddlesome, by investigating the things under the earth and the heavenly things and by making the weaker speech the stronger and by teaching others the same things," as his final condemnation declares (*Apology*, 19b-c). He identifies the good as the appropriate end of human desire, yet says almost nothing about its nature (*Symposium*, 211a-b); he speaks of gods but articulates no theology. Philosophy is the art of turning around the soul (*Republic*, 518d; 521c-d), he insists; its point is therapeutic, the transformation of an interior life; and the philosopher is the one who is so transformed and who assists others in such transformation. In this latter role, he is a midwife (*Theaetetus*, 149b); an "uncanny go-between" joining the right lovers (*Theaetetus*, 149d); a corrector of erotic misalignment (*Republic*, 403c) -- never a metaphysician, ethicist, epistemologist or political theorist.

Philosophy as therapy has priority over philosophy as a source of pronouncements on reality, an undertaking which Socrates sees as a lesser form of intellectual endeavour, not truly philosophy at all (*Theaetetus*, 174a-b), but often a place to retreat from the rigors of



philosophy. In emphasizing the therapeutic nature of philosophy over system-building, Socrates stands at the head of a diverse tradition which includes apophatic theologians like the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*; Descartes in *Meditations on First Philosophy*<sup>1</sup> and Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>2</sup> though each understood differently the confusion from which he wished to rescue his interlocutors or readers.

For Socrates the confusion that most contorts an individual is erotic. Those outside philosophy desire in such a way that their inner lives are malformed; the proper quest of desire is thus undermined in them. They must be persuaded to undertake a therapeutic journey -- which, like the journey in the *Odyssey*, is a long return<sup>3</sup> -- that begins with a correction of their ill-configured eros. The transformation of philosophy, this journey, is variously described as a flight (*Phaedrus*, 252b); a sea voyage (*Phaedo*, 99d); "assimilation to a god" (*Theaetetus*, 176b); ascent from darkness into light (*Republic*, 514a-516c). Each metaphor, however, illuminates a single thing: philosophy as the correction and proper unfolding of eros.



There has been a great deal of inconclusive scholarly discussion about what the figures of the sun, the divided line and the allegory of the cave in the *Republic* reveal about Socratic epistemology, ontology and political theory.<sup>4</sup> The controversy exists because these images are not intended as segments of a system replicating the nature of being and the structure of human knowledge, but are eikastic images offered to quicken change in the

Socratic interlocutor. They therefore need to be only sufficiently plausible to beckon desire, while not being precise: they must disarm and arouse, but not create disciples. Part of their effectiveness is that they resist the institution of an orthodoxy. It is not that Socrates is an obscurantist -- he believes, after all, that the good itself, a beauty beyond being, is somehow the source of what is -- but that he's suspicious of ontological clarity: such clarity often breeds dogmatism. Pointing to the severe personal and social consequences of dogmatic thought, thought drawn exclusively from clearly etched hypotheses or ideals, is one way he attempts to lead Glaucon, his primary interlocutor in the *Republic*, into a philosophical life.

Plato has struck commentators like Martha Nussbaum as a hopeless solitary, repelled by ordinary human relations, seeking safe harbour in transcendence, an intellectualist contemplation of an ineffable ideal replacing, for him, the uncontrollability of human sexual and emotional relations.<sup>5</sup> This is a newer version of the old argument that Plato in the *Republic* shows himself to be a totalitarian thinker: just as he fears the unwieldiness of a liberal democratic state, so he fears the raggedness of human passion, and is keen to jettison it in pursuit of an otherworldly perfection. But this criticism comes closer to describing the politics and psychology of Glaucon, whose version of the perfect city is, indeed, intolerant of ordinary human attachment. It is this idealism and the unimaginative deductive thinking that accompanies it from which Socrates wishes to rescue him. Philosophy is the unfolding of eros coming to assimilation to a god (*Theaetetus*, 176b), coming to a vision of the good (*Republic*, 508d - 509a). One block to such an unfolding is the conviction that philosophy is the erection of abstract systems -- metaphysical, epistemological, and political -- and their application in human affairs. This conviction is the paramount obstacle standing between

Glaucou and the philosophical life. His ridicule of the apparent excess of genuine philosophical eros -- its insatiability, its hyperbolic nature, its apparent lack of dignity, its seeming risibility -- reveals the profound fear of human desire that others attribute to Plato.

The eros of philosophy begins with pre-philosophical eros, so the *Republic* is preoccupied with political matters in a particular way because Glaucon, Socrates' chief interlocutor, is so preoccupied. Glaucon's interest in politics arises from his Achilles-like thirst for honour. In particular, he is interested in war and in the sort of state that would be successful in war, because in such a state the Achillean rewards would be greatest. His long exchange with Socrates begins with his request that Socrates defend justice as the sophist Thrasymachus, with extravagant vulgarity, has just championed injustice (*Republic*, 358d). Socrates, in his account of the conversation, remarks that Glaucon is "always most courageous in everything" (357a), but Glaucon's courage is untempered by prudence and is, as a result, often graceless: here it manifests itself as presumption. He turns Socratic method on Socrates at the outset of their conversation, asking him a series of questions in which he sketches a taxonomy of what is good. There is the sort of good we seek for its own sake, such as pleasures that have no deleterious effects; there is the kind of good liked both for its own sake and for its consequences; there is the good, like gymnastic exercise, that is drudgery but whose rewards we cherish. In what category, he asks, does the practice of justice fall? Justice belongs, Socrates replies, to the "finest" kind of good that "the man who is going to be blessed should like both for itself and what comes out of it." (358a) Glaucon fails to see that Socrates' reply alters his taxonomy, adding to it a fourth category; he believes Socrates has placed justice in his second category, the kind of good liked both for itself and its

consequences. But justice as Socrates describes it has no place in Glaucon's second category: there is no mention of a desire for blessedness in that category; there is no suggestion there that one must learn an attraction to this sort of good: the good of thinking and seeing is self-evident to everyone; Socrates has suggested that the good of justice is not. Socrates is talking about another kind of goodness, the "finest kind," but this is a sort beyond, it seems, the present reach of Glaucon's comprehension. Glaucon's own view is that justice is a form of goodness, like submitting to medical treatment when ill, whose practice is unpleasant but whose benefits are worth seeking.

Much of Glaucon's character is already made clear: an aspiration to "blessedness" is incomprehensible to him; whenever Socrates, throughout their exchange, suggests matters beyond the consideration of physical reality or practical statecraft, Glaucon, if he notes them at all, dismisses such remarks as daimonic hyperbole, verging on the laughable (509c). Also it is evident that Glaucon sees justice in terms of rulership, a hard undertaking practiced by the leader that nevertheless rewards those who exercise it with personal honour and wealth (358a). Because he is drawn to honour, he might be interested in finding a way to overcome his repulsion to the hard work he suspects justice entails; he perhaps thinks that Socrates' instruction on how justice is "better" will help him surmount his resistance to the drudgery of doing justice and so win him its considerable rewards. Besides, the vulgarity of Thrasymachus is evident to him: no real renown will come from rule marked by such unmasked injustice. He wonders how one can engage in political life and win a truly good reputation. The terms of Socrates' conversation with his companion are laid down at the outset by the latter's limitations.



Often in Plato's dialogues an individual is kept from philosophy simply by the conviction that he already is a philosopher or that he bears a profound resemblance to Socrates. Theodorus in the *Theaetetus* and Euthyphro in the dialogue that bears his name both labour under this personal misidentification. Glaucon has no awareness of himself as limited; indeed, he seems to rejoice in the belief that he is what Socrates is: he offers a superficial imitation of Socrates, in the early stages of their exchange, engaging in a sham dialectic, proposing a taxonomy and telling a paradigmatic tale -- all Socratic psychagogic devices. It quickly becomes evident, however, that Glaucon is not Socrates' double but his mirror image, just as Glaucon's story of Gyges' ancestor is a mirror image of the story of the cave that Socrates later will tell. Both stories involve descents into the earth and ascents into the world with new authority, but the authority of Gyges' ancestor comes from the mastery of technique -- the twisting of the ring -- rather than abandonment to philosophical eros and a vision of the good. Glaucon oddly imagines himself a philosopher while, at the same time, being repelled by what strikes him as the extreme oddness of the philosophical life (509c; 581d). The *atopos* nature of the philosopher is just as much beyond the scope of his imagination as the man in his tale who practices justice when the license to practice injustice is available to him, a figure he finds "wretched" and "foolish." (360d) We have a foretaste, in these valuations, of the mocking incredulity with which he will greet Socrates' attempt to introduce the "daimonic excess" of the good beyond being into their conversation.

Socrates is clear that he would prefer to respond to Glaucon's request by locating his search for justice in the soul, but recognizes that such an investigation is beyond the present capacity of Glaucon who, though courageous, lacks sharp sight (368d); he relents, then, and proposes to seek justice in the city where what is in the soul is written large (369a). Such a discussion is easily within Glaucon's range; it builds on his political preoccupations; indeed it flushes out the political exaggerations of his erotic ambitions.

Socrates and Adeimantus begin to construct an imaginary city in which they attempt to identify justice, but they are interrupted by Glaucon who complains that the two have made "a city of sows," yet one "without relishes." (372c-d) Instead of Socrates' "healthy city," he wishes to see a "luxurious city" -- what Socrates calls a "feverish city" -- described, one that, as Socrates puts it, will be "gorged with a bulky mass of things." (372e-373b) Such a city, Socrates warns, will require more doctors because of its excess and an army to take land from its neighbours in its appetite for more. Glaucon is not disconcerted by the inevitable warlike nature of the feverish city; he, after all, has a strong interest in the art of war, valuing it over commercial endeavors like shoemaking (374b). When Socrates outlines the education of the guardians in book seven, Glaucon is most keen to hear of the applications of calculation, geometry and astronomy to generalship and the conduct of battle (522c-e; 525b; 526c-d; 527d). The pleonexic city, expansionist, bellicose, is his true home.

Glaucon, however, has an eros that precedes his conversation with Socrates -- a desire for personal honour (548d) -- that could serve as a prelude to a philosophical life. This desire now leads him to seek renown in a warlike city; but it is not his political ambitions that bar him from the philosophical life into which Socrates is attempting to lead him. Glaucon

confuses philosophy with geometrical thinking and is fascinated by the convertibility of this sort of thinking into military success. He experiences severe difficulty in imagining a form of thought higher than such thinking when Socrates asks him to do so (511b-d), and it is his weddedness to such thought -- a being "unable to step above the hypotheses" (511a) -- that leads him to dream of a polis which sacrifices human beings and human attachment to towering, meta-human ideals. Socrates attempts to wean him from attachment to such a city and such thinking by showing him the repellantly anti-human outcome of both. At the end of book three, he sketches in an absurdly ascetical regime for the guardians (416d – 417b); in book four he recommends holding women in common (424a); in book five, he speaks of the rearing of human beings in pens (460c).

Jacob Howland argues that Socrates in proposing the more outrageous elements of Glaucon's city is deliberately acting like the figure of the philosopher Aristophanes created in the *Clouds*, ridiculous yet dangerous, and thus is ironically undermining any identification between himself and the Aristophanic caricature.<sup>6</sup> It is true that Socrates does not hold the more outrageous political views about Glaucon's city that makes such commentators as Karl Popper see Plato as a totalitarian, but Howland is wrong to think that the target of his irony is Aristophanes' treatment of him. This treats the *Republic* too much like a contemporary written work, in which a writer might set out to settle scores with his critics, and ignores its dialogical nature. Rather, it is Glaucon who is the object of Socrates' irony; the intent of this irony is the correction Glaucon's erotic misalignment and the drawing of him toward the kenotic pursuit of wisdom. But at the beginning of book four, it is Adeimantus who is unsettled by the severity of the guardians' lives; Glaucon seems undisturbed by this. It is

Polemarchus who initially raises an objection to the institution of holding women in common (449b); Glaucon adds a weak protest later, merely asking for a clarification. Glaucon seems troublingly unaware of the brutishness that, at his instigation, is being drawn in speech by the creation of the city he insists be constructed. He does not see the oddness of the citizens of his imaginary city, who are the product of calculation, their lack of musicality, their ugliness. However, if Socrates can arouse shame in his interlocutor at any point around the application of geometrical thinking to politics, Glaucon might just be brought into philosophy.



Shame is part of Socrates' psychagogic method; it appears throughout the dialogues as a way of correcting erotic disfigurement; the aftermath of shame is a vacuum in which philosophical desire may appear. Alcibiades reports its surprising appearance in his life in the *Symposium*: Socrates alone provokes it. (*Symposium*, 216a). Alcibiades is overwhelmed by the speeches of Socrates which appear "utterly ridiculous at first" (222b), concerned with "pack-asses and blacksmiths, cobblers and tanners," but that within appear "almost the talk of a god" containing numberless "representations of ideal excellence." (222c) Alcibiades confesses himself transfixed by such talk; his "heart beats faster than if I were in a religious frenzy and tears run down my face" (216c); he is disarmed, his soul "thrown into confusion and dismay"; he imagines his life little better than a slave's, yet his desire to expose himself to the beauty within the Socratic speeches intensifies so that if he did not block his ears as Odysseus did his companions as they approached the Isle of the Sirens, he would grow old



sitting before the man who charms him. Thunderstruck by Socrates words, he is convinced it is impossible for him to remain in his present state (216c); he sees that he "neglects his true interests" in his pursuit of renown in public life, that he is "a mass of imperfections." Dismayed by the building erotic effect Socrates' words have on him and the shame they arouse in him, he contemplates flight from the one who most draws him. He describes the experience of his encounter with Socrates as being wounded -- worse than snake bite, he says -- in his soul (219a).

Theodorus, the educator in the *Theaetetus* is another who speaks of shame as part of a brush with Socrates. For Alcibiades, his exposure to Socrates' "representations of ideal excellence," to philosophy, is a confusing experience of erotic intensification, disorientation, humiliation and an overmastering sense of the untenability of his present situation. Theodorus feels none of the erotic tug that Alcibiades reports, yet speaks of conversations with Socrates as a stripping (162b), a being taken "to the mat in speeches" (169b); he shies away from this discomfiting experience throughout the dialogue, remarking that he is "unused to conversations of this sort" and "not of an age to get used to it either" (146b); he wishes to speak only of geometry (169b). Theodorus avoids shame as he avoids the experience of philosophy, but he has been led towards both. Glaucon does not flee the experience of shame as both Alcibiades and Theodorus do, the disassembling of false self-esteem and the prelude of philosophy; he is impervious to it. He does not see, though Adeimantus, Polemarchus and even Thrasymachus do, that the city in speech fashioned to satisfy his pleonexia creates outrage. Even when Socrates asserts that the vigor of the city requires selective breeding among the guardians, in which the most fit are to be rewarded

with "abundant intercourse" (460b), whose offspring will be raised in "pens" by selected nurses, Glaucon does not recognize the barbarity he has initiated. Throughout his account, Socrates uses animal imagery to explain the eugenetics of Glaucon's city: the best breeders among the guardians will be selected like horses for their fitness (459c); the progeny of the fittest are bunched in "flocks." Since most people are likely to object to such political measures concerning procreation, Socrates observes, the "eminent rulers" of the city must use "a throng of lies and deceptions for the benefit of the ruled." (459d) Glaucon misses the irony of these remarks; he agrees to the grotesque conventions Socrates proposes, using the same language from animal breeding that Socrates employs to mock them: all this must be done, Glaucon asserts, if "the guardians' species is going to remain pure." (460c) Glaucon is unashamable in his attachment to the pursuit of honour in a society committed to the engineering of human beings, a city which his longing for glory, his longing for a "feverish" luxury, has brought into speech. Shame is part of the apokatastasis of philosophy, the breaking of old erotic postures and the re-setting of the soul so that it loves what it is fit to love. In his immunity to shame, Glaucon's encounter with Socrates amounts finally to a refusal of philosophy.



Yet another Socratic psychagogic device is the telling of formational stories. As psychologies, epistemologies and ontologies, images such as the tripartite soul, the sun and the divided line seem failures. Socrates locates all longing in the lowest part of the soul in

book four of the *Republic*; in book nine, he asserts that all three parts of the soul have appropriate passions (580d-e). Which is it? Just how does the good create intelligibility? How does it resemble the sun? What is "participation" by which things are and are knowable? A commentator is left with the task of accounting for the apparent philosophical incompetence of Socrates; he contradicts himself; he is vague; he lacks rigour. This difficulty arises, however, only if one assumes that Socrates' philosophical aim is to erect explanatory systems; if one sees his intent as therapeutic, these images are not somewhat clumsy theories, but psychagogic heuristics, "spiritual exercises" by which his interlocutors, in their imaginations, practice different lives, like Stoic meditations on the operation of necessity in physical reality which were meant to make human affairs seem of little import against a backdrop of the working of the cosmos.<sup>7</sup> They need to be suggestive, resonant, and true without being precise. Further, the images used to trigger such exercises in the Socratic interlocutor change as his capacity for philosophy changes over the course of the dialogue.

The term "spiritual exercises" is chiefly associated with *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, though the method used there is ancient. Most of the contemplations outlined *The Exercises* begins with a "representation of place," in which the exercitant is encouraged to visualize an incident from scripture or some other event, and to participate, in imagination, in the scene he presents to himself. In the "Meditation on the Kingdom of Christ," for instance, which appears in the first week of *The Spiritual Exercises*, one is asked "to see in imagination the synagogues, villages and towns where Christ our Lord preached" (*Spiritual Exercises*, 91), while asking "not to be deaf to His call, but prompt and diligent" in accomplishing the divine will. One is further encouraged to imagine himself addressed by an

addressed by an "earthy king" who asks for his support in the conquest of the "infidel" and a "heavenly king" who similarly seeks his support in the conquest of the whole world. In conversation with persons of the Trinity, in "tasting their divinity," the one engaged in the *Exercises* is meant to "draw profit." (*Spiritual Exercises*, 107) The purpose of this interior labour, says Ignatius, this training, is "the conquest of self" (*Spiritual Exercises*, 21) and the reformation of the soul.

The stories Socrates tells Glaucon, hedged about with comparable instructions, have a similar intent: they are ways for Glaucon to savour and rehearse a new sort of longing, a new way of holding himself; as such, they have the capacity to re-jig the soul. On the surface, such stories are full of "blacksmiths, cobblers and tanners," suns, caves -- these initially hold the imagination; on a deeper reading, motivated by analysis in search of meaning, they appear to be awkwardly rendered doctrines on the nature of reality or the structure of the soul. Their true value, however, is psychagogic: in the consideration of them the Socratic interlocutor undergoes an interior realignment as he practices an attraction for things that before did not draw him; he tries out the pose of a new disposition. The three images Socrates uses over the course of the longer way to illuminate "what is greater than justice" (504d), problematically imprecise, "poetic," as philosophical doctrine, thus would be better read as formational tales, exercises by which Glaucon might imaginatively enact a participation in some aspect of the philosophical life. At the beginning of the account of the longer way, Glaucon, as Socrates predicted he would (506e), has found consideration of the good itself beyond his reach: he accuses Socrates of daimonic excess when Socrates speaks of this good which is "beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power," which is nevertheless the cause of its existence.

Socrates then leads Glaucon through the figure of the divided line as a directed meditation: conceive, he bids him, of two things, one the "king of the intelligible class . . . the other . . . king of the visible" (509d); he asks Glaucon if he "has" these two forms, that is, if he is able to visualize them interiorly; in doing so, Glaucon enacts them, participates in them. He is then urged to "take a line cut in two unequal segments, one for the class that is seen, the other for the class that is intellected" and then to similarly divide the portions of the line above and below the first cut. The purpose of this exercise is to help Glaucon, who has a pre-philosophical predilection for geometrical figures, enter in his imagination a region previously inaccessible to him, that lying beyond hypothetical thought, where one understands without images drawn from the visible world (510b). Glaucon had just dismissed what is approached by such inquiry as another version of the "smoke and nonsense" of the wisdom-lover. Now he delectates in his imagination a strange sort of investigation difficult for him to "sufficiently understand" (510b); to so contemplate alters him, just as he is corrected by "seeing" (514a) the story of the cave where again he is led to conceive and savour a form of eros, a vocation, utterly new to him. These exercises do not make him a philosopher, but at least they allow him to entertain soberly in imagination what before he could not see and mocked.



The psychologies Socrates presents in the *Republic* also have a maiutetic intent. In books eight and nine, he lays out a typology of souls and the cities that arise from them --

a study in political psychology, but an exercise designed to increase Glaucon's interior acuity. Glaucon's disposition is in part timocratic, since he loves victories and honour (548d), and in part tyrannic, given the lure that the story of Gyges' ancestor has for him. He has demonstrated his incapacity for the philosophical life; perhaps he might be led to become more just, more restrained in his desires. His procession through the various characters and types of cities is both an examination of conscience and an interior stretching where he tries out various interior dispositions. In the end, he will be asked to make what amounts to a choice of life (the end, as well, of the *Spiritual Exercises*), saying which of the cities is happiest.

Socrates encourages Glaucon to represent the souls and their cities deeply to himself, for "in an argument such as this, one must not just suppose such things but must consider them quite well," since the point of the consideration is "the greatest thing, a good life and a bad one." (578c) With the tyrant, he tells Glaucon to "go in" the tyrant's city, "creeping down into every corner and looking," and then to declare whether the city seems happy or wretched (576e); then "with his thought to creep into a man's disposition and see through it," experiencing the soul of the tyrant intimately (577a). Taking on such a soul in an ekstasis of imagination, similar to that provoked by Ignatian instructions in the *Exercises*, Glaucon sees clearly that the soul he contemplates is full of indignity; slavishly "drawn by a gadfly, it will be full of confusion and regret" (577e). Nor, on consideration, does he feel the full pull of the timocratic soul; he finds himself not keen to endure being "abandoned by his best guardian," a taste for the music of argument. He ends by choosing the kingly man, the man both good and just (544e), as the happiest and best (580c), though he suspects that Socrates "has a still

and just (544e), as the happiest and best (580c), though he suspects that Socrates "has a still finer city and man to tell of" (544a). Exercised by Socrates' formational tales -- he has lived inside each of the possible souls, except the soul of the philosopher, in his imagination -- he has been turned a small way around within. He has grown, at least, in his capacity "to distinguish the good and the bad life," and like the most fortunate souls in the Myth of Er, is somewhat better equipped to choose his way (620a).



The *Republic* is widely regarded as a book where Plato exposes himself as an autocrat; it is also infamous as the work where he reveals his "puritanical" disdain for poets:<sup>8</sup> these two caricatures of the dialogue contribute to the popular image of Plato as a cerebral solitary with fascist tendencies. But the significance of the totalitarian features of the book changes when the *Republic* is understood as an account of an attempt to transform an individual charmed by geometrical thinking and political idealism. Socrates' remarks on poets also must be seen as therapeutic to be properly grasped. Glaucon is very much attracted to Homer (607d); his particular reading of the poet has "maimed" his thought (595b), enhancing his love of victory and his pleonexia to the point where the idea of a city where people are selectively bred to produce a successful warrior class appeals to him. The alteration Socrates tries to bring about in Glaucon, the education of his desire, should be understood as an attempt to correct the latter's reading of Homer. Zdravko Planinc argues that Plato's "mythologia" of Socrates in the *Republic* and the *Laws* makes the philosopher, in his

"wanderings and homecomings," the new Odysseus, but a greater figure than the honour-loving warrior, the greatest Greek hero, whose travels are in argument and lead to "the *paradeigma* of a perfectly just and good city," the polis of the Magnesians, as Odysseus' led him to the beautiful land of the Phaiakians.<sup>9</sup> Charles Segal, as well, points to the parallels between Socratic and Homeric heroism both in the *Apology*, where Socrates compares the pursuit of philosophy with Achilles avenging the death of Patroclus even though it will mean his death (*Apology*, 28b-d; *Iliad*, XVIII, 95-104), and in the *Republic*. But the heroism of the philosopher, Segal argues, alters the old heroic pattern, divesting it of its "tragic irrationality."<sup>10</sup> Signs, however, of this sublated pattern are throughout the *Republic*, especially in the theme of descent and return. The book begins with the descent of Socrates and Glaucon to Piraeus in order to view a religious event, a light carried on horseback appearing in darkness; there is the descent in the story of the cave and Er's descent to the underworld (*Republic*, 614b-621b), as well as the crafty, unheroic descent of Gyges' ancestor to steal the magical ring from the immense corpse entombed below the earth. With the exception of the last, each echoes the ancient mythic and psychagogic schema of descent to the underworld and renewal found in both Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries, in the myth of Inanna and in the *Odyssey*. Calypso keeps Odysseus "in one place / in a hollow cave" (*Odyssey*, IX, 29-30) from which he escapes through the intervention of the gods; Odysseus descends to Hades where he meets his mother, Antikleia, who urges him to "be eager to go to the light as fast as you can." (XI, 223) As well as cave and underworld references pointing to its indebtedness to *Odyssey* the *Republic* retains the epic motif of a numinous sea journey in the imagery of the triple wave (457b; 472a; 473c) threatening Glaucon's city in speech and in



the image of the soul, finally given over to philosophy, drawn "out of the deep ocean in which it now is" (612a) and restored to its "original nature." (611d) Thus Plato "saves" the myth (621c) by reshaping it, removing its violent elements, but retaining its psychic architecture -- the epic hero's loss of power represented by Odysseus' loss of his companions; his disorientation and stripping of identity on the trackless sea; his restoration to his homeland -- as way of talking about the heroic endeavour of philosophical transformation.

Segal's arguments, however, do not account for Socratic disdain for Homer in books three and ten of the *Republic* and the banning of all poetry except "hymns to the gods or celebration of good men." (607a) How to reconcile the view that the *Republic* is the *Odyssey* recast, that Socrates is presented in the dialogue as the new Odysseus and that the structure of philosophy is the structure of the epic hero's quest, with parts of the *Republic* that appear to be anti-poetic? There are eight sorts of passages Socrates wishes to "expunge" from Homer he tells Adeimantus early in book three: those concerning fear of death or loss of any sort (386c-387b); those depicting gods or heroes mourning over "the slightest sufferings" (388d); those showing the gods in derisive laughter (389a-b); those promoting lack of esteem for the truth (389b); those failing to present the gods as "rulers of the pleasures of drink, sex and eating" (389e); those showing them swayed by gifts of money (390e); and those representing heroes as irreverent toward divine things (391c). All poetry which claims "that the gods produce evil and that heroes are not better than human beings" (391d), Socrates claims, have a stunting, contorting effect on a soul and should be suppressed. Glaucon admits he is "very much" charmed by Homer (607d); he has taken a version of the Homeric hero as his paradigm and been harmed by his assimilation of the model (391e). Glaucon fears the bite of

loss; what he has he wishes to hold or add on to; his city is rigorous to the point of triumphalism, a garrison against loss, either from the depredations of enemies or a weakening of the warrior excellence of its citizens. Someone with this disposition is incapable of tolerating the erotic ekstasis, the perpetual absence, of the philosophic life. Glaucon is so far from ruling his pleasures that it is difficult for him to imagine a good beyond pleasure's gratification (509a), and thus he is incapable of a proper demeanour before divine things. He laughs at them and all those who speak of the (509c). Depictions of the gods as preoccupied by sex and money provide him with theological justification for his pleonexia and ingrain this feature deeper in him. Socrates' critique of Homer, then, is not an attack on poetry, not Plato taking a "puritanical," "intellectualist" position in "the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (607b), but a chipping away at Glaucon, just as Glaucon has "hammered off" him "shells, seaweed, rocks" which make him resemble "any beast rather than what he was by nature." (611d-612a) Socrates wishes to restore Glaucon to his "original nature" and make him fit to love wisdom and to see his affinity for what is daimonic; this involves a correction of his erotic misalignment formed, in part, by his particular appropriation of Homeric myth. Glaucon's reading of Homer, devoted though it may be, has been incomplete: he has missed the heroic structure of loss, disorientation and painful return home, Odysseus recovering what he was before he left to seek glory at Troy. Socrates reminds him of the inevitably difficult, wrenching, transformative life of the hero in particular in the story of the cave; a completed reading of Homer, a reappropriation of the whole myth, is one way of doing philosophy.



The *Republic* is a variously misread book. There are those who see it as a revelation of Plato's dangerous political idealism (Karl Popper); those who find in it a transcendent perfectionism replacing the fragility of human relationships (Martha Nussbaum); those who read it as anti-poetic (Iris Murdoch). Still others read the *Republic* as a sustained attack on eros as a force subverting both morality and the state (Allan Bloom), and thus a book at odds with the thought in both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. The *Republic* is anti-erotic, so this view goes, proposing a philosophy that is "mathematical and ordered" as opposed to the philosophy championed in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* which is "erotic and rapturous."<sup>11</sup> The spirit of the *Republic's* version of philosophy is, according to Gerald M. Mara, the latest proponent of the Bloomian position, decidedly non-Alcibiadean; it is "a matter of calculation rather than affect" the intent of which is to uncover "the order of the cosmos" not "to satisfy the deepest longing of its practitioner."<sup>12</sup> Plato, however, makes no mention of two philosophical paths in the *Republic*, *Symposium* or *Phaedrus*, one with scientific aspirations, the other a matter of the pursuit of longing. He does, though, attempt to draw Glaucon from his attachment to geometrical thinking, seeing it as a pseudo-philosophy, where one might hide if he did not wish to undergo the erotic risk of genuine philosophy.

Socrates speaks of philosophical desire -- philosophical "gusto" and "delight" -- as "insatiable"(457c) in the *Republic*, source of "the truest pleasures" (586d), indeed the *only* true pleasure (587c), but which the lover of honour sees as "smoke and nonsense" (581d) because it brings no honour. Glaucon is the prisoner of both "bastard" pleasures (587c), the love of honour and gain, placing him close to the tyrant, just as he is attracted to what merely seems to be philosophy. Glaucon's problem is not that he is too erotic, as Bloom and Mara

argue, but that he is not erotic enough, that he is not genuinely erotic. Socrates' apparent attacks on eros in the first image of the tripartite soul and the image of the tyrant are, in fact, attacks on what masquerades as eros. Glaucon wants to hold on to what he has; he prefers his satiety; he wants to make himself sufficiently esteemed, and he believes he can do this through calculation in politics and war. Glaucon's calculation is an ersatz philosophy; his pleonexia is an ersatz -- "bastard" -- eros. Absence is repugnant to him; the insatiability of philosophical longing is incomprehensible to him -- he will never be drawn to the reverence, poverty and unquenchable desire of philosophy, though it alone will give him what he seeks in his feverish city.

## Notes

- 1 Marjorie Grene, *Descartes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 53.
- 2 Ray Monk, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Duty of Genius* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), p. 415 ff. Monk notes the transformative intent of Wittgenstein's lectures on the philosophy of mathematics in 1939, in which Wittgenstein attempted to dissipate the charm cast by various metaphysical propositions arising from a particular view of mathematics. The episodic form of *Philosophical Investigations* also points to Wittgenstein's therapeutic intent: he is attempting, in the early sections of the book, to undermine attachment to a particular notion of language, the source, he believes, of much philosophical "superstition".  
 Pierre Hadot, "Wittgenstein, philosophe du langage (II)," *Critique*, 150 (November 1959), 973. Quoted in Arnold I. Davidson's introduction to *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises From Socrates to Foucault*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), pp. 17-8. Hadot argues for viewing all of Wittgenstein's work from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to *Philosophical Investigations* and *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* as a therapeutics meant to extricate readers from philosophy as "an illness of language," bringing peace to metaphysical worry.
- 3 Charles Segal, "Transformation and Ritual in Odysseus' Return," in *The Odyssey* trans. Albert Cook (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), p. 466.
- 4 Zdravko Planinc, *Plato's Political Philosophy, Prudence in the Republic and Laws*, (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1991), pp. 32-46. Planinc gives an account

of an array of misreadings, all of which grow from a conflation of ontological rumination and the practice of philosophy.

- 5 Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 81.
- 6 Jacob Howland, *The Republic. The Odyssey of Philosophy* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), pp. 29-30.
- 7 Hadot, p. 59.
- 8 Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun. Why Plato Banished the Artists* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977), pp. 12-4.
- 9 Plannic
- 10 Charles, Segal, “ ‘The Myth Was Saved’: Reflections on Homer and the Mythology in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Hermes*, 106, No. 2, 1978, p. 321.
- 11 Gerald Mara, *Socrates’ Discursive Democracy: Logos and Ergon in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 232.
- 12 Mara, p. 232.

## II

## Chapter Four

### How Cassian Read

*Totus in lectione totus in oratione*

John Cassian's *Conferences* lastingly introduced thought about longing as noesis to Europe. It was western monasticism's originary book: from it rose that small, durable home for the attentive heart: the *Rule of St. Benedict*. In Cassian's book, desire is amplified, drawn by reading: reading brings wanting the large good of the emotional scent of a final cause; and the persistent gravity this telos works on desire pulls it to shapeliness. All forms of anagogic reading in *Conferences* -- lectio divina, hesychastic repetition, opus Dei -- depend on a desire which must precede them, the same desire they subsequently will form-- specifically the poverty within this desire. Humility is the means by which reading in Cassian is rescued from a seamless exegesis and an ontology which in their urge to completeness increase one's separation from the nourishment within what one reads --this separation superbia's balm, superbia's wound --and turns one "to the lore which illuminates through the achievement of love," (*Conferences* 14. 1011) the erotic knowing of co-mingling.



Certain forms of literature, Origen remarks, are like human beings-- they are tripartite,



with bodies, souls and spirits (*On First Principles* 4. 2. 4). All psychagogic books, scripture pre-eminently, but also secular works like Hermas' *The Shepherd*, possess such strata, thus have interior lives. The latter two meanings are hidden, the first lightly, the second profoundly, and are reachable only through an ascetical practice which has not been formed by the deeper readings, but which the deeper readings, when reached, alone will fully augment. To be grasped by these meanings and be altered -- impossible to come to this by interpretation, impossible by ontologically inspired inquiry<sup>1</sup> -- is to be understood by oneself, to enter, by reading's anagoge, the other world beside this world, the place of pure intelligibility. The second reading pulls to virtue -- and in it reason bears an impressive load; the third to contemplation-- perhaps over the objections of understanding.

Books are psychagogic when lifted in the wake of philosophical practice, when they are, in other words, daimonic, infused. But they must be incidental to this practice, accidents; when they are intended as transformative, they are sophistry. If the writer, that is, is not helpless in the work, erotic yet passive, helpless but alert, she is a sophist. One contrarily disposed, ignorant yet drawn, alone would be able to mount an argument that their work was of scant consequence (*Phaedrus*, 278 c-d).

The contemplative life rises from language, but the forms of reading Cassian recommends are peculiar: here reading's intent is not analytic, taxonomic, hermeneutic, but maieutic: understanding, always burgeoning, is the transformed life. A later account of this

understanding is never systematic, can hardly be written: the altered life is the sole, complete figure for an otherwise non-reportable approach to what reason has been ravished by and loves. Less complete accounts may exist in poetry or in anamnestic literature like apothegmata, or, equally in the dialogues of Plato, but these are partial, more heuristic than description.

Prayer, says Cassian, is the plain attention within the “regular reading and continuous meditation on Scripture”; such reading, *lectio divina*, is not palliative, not distraction, but an inquiring probe into what draws but cannot be said; it is the push of besotted reason toward what it senses, almost as a fragrance (*Conferences* 1. 1), yet cannot know; but its aim is chiefly ascetical: one reads this way “so that a spiritual turn may be given to memory” (*Conf.* 1.17. 2). Or further: prayer is the unbroken repetition of a single psalmic verse, Psalm 70: 1, for instance; you turn this over repeatedly within and so “lift yourself upward”: this ceaseless facing of a model is training, the mind raised by the muscle of hesychasm (*Conf.* 10. 10. 1). Cassianic prayer, lastly, is *opus Dei*, the discipline of psalmody, the regular singing of psalms, read or recited from memory, meant to engender an implacable compunction, the mind's slimming (*Conf.* 1. 17. 2).

Cassian's notion of reading holds that writing with formative power has a subterranean vitality that scarcely shows on the surface of writing-- a shadow book lies within the book, hidden-- and that one gains entry to this altering, inner book through forms of attention, ways of holding language before one, which themselves provoke the same sort of change in the reader that the sequestered force within writing later will with even greater power. Such reading is an ascesis; such reading is a lifting. One does not read for

comprehension but to be made comprehensible, trued. Each of these forms of attention to literature, to writing with its own interiority, exercises, as well, a suppressant effect on imagination, and so helps to produce, says Cassian, *puritas cordis*, a pure heart, the treasure of the contemplative life: each narrows and sustainingly builds desire.

So attention to language in Cassian is *paideia*; true reading works as a lever on the reader, this reading also a disorientation, an intoxication.<sup>3</sup> Cassian's instructions for reading are a "theological poesis,"<sup>4</sup> which are also an account of love resting on one thing, then building: comprehension may or may not be coincident with this. Whether this comprehension is great or small is of secondary importance; however, greater comprehension entails a greater temptation by theory. But it would be wrong to see anti-intellectualism in Cassian's ascesis of reading.



Evagrius Ponticus was the child of a chorbishop, Palladius reports in the *Lausiac History*,<sup>5</sup> a minor, rural, itinerant hierarch, exercising limited episcopal powers under a metropolitan. He was raised near the family estate of Basil the Great, where a monastic community recently had been established which was to shape life in Cappadocia and monasticism throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Evagrius was ordained a lector by Basil, and later, in 379, a deacon by Gregory of Nazianzen, a colleague of Basil, who was soon to be appointed bishop in the imperial see at Constantinople, where he was charged with meeting the threat of Arianism, which had won over large numbers of people, including

members of the emperor's immediate family.<sup>6</sup> Evagrius, following his mentor to Constantinople, proved to be an illustrious disputant for the Nicean side; he rose to prominence as the orthodox cause grew in popularity in the city.

Evagrius fell in love with the wife of an important official during these years of celebrity, and left Asia Minor for Jerusalem, as a result, where he lived in the community of Melania on the Mount of Olives. Melania and her friend Rufinus were ardent readers of Origen -- Origen comes into Latin through Rufinus' translation; Melania, Palladius records, turned night into day reading him<sup>7</sup> -- and supporters of Egyptian monasticism even before Melania's visit to the cells of Nitria in the early 370's. Likely because of her influence, Evagrius spent the rest of his life in various monastic communities south of Alexandria; through him, the influence of Origen grew large in the desert.

Evagrian epistemology is largely ascetic: the subjugation of "thoughts" (*Praktikos*, 6) breeds impeturbability: with this emptiness, knowing occurs. "The goal of *praktike*, Evagrius remarks in *Gnostikos*, is "to purify the intellect and render it impassible" (*Gnostikos*, 49): knowing depends upon a chastening of the self, a quelling of the flickering movement of the self; it is what happens when the muscled, striven-for stillness appears. He takes the notion of *praktike* from Gregory of Nazianzen, who used it to describe the life of bishops,<sup>8</sup> and tilts it, sharpening it to apply to the contemplative life in general, to the monastic life in particular. *Praktike* is what Christianity is, along with *theoria physike*, contemplation of the physical world, and *theologia*, contemplation of divinity (*Pr.* 1): the kingdom of heaven is emptiness of soul, *apatheia*, permeability -- and "true knowledge of existing things." (*Pr.* 2) This interior state of spreading quiet has a

single offspring, *agape*, which is the sole doorkeeper to deep knowledge of being, the apprehension of things denuded of the additions of attachment.<sup>9</sup>

Apatheia, the soul's health, is the evacuation of images from keen, numinous attention (*Pr.* 65); this imagelessness is the end of the Evagrian therapeutics of "thoughts," the eight misdirections capable of stirring the passions, blocking attention, truncating eros itself -- gluttony, impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory and pride (*Pr.* 6) -- all plausible, febrile, enervating. Avarice, for instance, "suggests to the mind a lengthy old age, inability to perform manual labour (at some future date), famines that are sure to come, sickness that will visit us, the pinch of poverty, the great shame that comes from accepting the necessities of life from others." (*Pr.* 9) This "mother of idolatry" is met, claims Evagrius, by stability, a canny staying where one is: the conflict itself is psychagogic: to flee it "schools the spirit in awkwardness, cowardice and fear" (*Pr.* 28). Here, as elsewhere, Evagrian psychagoguery heals at a slant. The balm for sadness is inching from pleasure (*Pr.* 19); anger is disarmed by singing the psalms and almsgiving (*Pr.* 15). Anachoresis, turning within, the yielding of withdrawal, wrestles all demons (*Pr.* 52); reading wrestles all demons. Waiting during the time of sleep and prayer brings stability (*Pr.* 15).

Acedia -- listlessness, restlessness, an itch for fleet rootlessness -- is the least tractable menace, the last to be expelled (*Pr.* 12). Evagrius advises a practice of supposing one will die tomorrow in order to meet it; similar counsel appears in apothegmata associated with Antony and in Epictetus.<sup>10</sup> No other seduction follows acedia; behind it comes the noetic emptiness of apatheia, and behind this, *agape* appears: then one sees the world as it is. For Evagrius, the discipline involved in achieving *ordinata caritas* is the

structure of true knowing.



*Totus in lectione, totus in oratione*: the whole person in reading, the whole person in prayer: reading is reading's transformation; reading is prayer; comprehension is a turning; attention is a turning. Reading of a certain sort speeds permeability: that is, it breeds emptiness. Reading is ascetical, it is psychagogic. But not all reading is so -- only what is anagogic, and not all works permit such reading: only those that have been infiltrated by ascetical practice, only those pushed up by erotic, philosophical momentum. The turn of anagoge is not a being moved, is not inspiration; it is not a gestalt shift; it is not growth in erudition or understanding of any sort: it is not conversion; it can give no exhaustive account of where it ends: it is a noetic blindness which is subverted by light: it is an interior posture which fruits out from a life-wide, persistent attention directed toward what arrests reason but which reason cannot say.

The rational part of the soul, in Evagrius' anthropology, recovers from its wounds once appetite reaches for the medicine of interiority (*Pr.* 85), which is virtue; once irascibility transmogrifies into courage and patience as it enters combat with the demons, then reason is brought back to its nature and "applies itself to the contemplation of created things" (*Pr.* 86). *Apatheia* in the rational soul, virtue in reason, appears as prudence, understanding and wisdom (*Pr.* 89); as the latter, it is never stably settled, though it

approaches asymptotically true gnosis of being (*Pr.* 87).<sup>11</sup> Virtue's issue, its necessary issue, grain from seeds, is knowing (*Pr.* 90); reading is a work which is a prerequisite fashioning that builds to this knowing.



John Cassian was a Scythian, native of the Dobjudja, present day Romania. He went to Egypt in 385 from a monastery near the cave of the nativity at Bethlehem, in search of "perfection," travelling with a friend, his fellow countryman Germanus; both men were convinced they had been ill-equipped for a life of desert solitude by their short period in the cenobium (*Conf.* 19. 11. 1); each promised a return to their original community and each later broke this promise; they were looking for teachers. They made a landfall at Thennesus near the Nile's eastern mouth, and, helped by Bishop Archebius of Panephyss, a former hermit pressed into episcopal office, were introduced to a community of solitaires living in the salt marshes in the river's delta (*Conferences* 11-18); later Cassian and Germanus joined a second congregation of hermits in the desert of Skete (*Conferences* 1-10), under the leadership of Paphnutius, whom Palladius identifies as an Origenist.<sup>12</sup> While there is no record of Cassian having been taught by Evagrius, Evagrius was the leading synthesizer of Origen and Egyptian monasticism in the desert, and few non-Coptic monks failed to come under his influence -- Cassian's preference for imageless prayer, for instance, is clearly Evagian.

In 399, Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, issued a customary letter shortly after Epiphany in which he set the dates for Lent and Easter; the letter went on to denounce "the foolish heresy of the anthropomorphites" (*Conf.* 10. 11. 2). Cassian reports that this

denunciation was received with “great bitterness” by most of the monks; none of the presbyters in Skete, aside from Paphnutius, agreed to have it read in their churches; the outraged monks accused the bishop himself of heresy, stormed Alexandria, causing riots. Theophilus met the crowd, and initially upheld the argument of his letter --that God could not be imagined as having a human form -- then reversed himself, condemning what the rebellious monks called “Origenism.” The reversal began the chain of events which led to the expulsion of all monks under the influence of Evagrius -- chiefly Greek and Latin speaking foreigners -- from Egypt. This expulsion included Cassian, who next appeared as a newly ordained deacon in Constantinople in 403, under the authority of John Chrysostom.<sup>13</sup>

Cassian reports Theophilus' letter, and Paphnutius' support of it, with approval: rustic naivete, he says, has caused the Coptic monks, most of whom were illiterate, to misconstrue the Genesis description of the making of man in the likeness of God in crudely physical anthropomorphic terms, and to employ such an anthropomorphically angled imagination in prayer. The purest form of prayer, he has the elder Isaac say in response to the crisis, will “permit itself neither the memory of any word whatsoever, nor the likeness of any deed, nor a shape of any kind” (*Conf.* 10. 5. 3). Here is the mark of Evagrius: prayer should be “free from all matter,” an unrepresented knowing gained by drawing near “the immaterial Being” (*Chapters on Prayer*, 66).

Not only is Evagrian prayer empty, but it is also termless (*Pr.* 87), a sustained posture of erotic availability -- even though the subduing of the passions, the object of ascetical theology, he believed, had an end, as did *theoria physike*, the contemplation of nature. The contemplation of the Trinity, however, was “unlimited” (*Gnostikos*, 4. 87-8), an “infinite



ignorance,"<sup>14</sup> a "silence" (*Gnos.* 41). Evagrius' notion of limitless contemplative striving resembles Gregory of Nyssa's teaching of *epektasis*: the pursuit of gnosis of divinity is by nature endless.<sup>15</sup> More: not only is God incomprehensible, in Evagrius' view, but so, too, is the individual soul (*Gnos.* 3.31), the one thing in nature able to receive the impress of the Trinity itself.



The end of contemplative attention is purity of heart, says Cassian (*Conf.* 1. 5. 2., 1. 7. 1); this state is *theoria*, divine contemplation (1. 8. 2); it is the totality of what *philosophia* is<sup>16</sup>; it resembles Socratic permeability. *Puritas cordis* is attentiveness<sup>17</sup>; it alone is what builds attentiveness, what makes for being "one." (1. 8. 3) It begins with reflection "on a few holy persons," is, then, a reading of the life of one who is able to read you, who is able readily to detect a lover.<sup>18</sup> Cassian and Germanus, in the initial *Conference*, approach the old man Moses in the desert of Skete; his knowledge -- "his practical and contemplative virtue" -- strike them not as coherent system but as perfume (1. 1): they ask him for edifying instruction. He refuses to give them this at first, but at last is worn down by their pleading, their tearful begging. Moses, however, does not act condescendingly as a teacher: the penitetic sadness and the eros (1. 1) of the two permits his speech; without such conditions in his auditors, what he might say could not be other than boasting (1. 1), lightmindedness (10. 9. 3). The state of the listener can falsify speech with true gnosis, even for the speaker, can induce inarticulacy in the one who knows (1. 23. 2), can affect the true words so that they are

a betrayal of "important things."

Purity of heart, Moses tells them, is perfection. Besides the ascesis of yielding to the "fragrance" of the contemplative individual, its "tools" are the horror of vast solitude (1. 2. 3); readings (1. 7. 1); vigils; fasts; being stripped of everything -- honours, family, homeland (1. 6. 3). But the achievement of these -- even the setting aside of magnificent properties, the impressed Cassian says -- the athleticism of such acts, may yet leave one irritable over lesser losses, or besotted with the practice itself (1. 7. 4); reading may breed contempt for those near. The losses are ascetical theology only when undergone while the heart is fixed in pursuit of its proper end: its own erotic availability. Only when so narrowed may it feed on the beauty and *theoria* of divinity (1. 8. 3).

The emptiness of Cassian's pure heart is not interior immobility: it quivers with the intensity of the interior gaze (1. 12. 1); it is not impassibility: it is the most erotic of states in which the mind's attention is fixed unceasingly on Christ, where the smallest interruption of the gaze is "fornication" (1. 8. 1). Nor is it actual Evagrian emptiness: *puritas cordis* does not involve cessation of thoughts (1. 18. 2); thoughts rise but the mind is smoothed by diaphanesis, counterfeits set apart from *obrizim*, purest gold (1. 20. 1), so that one becomes a single act or thought -- an unbroken interior looking. The source of discernment is reading, "the frequent reading of and meditation on Scripture," which quickens compunction, gathering the mind stretched to its limits (1. 17. 2): reading as sorrow, reading as the simplification, the intensification of desire.



The book was an object of sharp emotional interest in the desert. An apothegmatum concerning the abba Anastasius recalls he owned a single volume, written on very fine parchment, worth eighteen pence, containing both the Old and New Testaments. A visiting monk saw the magnificent book and took it, intending to sell it later in the city for sixteen pence. His buyer, however, was suspicious, and brought the book to Anastasius for it to be evaluated. Assured by the abba that it was worth at least this much, the buyer returned to the city to complete the transaction, but the monk who had stolen the book, hearing that Anastasius had done nothing but praise the quality of the book, refused now to sell it, and returned, instead, stricken, to the abba. Anastasius declined to take the book back, offering it now to the thief as a gift. The monk stayed with the abba the rest of his days.<sup>19</sup>

Anastasius' detachment from his book on fine parchment is offered as proof of surpassing sanctity: books were charged physical presences in the desert, often the last of the possessions to be freed from, the last test, because of the centrality of exegesis in monastic practice. All of the theorists of desert prayer, Origen, Evagrius, John Cassian, held that mystical understanding grew from the exercise of certain sorts of reading. Origen's mystical theology is entirely exegetical: it is indistinguishable from the act of taking in a text. The mystical life is an injury suffered from sifting the Word, he says, an injury which is in fact the rising of desire. When one savours the sinuousness of all things brought out of the Logos, Origen observes, he will be pierced by a "chosen dart," and will "suffer from the dart Himself a saving wound." (Prologue to the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 2) This home-bringing wound, which Origen also calls *vulnus amoris*, the wound of love, the love of the inner man,

the wound which is the soul approaching its clearest form "under the stimulus of love's desire" (Prl. To the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 1), is eros woken by the Word. The point of reading is this standing-forth of eros: reading quickens the appearance of God who is desire in the one who reads (the Prol., 2, 1 John: 4-7). Let the soul say, I have been wounded by Charity, Origen counsels deep in his long reading of the *Canticle of Canticles*; let it say, I have been pierced by "the lovable spear of his knowledge." (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*. 11. 8); here is interior sensuality taught to speak by reading, a sensual mindedness which is in large part the words one reads anagogically fully assimilated.<sup>20</sup>

Knowledge of the philosophic working of desire, Origen claims, begins with Solomon; from him, it passes to the Greeks. This knowledge is laid out in three books, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and the *Song of Songs* itself, each book corresponding to a particular ascesis of knowing -- ethics, physics and enoptics -- which also may be called, according to Origen, the moral, natural and inspective disciplines (the Prol., 3). The moral "inculcates a seemly manner," an inclination to right reason; the natural gives knowledge of things so that nothing may be done that is contrary to nature; the inspective shapes in the soul a craning for divine things (the Prol. 3). All amount to the correction and lifting of desire so that it claims the power of vivification; all achieve their ends when the words of scripture are "stretched out" in the heart (*Proverbs* 1: 24, the Prol., 3), expanding the things first said enigmatically. The highest form of reading, anagogy, lifts, enlarges, confounds, changes, brings one to oneself. It is a heeding flavoured with a faithful anticipation; such reading may be a hearing of harmony ("God's music") within what appears discord: it may leave the understanding "unfruitful," even as it feeds the range of

faculties aiding the soul -- "believe," says Origen, "that thy soul is profited by the mere reading," even though the "understanding does not receive the fruit of the profit from these passages." The inner nature, meanwhile, is charmed as an asp under the spell of the charmer.<sup>23, 24</sup>

It is charmed as if it is remembering, or being remembered through, as if the "immense, monstrous animal" of the universe (*On First Principles* 2. 1. 3), in unstable dispersion, feels out the shape of its unitary girth. Through catanyxis, asceticism, attention, each powered by desire, the scattered, unself-conscious oneness remembers itself; the contemplative remembers herself as unlike, pulled, recalls a fuller extent, false dawn, then dawn, revealing a complete terrain; remembering is return and identity in union, "bending the knee in the name of Jesus," (1. 6. 2, Philippians 2: 10) each one recognizing itself -- and all near it -- in the dislocation into the otherness, the strangeness of beauty. Here knowing is a "whirling" (1. 8. 4), is a "wavering" (1. 8. 4), a "tossing" (2. 1. 1), a "winding" (4.4. 10), the soul running "round God" "since it cannot go to him."<sup>25</sup> The various momentum, shifting states of being are psychic states<sup>26</sup>, fallennesses, yet also stations -- understandings, lives, "nations," each a *mundus imaginalis* -- in the spectacle of return, this passage to the end that is like the beginning the soul's inexorable school (1. 6. 2., 1. 6. 4., 3. 6. 3). Origen's epistemology is eschatological, and, like his theodicy, inseparable from cosmology. In reading, which is divine eros thinking through dissatisfaction (4. 3. 11), one lurches into one mind, where feeling, understanding, thinking "will all be God," (3. 6. 3) a region of unlikeness, "the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places." (Isaiah 45: 3)



Prayer, in Evagrius, is knowing and ascesis; it is nourishment to the intelligence as bread is to the body, as ordered desire is to the soul (*Chapters on Prayer*, 101); prayer drives out acedia's despondency; the imagelessness of highest prayer can defeat a sort of inner pomp (116). Prayer's knowledge is proximity and decorum, not representation by analysis -- and it is higher than this second knowing: "If you are a theologian you truly pray," says Evagrius. "If you truly pray you are a theologian." (60) Prayer is the nature of the spirit working (*Praktikos*, 49); it is the "following of Christ" (*Chapters on Prayer*, Introductory Letter); it is another mind and desire within one, these appearing as gifts (58), provoking surprise, delight at aptness, gratitude.

Evagrius' instruction on prayer, offered to an unnamed correspondent, perhaps Rufinus<sup>27</sup>, is a random abundance, rough-edged in overall shape, one hundred and fifty-three remarks that, he says, came to him after he had "worked the whole night through and ... caught nothing" (Introductory Letter); they are writing which he presents as a "vehicle of the spirit," an anagogic device: he invites his reader to set upon his observations as a dish (Introductory Letter). Prayer, he says, rises from the virtues, "the highest act of the intellect," (34) but does not inevitably rise from this place (55); it is the likely, plausible flower of meekness, the flower of joy. It begins best in penthos (5); it undermines sadness (16) -- the state of prayer, further, wakes discernment: it makes clear the distinction between sorrow and despair, and bestows an appetite for the former. Indeed the atmosphere of prayer is "respectful gravity," "coloured" by compunction (42). It is what appears when everything

has been given up.

A late renunciation is the religious imagination -- when you pray, Evagrius counsels, do not cast the divinity as an image within (66): this stirs the passion of vainglory; it is the demons attacking no longer "from the left side but from the right," (72) suggesting a likeness of God "flattering to the senses." Evagrius favours a patrolling of the spirit in prayer, keeping it free from concepts, in deep formless anticipatory calm, an evacuated tending (67). A special solicitude for the self, a self-cossetting "attempts to enclose the Divinity" in forms. The state of prayer is a "habitual state of impeturbable calm"; it is a snatching "to the heights of intelligible reality the spirit which loves wisdom," the spirit "truly spiritualized by the most intense love." (52)

Prayer is an ignorance (69)<sup>28</sup>, empty availability, erotic tracklessness, the portal for visitation -- the end of reason's eros is visitation; reason arrives at last at fixed interior looking, looking and visitation. Poverty builds the stretching emptiness (130); affliction builds it; tears work toward it; plain attention seeks it: nothing else moves in the train of attention but prayer (149).



Origen fell under censure in matters of doctrine after the Origenist controversy broke out in Jerusalem in 393; Jerome, a former translator, turned on him, attacking him as heretical on matters of the fall of the angels, descent of the soul, the resurrection of deceivers, and the final redemption of all creatures (apokatastasis).<sup>29</sup> In the same book, *Apologia adversus Libros Rufini*, Jerome also attacked, with justice, Rufinus, Origen's second

translator in antiquity, for bringing an amended, de-platonized Origen into Latin; even among the devoted there seem to have been doubts concerning the orthodoxy of Origen's ontology. Origen's exegetical style has been equally controversial throughout history. Luther's denunciation of his use of allegory is paradigmatic: meaning appears solely in the "simplici puraque et naturali significationi verborum," the chastely simple and natural meanings of words:<sup>30</sup> further reading is caprice, a refusal to accept the sturdiness of the divine artifact of ordinary language.<sup>31</sup> Later, nineteenth century commentators criticized Origen's method as subjective, a-historical; his hermeneutic employs no discernible method, it was objected, was not scientific, a "jeu d'imagination."<sup>32</sup>

Origen's style of reading, it is true, is non-methodological if method is co-terminous with the practice of adding tested hypotheses to one another so that a range of probable claims is amassed; it is not objective, yielding a collection of facts. It is non-analytic, but grows instead from an initially puzzled yet building attention; it is non-literal, seeing the surface of writing as a place of imprisonment, "gates of brass," (*On First Principles* 4. 3. 11)<sup>33</sup> and wisdom as inevitably sequestered; it is subjective, but the result of an exercised, likely subjectivity which forms a paideia for the soul of a particular reader.

Origen offers a condensed version of his approach to reading at the beginning of Book IV of *On First Principles* -- scripture is divine because it has daimonic effect: it alone achieves antiquity's ideal of teaching, it alone, that is, has power to cause its hearers to dedicatedly change their lives, provoking a return to nature; it, therefore, is the repository of *scientia* or truth (4. 1. 1). Later he makes an allowance for certain secular writings, such as Hernias' *The Shepherd*: these, too, contain "two books," one historical, the other, while in



some sense incomprehensible, capable of speech to the awareness below the scree of thinking. Such books have knowledge, are *scientia*, this shown in their capacity to provoke and power an inner turning: they visit catanyxis and remodelling on readers; they trigger philosophy.

The route to the deeper readings, the “way” in the interior life (4. 22. 4), passes through ascesis and empty attention -- both of which Cassian will later call purity of heart: they amount to singleness of gaze, the only cognition, in the Alexandrian hermeneutic, with penetrative power. Its method is simply wanting one thing, this moving unaccountably to spreading light, a method resembling the translation practice of the poet Paul Celan, who advised Chalfen to simply “Read! Just read again and again, the understanding comes by itself.”<sup>34</sup> For Origen, the penetrative reading is three-fold, following the stages of the soul to perfection in the contemplative enterprise of *paideia*,<sup>35</sup> an erotic itineracy (the Prologue to the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 1), the goal of which is a state of pure receptivity to divinity. The “flesh” of writing, its soul and its spirit replicate the divine creative act of giving the individual first being, then reason and finally sanctity (*On First Principles* 1. 3. 8); one must follow this same route in reverse in the practice of return -- rapture, to reason, to divinisation<sup>36</sup>, reading forming these states in the reader in whom desire is on the move, desire whose unfashioned, unwilled telos is restoration to an original resemblance to divinity (2. 11. 3).



Ceaseless prayer<sup>37</sup> is the perfection of the single heart (*Conf.* 2. 1); it is desire's end, what makes desire strange and beneficent: the heart, too, by its nature, climbs toward unbroken tranquility, "perpetual purity"; for the sake of these, it walks toward "every bodily labour," walks toward compunction (9. 2. 1); one labours to virtue, that is, the end of that stickiness of mind which is wanting wrongly. This emptiness, lack of knowing -- the passions always know precisely what is wanted -- is the moment of purest eros, is when at last one can take the food of contemplation (9. 3. 4). Here is where the soul, more itself than at any other time, is lightest, a bit of down, a "plume," liftable by the "slightest breath."<sup>38</sup> Now interiority regains its natural suppleness, is weightless, available, subtle, taking the pose of shapely exigence; this is prayer as perpetual state, as returned nature: here eros penetrates "not only the heavens but even what is above the heavens," (9. 4. 3)<sup>39</sup> seemingly without effort, from necessity, this action a remembered rhythmic habit. What is not nature is always heavy, relentless, wasting, "pounding a very hard rock with a sledgehammer," and it makes nothing: it is as if "another is with you whom you did not see," standing by, pressing the endeavour forward with compulsive force (9.6. 3): the soul fattens, reels and dithers (9. 5. 1). The empty mind, biddable longing, is not only unplucked by the passions, but also refuses with implacable strictness "those things that cater to our power and which have the appearance of a kind of goodness" (9. 6. 3); whatever it takes in, turns to, does now is purest prayer (9. 6. 5). *Puritas cordis* is the silence -- intent, stretching -- standing before the intelligibility, the speech, risibility, the eyed-ness of the world and what appears beyond it.

Cassian's erotics, his teachings on prayer, are heard, not assembled: they come to him in conversation with those whose subjectivity is plunging and capable of inculcating diaphanesis.

His thought on desire, then, is philosophic -- Socratic -- in content and grammar. His and Germanus' interlocutor in *Conference* 9, the first conference on prayer, is the abba Isaac, who knew Antony the Great, and learned from the first monk's paradigmatic ecstasy (9. 31) that prayer is more than what the contemplative understands of himself and his prayer; that it is not uniform (9. 8. 2), or countable (9. 8. 1); that prayer is speech -- supplication, vow-declaring, intercession and thanksgiving -- but beyond speech, "fiery," soundless eloquence of "purest vigour" (9. 15. 2); that it is liquefaction and familiar speaking (9. 18. 1), intelligence beyond the "self-conscious mind" (9. 25. 1). By it, the mind is "up-built" and "formed" (10. 6. 1) to an inward seeing of divinity, the image under view not anthropomorphic in impulse, not self-aggrandizing, apparently given; what aids such a gaze is "the support of withdrawal," anachoresis, "the benefit of the desert" (10. 6. 4); thus purity of heart is a fruit of where the body is placed: propaedeutic to hearing is physical and social dislocation.<sup>40</sup> The end of prayer is identity, the eros of God passing into the heart's disposition, so that "[w]hatever we breathe, whatever we understand, whatever we speak may be God." (10. 7. 2)

This crescendo of Isaac's speech on prayer has a psychagogic effect on his interlocutors: they are given an object for eros, the eros which is the reach for it and the poverty which is the means by which they will move forward: they are instructed, inflamed, shamed by their not knowing, struck by despair; they are made philosophic (10. 8. 1). Germanus now asks how one can assemble a bare beginning -- what is the training, he inquires, in the erotic life which resembles the teaching of the alphabet to one who wishes to be instructed in grammar, thus acquiring "competence in rhetoric and philosophy" (10. 8. 3)?

Isaac's response is, in fact, a disquisition on *grammatica*, a theory of reading where understanding is becoming the text.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the desert, even among the non-Origenist monks, some hermeneutic stood at the core of spiritual practice: the monastic work was to re-speak the language of scripture with the forms of one's life. But a trustworthy reading of these words depended on a prior ascetical formation -- in silence, in withdrawal: to hear, you must be changed; hearing itself, too, can provoke a change which amounted to entry into a noesis of speechless comprehension. The reading which Isaac recommends, while possibly vocal,<sup>42</sup> was a silence before the text, pressing, yet not reaching to interpretation, though devolving to practice -- a hermeneutic of inarticulacy, ignorance, yearning, self-cultivation, worked out, in part, in hesychastic repetition of psalmic fragments.

How to manage a diminution of the heart's attentiveness, wonders Germanus (10. 8. 5). The question, Isaac remarks, shows that the one who asks it stands in the "vestibule" of purity, and this allows the teacher to speak with candor -- without risk of light mindedness -- the formula for this spiritual theoria (10.10. 1), what is absolutely necessary for perpetual awareness, that is the gathering of the mind around the repetition of Psalm 70:1, "Be pleased, O God, to deliver me/O Lord, make haste to help me." The versicle, says Cassian through the abba, "takes up all the emotions . . . and . . . adjusts itself to every attack" (10. 10. 3); it hears, then, the heart more than the heart itself hears, and defends the heart with a fluid inventiveness, sharp-eyed, commodious; the writing hears the hearer and draws out what is latent. "It contains a burning love and charity, an awareness of traps, and a fear of enemies." (10. 10. 3) It repels acedia, repels despair; it disarms vainglory (10. 10. 10). Repeating the couplet without stint, one is shifted while held fixed in an impenetrable breastplate (10. 10.

3); one is given a retreat, making possible anachoresis, a breath-place; “you should write this on the thresholds and doors of your mouth” (10. 10. 15) and let it lead you to the *theoria* of invisibility (10. 10. 14).

This psalmic repetition crucially quells the imagination, blocking its wealthy, fifth-column consolations, while it muscles, speeds desire, blinding it, impoverishing it, giving it, thus, impressive range and commensurate durability (10. 11. 1). It strips one and this emptiness draws the numinous near: language as abashment, language as a shrinking and raising. The psalm becomes the mind, and the mind goes ahead of comprehension: then one's inner postures become one's own teachers.

For divine Scripture is clearer and its inmost organs, so to speak, are revealed to us when our experience not only perceives but even anticipates its thought, and the meanings of the words are disclosed to us not by exegesis but by proof. When we have the same disposition in our heart with which each psalm was sung or written down, then we shall become like its author, grasping its significance beforehand rather than afterward. That is we first take in the power of what is said, rather than the knowledge of it. (10. 11. 5)

Having been instructed in this way, with our dispositions for our teachers, we shall grasp this as something seen rather than heard, and from the inner disposition of the heart, we shall bring forth not only what has been committed to memory but what is inborn in the very nature of things. (10.11.6)



Reading in psalmic hesychasm is an anagogic being-taken-over by writing, but elsewhere in Cassian, reading leads or drives up, as well.<sup>43</sup> Ascesis everywhere is the prelude to all knowledge, the single practice in which knowing appears (14. 2). It is thus the antechamber of reading, then reading's necessary attendant, reading's modifier, vivifier, without which reading shrinks to the surface of writing and knowledge to incoherent conviction. Deeper reading is impossible without moral practice; this deeper reading is itself a later ascesis, leading to a memorization of the text -- the whole of scripture, says Nesteros in *Conference* 14 -- taking the work so into the mind that the mind becomes indistinguishable from the work, its postures transliterations into decorum of the work.

This knowledge which is religious life, the erotic life, for Cassian, is both practical and contemplative<sup>44</sup>; the former noesis is twofold: a penetration, a setting into the light, of the nature of the misdirection of each passion -- and a subsequent distancing from the power of each -- and its slantwise remedy: anger is broken down by almsgiving and psalmic singing. The second part of practical knowledge is picking out the sequence, the watercourse, (14. 13. 5) of the virtues; his succession is not "guesswork" but a recognition of a causal series among the perfections which is not acquiesced to in obedience but is enjoyed as a severe, natural good (14. 3. 1) -- this knowledge accessible in a range of situations, solitude, hospitality, care of the cenobium; all that is required is stability in the work undertaken (14. 15. 1). Silence and an attentive heart, says Cassian's Nesteros, are the beginning of practical discipline,

intellectual humility, taking in what is given, not to master it but to “preserve” it in the contemplative gaze.

Contemplative work is *lectio divina*, and it, too, is “doubly clothed” (Proverbs 31: 24), split into historical interpretation, reading's surface, and spiritual understanding. The second knowledge is further divided into tropology, allegory and anagogy; tropological reading directs interior correction; allegory, for Cassian, is prophetic; anagogy lifts the mind to a secrecy higher than what is highest (14. 8. 3), lifts it not into comprehension but clarified, directed appetite, beyond eristics (14. 16. 1), to the ability to be fed by what first confounds, and by this lifting, the reading forms. All readings are part of a continuous, non-progressing work that brings rest from the passions and a slackening of intention in which an unformed understanding grows (14. 11. 1), as definable as fragrance (14. 13. 5), working as a final cause on the heart.



Between 385 and 399, John Cassian witnessed extraordinary events -- a new form of life being worked out at the limits of the empire and a new philosophy constructed which appeared to perfect the striving of the ancients -- and he spent the rest of his life mulling over both, practicing them and, after twenty years, writing about them at a length greater than he had intended (9. 1). The charge of what he had seen perdured; this durability was a mark for him of its daimonic nature. These collections of observations -- perhaps in part pedagogical fictions flavoured by memory<sup>45</sup> -- together with Palladius' *Lausiaca History* and other

gatherings of apothegmata, served as the template for intentionality in Europe for the next 1200 years, until displaced by the experimentalism, the dogmatic irreligion, of the new science. Cassian offered what he heard to the monks living on the Stoechadian Islands, southwest of Lerins, in the Rhone valley, to match and pull their sharp desire (Preface to *Conferences* XI - XVII. 2), and to save their abbot, Eucherius, from having to make the dangerous sea voyage to Egypt to read the acts of those still in the desert who had come through.



## Notes

- 1 Jean Leclercq, O.S. B., *Love of Learning and The Desire for God, A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1960), pp. 4ff. Leclercq distinguishes "two milieus of Christian culture," the scholastic, the monastic, illustrating the differences between them by a comparison of two books of exegesis, written by friends early in the twelfth century, Peter Lombard's commentary on the *Epistles* of St. Paul and Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles*. In Lombard's commentary, the tone is impersonal; the work's intent is to acquire knowledge, and the way it goes about this is by the objectivity of the *quaestio*. Matters of authenticity, dating and form relating to the Pauline texts are examined in turn; the ancient authorities -- Pelagius, Jerome -- are canvassed, and the most reliable reading chosen. Lombard's careful, inquiring objective style is nowhere present in St. Bernard's treatment of the *Song of Songs*. Here the writer uses the first person singular in his address; he assumes a spiritual maturity in his auditors whose need is not for knowledge but sacred doctrine (*doctrina spiritus*): to them, Bernard will speak wisdom (*sapientiam loquimur*). They will receive not speculative insights from him, but "a certain appreciation," a "savouring and clinging to the truth." "The important word," Leclercq remarks, "is not *quaeritur*, but *desideratur*; no longer *sciendum* but *experiendum*." The texture of Bernard's exegesis is also different: musical, rhythmic, beautiful, it does not reach for the authority, the doubtlessness of Lombard's consideration of St. Paul.
- 2 Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1968), pp. 101-2. Chadwick calls Cassianic exegesis "religious study," a "continuous meditation that forms the soul," a "storing of the Word" in the mind, not so much an intellectual practice as an ascetical one which nevertheless has singular intellectual effects. This formation, Chadwick argues, makes for even more penetrative readings.

- 3 Origen, *Homily on Genesis* 10. 1, Sources chretiennes 7bis, Louis Dertleau ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1976). For Origen, it is the style of reading -- allegorical -- which causes the disorientation: *Aquae leguntur mystica sunt, in allegoricis exponendis sunt sacramentis* -- "the words which have been read are mystical; they are to be explained in allegorical mysteries." Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations to Mysticism, Origen to the Fifth Century, Vol. I of The Presence of God, A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), p. 116.
- 4 The phrase is used by Patricia Cox in describing Origen's mode of reading. " 'In My Father's House are Many Dwellings': κτισα in Origen's *De principiis*," *Anglican Theological Review*, 62, 1980, pp. 322 - 337.
- 5 Palladius, *Lausiac History*, trans. Robert T. Meyer, Ancient Christian Writers 34 (Westminster: Newman Press, 1965), 38:2.
- 6 Details of Evagrius' life are drawn from John Eudes Bamberger, O.C.S.O., "Introduction" to *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), xxxv-xlvi.
- 7 *Lausiac History*, 55.3; Chadwick, p. 25.
- 8 Bamberger, note 21, p. 15. He takes this information from Antoine and Claire

Guillaumont, *Traite Pratique ou le Moine*, Sources chretiennes 170, 171 (Paris: Cerf, 1971).

- 9 Evagrius, "Letter to Anatolius," in Bamberger, p. 14.
- 10 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life, Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 131.
- 11 *Praktikos*, 87. "The man who is progressing in the ascetic life diminishes the force of passion. The man progressing in contemplation diminishes ignorance. As regards the passions, the time will come when they will be entirely destroyed. In the matter of ignorance, however, one type will have an end, but another type will not." Bamberger points to the similarity between this claim and Gregory of Nyssa's notion of *epektasis*. The fullest treatment of the endlessness of contemplative ignorance in Nyssa appears in Jean Danielou, *Platonisme et theologie mystique. Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Gregoie de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, 1944). Bamberger does not argue influence between Nyssa and Evagrius on this matter, nor need he: the coincidence of perpetual not-knowing and philosophic eros is as old as Heraclitus.
- 12 *Lausiac History*, 46.3.
- 13 Chadwick gives a full account of this series of episodes, pp. 28-9.
- 14 The phrase is McGinn's (p. 155), but shows Evagrian influence: in the *Kephalaia Gnostica*, Evagrius speaks of the beatitude of the one who has "attained unsurpassable ignorance." McGinn gives Gregory of Nazianzen as the possible source of Evagrius' juxtaposition of ineffability and contemplation, but the roots of this conjunction, as argued earlier, are much older.

- 15 Origen, too, stresses the erotic limitlessness of prayer: the kingdom of God, he says (*On Prayer* 25.2), is established in one with ceaseless effort -- unbroken straining is a sign of arrival. He is gesturing here to Philippians 3: 13.
- 16 An insightful discussion of the nature of philosophy in patristic thought appears in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, pp. 126-30. Leclercq insists that the word *theoria*, which Cassian, above others, helped transmit to the West, and its various subsequent forms, such as *theorica mysteria* and *theorica studia*, carry none of the connotations of the modern word "theory." "Love of prayer," Leclercq argues, more accurately renders *theorica studio* than "theoretical studies." *Philosophia*, linked to *theoria*, concerns all that is involved in the turning of a single life; it is therefore linked intimately with *disciplina* -- attention, asceticism, knowing here bound in one idea. For the Fathers, Christ was the first philosopher, was philosophy itself: *ipso philosophia Christus*.
- 17 Boniface Ramsey, O.P., *John Cassian: The Conferences* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), xv. Ramsey translates *contemplatio* in Cassian as "attention."
- 18 *Lysis*, 204c. Socrates gives the capacity to make such a recognition as his sole power.
- 19 The apothegmatum appears in Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert, Sayings of the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960), XVII.
- 20 McGinn, p. 116.
- 21 *The Philocalia of Origen, A Compilation of Selected Passages from Origen's Works Made by St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Basil of Caesarea*, trans. Rev. George Lewis (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1911), XIII. 4, p. 59. The existence of a

Cappadocean philocalia of Origen indicates the durability of his influence -- it shines among the orthodox even in times of great doctrinal anxiety.

22 *The Philocalia*, XIL. P. 55

23 *The Philocalia*, XIL. 2, p. 56.

24 Another account of such transfixity appears in the Jane Hirshfield poem "Secretive Heart" in *The Lives of the Heart* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 9.

#### Secretive Heart

*What's this? This is an old tool shed.*

*No, this is a great past love.*

- Yehuda Amichai

Heart falters, stops  
before the Chinese cauldron  
still good for boiling water,  
It is one of a dozen or more,  
It is merely iron,  
it is merely old,  
there is much else to see.  
The few raised marks on its belly  
are useful to almost no one.

25 Plotinus, *Enneads* 2. 2. 1-2.

26 Cox masterfully argues this reading of Origen's conflation of cosmology and conversion of heart. Exposition of a similar conflation in Plotinus can be found in Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Michael Chase (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

27 Bamberger, note 1, p. 52.

- 28 As it is with Nicholas of Cusa. See Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa On Learned Ignorance, A Translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignoranta* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985).
- 29 Karen Jo Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1986), note 64, p. 18.
- 30 Martin Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio*, WA, 18, 700.
- 31 Melancthon's criticism of Origen's non-literalism is similar: Ex Origene si tollas inconcinna allegorias et philosophicarum sententiarum silvam, quantum erit reliquum? If you remove from Origen absurd allegories and a mass of philosophical opinion, how much is there remaining? -- my translation. *Loci Communes*, StA II, 1, p. 4, quoted in Torjesen, note 2, p. 1.
- 32 J-F Denis, *De la philosophie d'Origene* (Paris, 1884), p. 33. The entire judgment reads: "L'exegese allegorique, voila l'unique procede de decouverte, reel ou apparent, que constitue la method d'Origene, si l'on peut donner le nom de method a ce jeu d'imagination, excellent moyen de paraître trouver ce qu'on a déjà, mais non de decouvrir ce qu'on n'a pas."
- 33 Origen is quoting from Isaiah 45: 2.
- 34 Quoted in the introduction to *Last Poems by Paul Celan*, trans. Katharine Washburn and Margaret Guillemin (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), p. xiii.
- 35 Torjesen, pp. 39ff.
- 36 Torjesen, p. 71.
- 37 Thessalonians 5: 17.
- 38 The featheredness or the feather-likeness of the soul appears in Evagrius (*Gnostikos* 2. 6), in Gregory of Nyssa (*Life of Moses*, 224 and 226), and in Plato (*Phaedrus*, 246ff.).
- 39 See *Phaedrus* 248 a-b.
- 40 Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 213.
- 41 On *grammatica* in the Middle Ages and late antiquity, see Leclercq, pp. 1-9 22ff. See also Burton-Christie on the hermeneutic of the desert, specifically the psychagoguery

of reading in the thought of abba Poemen, p. 153.

42 See Leclercq on reading as a physical activity, as labor, as, therefore, ascesis, p. 19.

43 *ana* = up *agein* = to lead, to drive.

44 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 2. 1.

45 Ramsey associated such doubts with Prosper of Aquitaine (*C. Collatorem* 2. 1), p. 403.

## Chapter Five

### Knowing as Ritual

*The Divine Names* of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite begins with the word “and”; later, still in its initial clause, it mentions an earlier book, *The Theological Representations*, perhaps lost, perhaps fictional: *The Divine Names*, then, lies part way through a longer exchange between “Dionysius the Elder” and “Timothy the Fellow Elder” or presbyter.<sup>1</sup> Since it is addressed to an individual, the book is a work of spiritual direction, its cosmological complexity, the appearance of system throughout it, notwithstanding;<sup>2</sup> it is a private instruction, that is, closer to oral communication than to a modern book of theological explanation. Its intent is the shaping of a particular soul -- thus its repetitions, thus its inconsistencies -- not the production of an exhaustive account of sacred nomenclature usable as doctrine, though the many names falling under its exegesis are in no way random.

The individual to whom the work is addressed is suited to a particular form of enlightenment, the one appropriate to his state of presbyter. In *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius explains that such a figure, as teacher, “has the understanding both to illuminate and to purify” (*The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 504A). The illumination peculiar to presbyters, “their powers of uplifting,” and the enlightenment such ecclesiastics had the charism to bestow, is a form of contemplation, Dionysius says, which is an attention to divine symbols (*EH* 532 B-C). The formation proffered in *The Divine Names*, then, its particular “uplifting,” is symbolic, undergone by means of a linguistic ritual.



*The Theological Representations* is summarized in Dionysius' *The Mystical Theology* (1032D-1033A) as a treatise of kataphatic theology, which is, in part, a disquisition on post-Nicene, post-Chalcedonic dogmatic theology, showing "the sense in which the divine and good nature is said to be triune"; how Fatherhood and Sonship are implicit in this nature; the book, as well, is a rendering of a theology of the Spirit and an account of the Incarnation, dwelling at length on Jesus who is both "above individual being" and a "being with a true human nature" (*The Mystical Theology* 1033A). Both *The Divine Names* and *The Theological Representations* are affirmative theologies, treatments of divinity insofar as it is knowable; both books are addressed to the same person: how, then, is the *via positiva* of the one to be distinguished from the other, since they appear to be parts of a single, ascending formation? The answer appears in the same review of a portion of the Dionysian corpus in *The Mystical Theology*: the kataphaticism of *The Theological Representations* is chiefly scriptural, while that of *The Divine Names* is "conceptual" (MT 1003A). The positive assertions in the first book rise from revelation and have a purifying effect (*The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 508B); those in *The Divine Names* come from human subjectivity alive to the sacral nature of being: their purpose is to enlighten and move.

The language of *The Divine Names*, the author reports in the second sentence of that treatise, is not intended to identify -- an impossible project when the object of this exercise is divinity -- but to lift the auditor: the author will "set down the truth 'not in plausible words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the power granted by the Spirit' (1 Corinthians 2:4)"; the language of the treatise is offered as force, then, "by which in a manner surpassing speech and knowledge, we reach a union superior to anything available to us by way of our

abilities or activities in the realm of discourse or intellect" (*The Divine Names* 588A). It is the use of language which momentums its audience outside of language and discursive reasoning; its worth, like poetry's, is anagogic power: it jolts and alters vision. The alteration of perception, which is a deepening introspection, will be the path to union with the divine, being's cause, "[ m ]ind beyond mind, word beyond speech," which "is gathered up by no discourse, no intuition, by no name" (588A). But, like poetry, the language of *The Divine Names*, while not explanatory, may not be capricious; this is praise, not ontology, but it aspires to be an actual mimesis, a hymnic noesis.

What is not named by this language is the "hidden transcendence of God" (588C), which is unreachable by any human power, unintuitable, unloveable, the fire which warms, but which itself is not burnt (645D). Dionysius quotes Romans 11:33 on the intractable distance of divinity, the unqualified unsearcheability of the Godhead -- "there is not a trace for anyone who would reach through into the hidden depths of this infinity" (588C).

It is at a total remove from every condition, movement, life, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, thought, conception, being, rest, dwelling, unity, limit, infinity, the totality of existence. (593C-D)

Yet this unknowability works "enlightenments proportionate to each being"(588A), which are not, in fact, satisfactions of the cognitive ambition to know all, including the vision of divinity, though the language seems to suggest this, but a drawing "to permitted contemplation, to participation and the state of becoming like it "(588D); this enlightenment is a raising "upward in the direction of the ray that enlightens them "(594A). One rises with an unconsolated eros, which is the totality of illumination: this rising is liturgical, the beings of those drawn formed by songs of praise (589B).

The praise, “revealing praises,” names, but what is praised is not divine hiddenness, inaccessible even to delight, but “ the beneficent procession of God ” (589D). God in “procession,” in the outflowing from unknowability which is first what dogmatic theology limns then all that is, is called “Trinity,” a name which indicates fecundity; “Cause”; “wise”; “beautiful”; “loving”-- all the latter names, after the first revealed name addressed in *The Theological Representations*, are “conceptual”: all the names in *The Divine Names*, in other words, are hailings, ejaculations, a cascade of apparent recognitions, which is hymnal, not taxonomic -- yet, as with poetry, the names must be, in some way, true, for if they do not strike the one who uses them as apt, without being definitional, they will not be selected as suitable as praise.

The names shed light not on objects, not on divine states, but on subjective responses to what seems providential in being. They also possess anagogic strength, are, that is, subjective states conpressed as language possessing the power themselves to transform interiority; they are “theurgic lights” (592B),<sup>3</sup> into which one is initiated, “a tradition at one with scripture” (592B). The theurgic words are symbols:<sup>4</sup> this identification with symbol in liturgical ritual or in the formative rite of reading, the rite exercised by *The Divine Names* itself, is introspection, wherein the soul, as Proclus remarked, “wants to enter within herself to see the circle and the triangle there, all things without parts in one another, to become one with what she sees” (*A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid’s Elements*, 141). These “analogies” -- names, symbola, geometric shapes, praises, ceremonial gestures -- lift the reader (592C), strip all notions of the divine ( 592D), thereby disabling discursive thought, while leaving unmarred contemplative momentum.



Theurgy, central to Neoplatonic philosophic practice, grew from Plotinus' employment of metaphor in teaching,<sup>5</sup> achieving its fullest expression in the work of Iamblichus in the third century. Its use as a pedagogical device -- an initiation into contemplative endeavour and an ascesis -- rested in the ontological conviction that divinity was characterized equally by unity and differentiation (*The Divine Names* 640D-641A), with certain things peculiarly bearing the power to trigger memory of the origin of multiplicity in oneness -- arithmetic and ritual objects for Iamblichus, geometrical forms and language for Proclus. These bore the deposit of divinity, the philosophers held, though they required a ritualistic liberation to be psychologically useful. Iamblichus, in his *Life of Pythagoras*, praised the Pythagoreans' "marvellous divination and worship of the Gods according to the numbers most allied with them" (*Life of Pythagoras*, 147 ). Proclus recommended the veneration of the sphere since it is " both itself one and capable of containing multiplicity, which indeed makes it truly divine, in that while not departing from its oneness, it dominates all the multiple" (*On the Timaeus*, frag. 49, 27-9).

Such attention to number or form with sacred significance was meant to focus the mind, initiating, easing one into contemplation. As ascesis, it muscled attention; attenuated attachment to discursivity; bestowed an appetite for introspection. The most potent symbols have the capacity to surprise and captivate, working in new patterns of looking. Proclus, in *The Platonic Theology*, recreates the entire cosmos in language, gathering all its appropriate

names. He is not attempting natural science in this collection of hierarchies, he insists, not asserting ontology, but tracing the source of eccentricity in divinity, as he observes in his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, for formational ends.

So, as the *Timaeus* does not simply inquire about nature in the usual manner of the natural scientist, but in so far as all things get their cosmic ordering from the one Demiurge, so also Parmenides, we may say, in conducting inquiry about beings, is himself examining these beings in so far as they are derived from the One.

(*Comm. On the Parmenides*, Preface V. 641)

In Proclus' linguistic theurgy, a miniature of being is assembled in the mind by an exegesis of Plato's dialogues, the *Parmenides* pre-eminently, which is a rehearsal of the hierarchical structure in being, its object the creation of an enlarged subjectivity, one formed by intimacy with divine symmetry. Attention builds, tilting into adoration. Similarly, the whole of Dionysius' *Divine Names* is simultaneously an exegesis, an ontology -- slanted so that it accommodates an anagogic reading -- and a ritual.



The author of *The Divine Names* identified himself as one of a pair of prominent Athenian disciples of the apostle Paul mentioned in Acts 17:34; as a result, his work possessed what approached apostolic authority until the sixteenth century. Thomas Aquinas cited him 1700 times in his work; the Dionysian oeuvre formed the core of the philosophy curriculum at the University of Paris in the thirteenth century; but widespread concern about his identity appeared toward the end of the Middle Ages, and in 1520 Luther condemned him as a pernicious platonizer of unadulterated Christian thought.<sup>6</sup>

The Pauline ministry to Athens was far from successful; in fact, it had not even been planned, but resulted from an earlier apostolic failure in Thessalonica, where a mob had driven the eristic evangelist from the city after he had caused dissension in the synagogue by fomenting an argument extending over three Sabbath days concerning the Messiah. Paul's supporters in Thessalonica were forced to spirit him and his assistant, Silas, to Beroea under cover of darkness; and, while his ministry in that place was less tumultuous, the Thessalonican Jews whom Paul had offended soon heard of his whereabouts and activities and sent emissaries to Beroea to "incite the crowds," causing Paul to be sent away again, by his supporters this time, to the Greek coast. Those charged with conducting him, however, took him only as far as Athens, where they abandoned him (Acts 17:15). There Paul was "deeply distressed" by the plethora of idols he found in the city, and proceeded, with typical vigour, to remonstrate with individuals both in the synagogue and in the market place on the matter of images; this drew the attention of certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who, wondering "what this babbler wants to say" brought him to the Areopagus to give an account of his learning. Paul declared before his philosophical audience that "we are God's offspring," and denounced again the use of gold, silver and stone images for the divinity. Further, he claimed, God had allotted the times of the existence of all beings and "the boundaries of where they would live," this an impetus to search for God "and perhaps to grope for him and find him" (Acts 17:27); the apostle concluded his oration with the claim that at the appointed time the world would be judged by a man who had been raised from the dead. Most of the Stoics and Epicureans balked at this last assertion, but a few remained attentive, "including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris."

Numerous figures have been proposed as the true author of the *corpus dionysiacum*; some of these suggestions -- Ammonius Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus, and Damascius, the last diadochus of the Academy in Athens -- have been outlandish.<sup>7</sup> The first notice of the Dionysian writings came in 532 in a report (*Innocenti Marionitae epistula de collatione cum Severianes habita*, "Epistle of Innocent the Marionite Concerning a Conference Held with the Severians") of a theological exchange between orthodox followers of the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.), and its doctrine of the two wills of Christ, and a group of disciples of Severus, who were Monophysites, holding that Jesus, the incarnate Logos, possessed but a single, divine nature. This latter group advanced "Dionysius the Areopagite" as an impeccable, patristic authority in support of the heterodox position, along with the Alexandrians Athanasius and Cyril. The Chalcedonian defenders rejected the arguments of the Severians, discounting, in particular, the support of Dionysius; such a figure, they argued, must be spurious since no mention of him existed in the writings of any prominent fourth century theologian.<sup>8</sup> Innocent's "Epistle" marks not only the earliest doubts concerning the apostolic lineage of the Dionysian corpus, but also the onset of uneasiness about its orthodoxy. Throughout the seventh century, the Dionysian writings were associated with the Monophysite and Nestorian cause, often lumped together with the equally questionable doctrinal thought of Origen and Evagrius. With their translation into Latin in the ninth century by John Scotus Eriugena, the writings regained their full apostolic lustre.

While there has been considerable confusion over authorship, agreement has appeared concerning the date of the composition of *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. The last book, a psychagogic account

of liturgical conventions, mentions a sung creed between the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the sacrament, a tradition introduced by Peter the Fuller, a Chalcedonian skeptic, in his second tenure as Patriarch of Antioch, 475-7. "Dionysus," then, appears to have been a fifth century Syrian. He was, thus, a late contemporary of Proclus (410-485), diadochus in Athens, whose methodological style -- system as theurgy, exegesis as ascesis -- is replicated in the Dionysian writings. While it might seem legitimate to suppose that the pseudonymity of the author of these works was meant to draw Pauline prestige to his position, it is more plausible, given the dissimilarity between Dionysian and Pauline thought, to hold that it was intended to declare an entirely new way of thinking. He locates his authorship in Athens, in the midst of a fruitless philosophical conversation in which Paul of Tarsus, the self-proclaimed apostle to the Gentiles, makes various remarks that appear to echo Neoplatonic cosmology -- God is the generative cause of all; being is a series of gradations or hierarchies; all beings "grope" toward God. Thus Dionysius announces a marriage of Christian revelation and Proclan ontology, to which Greek philosophy, represented here by curious Epicureans and Stoics, was unsympathetic, and of which Christianity proved soon to be suspicious on grounds of orthodoxy.



Eunapius, in his *Lives of the Sophists*, writes of the extraordinary theurgic practice of Maximus of Ephesus, a student of Iamblichus and chief religious advisor to the emperor Julian. Maximus, Eunapius reports, was known to make the statue of the goddess Hecate



smile, and to light from a distance the torches she held (*Lives of the Sophists* 7.2.7-12).

Iamblichus himself performed equal feats, Eunapius continues, while Proclus, according to his biographer Marinus, received visions of Hecate, practiced soothsaying by means of the tripod and summoned oracles.

The ubiquity of such theurgic disciplines grew from the influence of *The Chaldean Oracles* on Neoplatonism from the third century onward. *The Oracles*, appearing in second century Syria, purporting to be the speech of a medium in communication with the soul of Plato, claimed that all things possessed a symbol of divinity -- this condition especially true of religious statuary, the *hermes* -- and that interiority consisted largely in the liberation of this divinity through the manipulation and adoration of such god-sequestering objects. Theurgy, the animation, vivification, illumination of daemonic figures, taught Proclus, was a valuable "intermediary," joining individuals to "the primordial causes," like love's madness and divine philosophy, but "better than all wisdom and all human knowledge, because it concentrates within itself the advantages of divinization, the purifying forces of rites carried out, and, in short, all the operations performed when one is possessed by the divine" (*Platonic Theology* I.25). The word "theurgy," a neologism appearing late in the second century,<sup>9</sup> meant "to make gods" and referred to this practice of assimilation to divinity. Proclus believed the discipline appeared in Plato as well, in particular in the behaviour of the young Socrates in the *Parmenides*. Socrates has just spoken at some length to Zeno and Parmenides; instead of being annoyed with him, the two philosophers "looked at each other and smiled, as if in admiration of Socrates"; Parmenides, then, prepared to instruct the loquacious neophyte (*Parmenides* 130a). Proclus interprets Socrates' acts -- speech at length, stirring up "the

divine sparks"-- as ritual theurgic preparation.

And thus Parmenides is moved to address Socrates 'when he had finished.' In this phrase also Plato has given us a divine symbol. When a man is anticipating the appearance of the divine, he must exert himself to stir up the divine spark within him in preparation for participation in higher beings; but when the illumination from above is at hand, he must be silent, and this is what Socrates does. Having roused himself for the reception of these men's insight, having by his own words unfolded and exhibited his fitness for partaking of it, he stops speaking and begins to receive the midwifery instruction that they give him.

(*Commentary on the Parmenides* II.V.781)

Socrates' "rousing," for Proclus, is through the theurgic ritual of excessive talk, a prelude to silent illumination. Theurgic practice, then, involved not just ceremonial exercises of physical transformation, but speech and reading as well. Proclus regarded the reading of Plato, the *Parmenides*, the most theological of the dialogues in particular, as a religious act, *religio mentis*; the speech of Socrates, his stirring up, equally was theurgy. Indeed once the suppression of pagan religious images was enforced by Christian authorities in the fourth century, the manipulation of repositories of divinity, the anagogic ascesis of this, became increasingly linguistic.<sup>10</sup> A ritual, a psychagogic, use of language became the dominant theurgic vehicle in the Academy under the instruction of Proclus, a means of preparing oneself for the reception of higher beings. Such a discipline is an emptying, an uplifting: it is a quickening of proximity.

The word *theourigicos* and its variations appear forty-seven times in the writings of Dionysius<sup>11</sup>; in *The Divine Names*, he speaks of "the statues which are the divine names," (909B) just as Damascius, diadochus, later spoke of "vocal statues," and Proclus himself referred to names as "statues in words," depicting primarily the immaterial Forms (*Commentary on the Parmenides* IV. 851). But how does one ritually "manipulate" language

so that its theurgic power is released, hastening the soul to “assimilate itself to a superior being” (Proclus, *Commentary on the Cratylus* 18,27-19.17)? This effect is achieved in the Dionysian writings through incantation, liturgy, spiralling iteration and poetry.



Wave after wave of names breaks on the ear of the Dionysian interlocutor: the efficacy of the names is liturgical: they do not replicate reality in speech, but nudge in an at-homeness. Their armature is an apt ontology, but their purpose is not to construct a cosmological understanding in the reader; it is to de-center the ego and to sway one nearer to what one desires; they comprise an inebriative ascesis.

The names, false, partial, misleading, affectively inert if viewed objectively, yet charge-bearing to a subjective construal, fall in gradations. The names are simply praise (652A), ejaculations, delight: their iterations are phenomenologies, assuring, compelling, shaping contemplative experience: the saying of the names, while descriptions of the reader’s interior state, is still meant to establish a final cause for the interlocutor. The pre-eminent name is Good, since “it shows forth all the processions of God,”(680B), that is, it shows how these are named by human gratitude, reveals the capacity of the processions to draw individuals from their differentiation toward them. This drawing, says Dionysius, is prayer, which, he is careful to point out, is not a domestication of divine wilderness, but an experience of being pulled which nevertheless offers the illusion of control.

Imagine a great shining chain hanging downward from the heights of heaven to the world below. We grab hold of it

with one hand then another, and we seem to be pulling it down toward us. Actually, it is already there on the heights and down below and instead of pulling it to us we are being lifted upward to that brilliance above, to the dazzling light of those beams.

(680C)

The chain is the names, their ritual iteration, incantatory, a pulling; the names, identifications of inner states of relief and gratitude only, since divinity itself is beyond appellation, have anagogic authority: they lift the auditor. The names trace one's response to the divine effects, and they accentuate this response. The manipulation of the chain, the undergoing of the chain, is the ascesis of the complete reprisal of being as a hierarchical beneficence. Imagine, he invites his fellow presbyter, the Good dwelling "far above the sun, an archetype far superior to its dull image, it sends the rays of its undivided goodness to everything with the capacity ... to receive it"(693B). The "rays" of the Good are responsible, for instance, for angelic life -- "Their longing for the Good makes them what they are and confers on them their well-being. Shaped by what they yearn for, they exemplify goodness and, as the Law of God requires of them, they share with those below them the good gifts which come their way." (696A) The names, Dionysius' exploratory combing-out of them, fosters eros for what they point to, by sketching in such paradigms for desire as angelic life, and this bequeaths identity, giving one a sense of place, this locatedness quickening generosity.

The names are shocks of gratitude for what appears as providence: the author reveals what seems to be these good effects as they manifest themselves, passing through the hierarchy of what is, a plausible, reverent, hymnological cosmogenesis, beginning with

angels, passing to souls, to irrational souls, to plants, to lifeless matter. The tracking of each effect, which is an account of each name, is a be-speaking of the cosmos. By spiralling utterance, greater name to lesser name, the lesser yielding to the greater, the fluid machinery, a mobile, providential coherence, in procession, rest and return, is enacted in the planetarium of the reader's mind, and one inches in affect toward what holds the attention; an erotic apokatastasis, an awakening with ultimate political and cosmological significance, begins.

...the Good is the cause even for the sources and the frontiers of the heavens, which neither shrink nor expand, and it brought into being the silent ... and circular movements of the vast heavens, the fixed orders of starry lights decorating the sky and those special wandering stars, particularly those two rotating sources of light described as 'great' by the scriptures, and enabling us to reckon our days and our nights, our months and our years. They set the framework in which time and events are numbered, measured and held together.

(697B)

The names are also a rehearsal of the erotic dynamism of being, the ecstasy of the going out of divinity and its return: here yet another pattern is established for the imagination. "The Good returns all things to itself and gathers together whatever may be scattered, for it is the divine Source and unifier of the sum total of things. Each being looks to it as source ... and as objective"(700A) -- inevitably so looks: such a look is the substance of the name "Good," for the Good is the insensible, unintellectable, unloveable God coming to be experienced as desire in an individual's grateful response to the cosmos, that is, to the ordered beauty of being. The name is the subjective state (645B) -- the shock -- of gladness for what is. "All things desire it. Everything with a mind and reason seeks to know it, everything sentient yearns to perceive it, everything lacking perception has a living and

instinctive longing for it, and everything lifeless and merely existent turns, in its fashion, for a share of it.” (700B)

Like poetry, the names possess one sort of veracity while avoiding another. The fluent columns of sound in strong poetry must be true without being objective mimeses -- the caprice of wilfully random surrealism dooms the work; an exhaustive photographic equivalency in poetry of, say, domestic life dooms the work. The quality of good poetry, what identifies it as such, is bound up with a truthfulness which is, in part, a telling emotional accuracy in imagery, appearing as a shock of recognition and an ensuing, fleet instruction in what appears to be something one knows yet has not named, an instruction which a strict reason would refuse; this unusual form of veracity, like praise, announces and builds proximity: it lifts and this lifting seems liberation not seduction. The word “light,” Dionysius continues, may be applied to the Good; this application shows once more that his treatment of the Good is less cosmology than a phenomenological account of the coming to contemplation which builds from the shock of gratitude.

The Good is described as the light of the mind, because it illuminates the mind of every supra-celestial being with the light of the mind, and because it drives from souls the ignorance and the error squatting there. It gives them a share of the sacred light.

(700D)

At first it deals out the light in small amounts and, then, as the wish and longing for more light begin to grow, it gives more and more of itself, shining ever more abundantly on them because they ‘loved much’ (Luke 7:47) and always it keeps urging them onward and upward as their capacity permits.

(701A)

The light, *lumen mentis*, has eschatological, political effect, as well, as it “assembles into union everything possessed of reason and mind”(701B). The experience of gratitude, which becomes contemplative focus, further, restores the world’s reality: “It returns them toward the truly real ... it gathers their clashing fancies into a single, pure, coherent and true knowledge,” (701B) achieving a healing which is both interior and cosmic.



The holding of the names in the mind, desire’s words, expostulations, desire’s quickening, the praises which seem appropriate to desire, by which it is formed and sped, is an exercise in uplifting. John Scotus Eriugena, the Latin Church’s first translator of the Dionysian writings, renders this interior experience variously in his translation of *The Mystical Theology*, as *sursum agere* (to be driven with violence, to be set in motion upwards); *consurgere* (to rise up, to stand up, to rise in honour of someone, to rise in any action, join an insurrection); *elevare* (to be uplifted, raised, to alleviate, to lighten).<sup>12</sup> The inner movement which is the object of Dionysian ascetical theology, then, is violation, courtesy, relief. This is the subjectivity of formation because another name for the Good, according to Dionysius, is “beauty.” “The sacred writers lift up a hymn of praise to this Good. They call it beautiful, beauty (Song of Songs 1:16, John 4:16, Psalm 45:2), love and beloved.”(701C) While this word is chiefly response, a light of the mind, it is also obliquely cosmology, emotionally dependable, fecund: what is known in the jolt of the heart and is read from there -- the psalmist, the evangelist “give it the names which convey that it is the

source of loveliness and the flowering of grace”(701C). Its result is comeliness and symmetry.

The name stands also for the eruption of emotion attendant upon the discovery of oneself being drawn into a community: as “beauty” the Good appears as “the Cause which gathers all into one.”(701C)

And there it is ahead of all as Goal, as the Beloved, as the Cause toward which all things move, since it is the longing for beauty which actually brings them into being. It is a mode to which they conform.

(704A)

The longing hinted at by “beauty” is, says Dionysius, in fact is “divine longing ... seeking Good for the sake of the Good”(708B). The name is the announcement of the discovery of this eros within the contemplative; its utterance is an ascesis initiating, firming, this discovery. Eriugena’s *consurgere* is an encounter with identity -- intimate, strange -- a falling into oneself,<sup>13</sup> is vivified introspection: it is an alarming, deracinating individuality which is a merging. “This divine yearning brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to the self but to the beloved.” (712A)

The ecstasy provoked by such language is oxymoronic: the divinity, in erotic passage from itself, remains within itself (712B): the going out, the largesse, the communion, is a stable inwardness. The paradigm makes politics and introspection simultaneous in the contemplative, the Dionysian account of divine eros a provocation of a similar eros. “He is yearning on the move, existent in the Good, flowing out from the Good and into all that is, and returning once again to the Good”(712C-D) in “an everlasting circle”(713D). The double advantage of this image is that it involves a sphere, suggesting the



simultaneity of union and multiplicity, and contains the whole of contemplation and erotics in a single thought -- such compression, like lyrical economy, astounds and therefore directs as it instructs. For Dionysius, as for Proclus, language is the primary theurgical object: by it the god is summoned in the one addressed.



The succession of numinal approximations, inklings, continues. Another name for what is beyond names is "being." This word, too, fails to reach what is transcendent, yet is "a hymn of praise for the being-making procession of the absolute divine source of being into the total domain of being" -- an expostulatory response, then, to what appears as providential effulgence. This response hints at an ontology -- such a presumption of ontology is an emotional precondition of the response -- and weds one to such an ontology's dynamism: understanding is a praising and the anagogic work this hymnic labour does.

In his repeatedly iterated cosmology of the Being-beyond-being, under its many names, through its multiple effects, Dionysius insists upon the unknowability of the Source of being, the Preexistent, while speaking at length of its beneficence. He also insists upon the union of the unsayable and the sayable.

All the radii of a circle are brought together in the unity of the center which contains all the straight lines brought together within itself. These are linked one to another because of this single point of origin and they are completely unified at this center. As they move a little away from it they are differentiated a little, and as they fall farther they are farther differentiated.

(821A)

Yet in every cosmological iteration, the Preexistent is exempted -- "He is not a facet of being"(824A); "He has every shape and structure, and yet is formless and beautyless" (824B). These trackings of the names for procession and the repeated assertion of the nameless nature of the source are stagings of the imaginative summoning of positive images of divinity -- the sun; the center of a circle; the monad holding every number -- and negative ones -- formless, beautyless, non-being -- and their cancellation, the enactment of apophysis' ascesis. "He is present to all and he is everything .... He is at rest and astir, is neither resting nor stirring ... He is in nothing. He is no thing." (825B) Such expressions, incoherent as ontology, even though they hold the form of ontological remark, wear away the image, as they retain the attentive focus the images fashioned.



Knowing continues to appear as praise in the Dionysian exploration of the further names -- "Wisdom," "Mind," "Word," "Truth." "Now, if you will, let us give praise to the good and eternal Life for being wise, for being the principle of wisdom, the subsistence of wisdom, for transcending all wisdom and understanding it," (865B) even as we realize this Life is unlike "all reason, all intelligence, all wisdom." All human thinking is "a sort of error"(865B) in relation to divine knowing; therefore it is appropriate to apply negative terms to God, though not in the sense of deprivation. One version of negation is oddness in utterance, "dissimilar similarity." The divinity, however, is not approached by the absurd, the strange (865C) -- speech of, say, the "foolishness" of God (1 Cor. 1:25) -- but such

symbolism possesses lifting power: its impropriety blocks discursive reason, yet apt strangeness still pulls the knower to what would be known: it drives upward with violence in the Eriugenean sense of *sursum agere*.

The intent of the interpretive process, tending ultimately toward negation, is ecstasy by which we are “taken out of ourselves and become wholly of God,” (868A) who is unintellectable, indeed unreachable by all appetite. The end of noesis is such high-pitched noetic disappointment. Belonging to God rather than ourselves, in this disorientation, this homelessness, “the divine gifts [will] be poured out onto us.” (868A) This cognitive uprooting, the result of praise gathering into negation, the result of strange praise, is a form of similitude, for “Wisdom” has neither reason nor intelligence itself, is not, that is, bordered by the limits of either power, even while it is the source of both.

God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and unknowing. Of him there is conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name, and many other things. On the other hand, he cannot be understood, words cannot contain him, and no name can lay hold of him.

(872A)

The divinity, “known” through the assertions of kataphasis and the withdrawals of apophasis, is intimacy that is built by the full repetitions of kataphatic cosmology, which are reading’s theurgy, and the names’ apophatic delimitation. The knowledge of apophasis, higher, holds no content, is a sort of dying, a seeming madness (873A). But even with negation, though this language is truer, one does not leave the subjectivity of the conceptual, as Proclus sternly reminds readers in his remarks on the *Parmenides*: such cancellations “do not express anything about the One, but do refer to the One.”

For nothing at all applies to it, either specifically or privately, but, as we have said, the name 'one' names our conception of it, not the One itself, and so we say that their negation also is about conception, and none of the negative conclusions that have been stated is about the One, but because of its simplicity, it is exalted above all contrast and all negation.

(*Comm. on the Parmenides* VII.70K)

When even the negations of assertion about divinity must be themselves negated, since even they represent conceptual limitations and present misdirecting cognitive consolations, it is clear that understanding in this erotic noesis is entirely formational.

Just as there deliberation ought to be eliminated from our activity, although it is brought to perfection by deliberation, so here all dialectical activity ought to be eliminated. These dialectical operations are the preparation for the strain toward the One, but are not themselves the strain. Or rather, not only must it be eliminated, but the strain as well. Finally, when it has completed its course, the soul may rightly abide with the One. Having become single and alone in itself, it will choose only the simply One.

(*Comm. on the Parmenides* VII, 74K)

Learning ending in wisdom is formation through which aroused interiority is brought to act with such apparent volitional inevitability.



Liturgy, too, Dionysius notes, is a place of theurgic lifting. Here, as well, knowing is undergone, but, as with the psychagoguery of reading, this operation does not require the reader to grasp anything with the understanding (*mathein*), as Aristotle says of the knowledge of initiates, but "to have a certain inner experience (*pathein*) and so to be put in a particular frame of mind, presuming that they are capable of this frame of mind in the first place."<sup>14</sup>

Such is the experience of theurgy, which for Proclus was “a power higher than all human wisdom, embracing the blessings of divination, the purifying powers of initiation, and in a word all the operations of divine possession” (*Platonic Theology* I.24.63); such, too, is the anagoria of “idle talk” which Socrates enjoins in particular upon the young in the *Parmenides* -- the uselessness of dialectic and not “mere argumentation and logical procedures” which the multitude admire -- which Proclus calls “a force that leads the soul upwards to the truth” (*Comm. on the Parmenides* V.990).

Liturgy is knowing which occurs in the ritual activity of the community, “the perfect total of all its sacred constituents,” as Dionysius says in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (373C), a sociable noesis taking the forms of purification, illumination and perfection. It is enacted by a triad of ministers -- deacons, priests, hierarchs -- and received by a triad of beneficiaries -- those outside of initiation (catechumens) or who have become disjoined from initiation (penitents); the laity; and monks.<sup>15</sup> The ecclesiastically authorized order of service echoes the providentialism of the cosmos, where “the being and proportion and order” in each member of the hierarchy is deified, “then imparted to those below him” (*The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 372D). Thus “each one is able to have as great as possible a share in him who is truly beautiful, wise, and good” (373A); this sharing is a rising: where the anagoria of *The Divine Names* was conceptual, it is symbolic -- choreographic -- in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. This sharing itself is knowledge, is deification (376D), “using images derived from the senses,” a plastic, not linguistic, theurgy.

Knowing as ritual abolishes the usual distance of the knower: one approaches what one would know, comes to conformability not comprehension, to “likeness” and “union” by

“sacred enactment” (392A). The first of these illuminating movements is baptism’s initiatory submission; before an intermediary, one promises “complete obedience to whatever is laid upon him”(393B). Eros brings one first to nothing within which alacrity appears: the candidate eager for baptism approaches with “fright and uncertainty”(393B). This sacred enactment of approach provokes a responsive gesture in the putative teacher who prostrates himself within the liturgy before the sign of the divine eros in the appetite of the one called; the “uplifting” of the catechumen begins with marks of the experience of nothingness -- he is “naked and barefoot” in the ceremony -- being brought into the sacred community, for this knowing he seeks steps from a stripping and requires “the mediation of people more advanced than he” (400C). But these baptismal enactments do not amount to an “inspired existence”; they do, however, begin an “incubation” within the “paternal scriptures” (432D).

The deacons, whose charism is purification, constrain the catechumens to absent themselves before the synaxis, the Eucharistic gathering, the communitarian noesis par excellence which fashions personal and, ultimately, ontological unity: “Every sacredly initiating operation draws our fragmented lives together in one-like divinization” (424C): the synaxis achieves this more efficiently than any other psychagogic instrument. It is preceded by a sung creed, a “symbol of adoration,” a hierarchic thanksgiving, a celebration of the totality of divine theurgy, by which one receives a share of “the divine condition and uplifting” (436C-D). The creed is a manipulation of the “statue” of a memory longer than but inclusive of one’s own (441C). While the symbols of scripture are protected from anarchic curiosity by difficulty, the symbols of numinal action are hidden within *disciplini arcani* -- the discipline of secrecy, thus saved from reductive dissipation, saved from misconstrual. Yet

misconstrual. Yet their work of God is achieved in their being performed; their theurgical power also is released by Dionysius' description of them; their theurgy is achieved in the imagination of the presbyter who reads these descriptive accounts of ritual.



The Hellenic religious world was in decline at the end of the fourth century. Sculptural representations of the gods were proscribed in the Empire in 386; the orator Libranus described to the Emperor Theodosius the spectacle of "torrents" of Christian monks moving through the countryside, destroying all temples they came upon, as if, he said, they were tearing the eye out of a region;<sup>16</sup> villagers, Libranus reported, lost their will to work once these traditional links with the gods appeared to have been severed. But according to the Syrian Iamblichus, the dominant Platonist philosopher of the age, the enervation endured by the traditional religion was not the result of Christian proselytization, but "the endless innovations and lawlessness of the Hellenes" (*De Mysteriis* 259, 5-14).<sup>17</sup> He echoes Plato's denunciation of spiritual and ritual invention in the *Laws* (*Laws* 657a).<sup>18</sup> Iamblichus bemoaned in particular the extreme rationalism of contemporary Platonism, contrasting its hybris with the stability of the Egyptians in hieratic matters (*DM* 259, 14-19).

Iamblichus' investigation of the Egyptian mysteries, *De Myteriis*, was an attempt to bring the foundational, subterranean element of Plato, which Plato himself insisted he had imported from Egypt (*Statesman* 290c-e; *Timaeus* 21; *Phaedrus* 275b; *Laws* 819b; *Philebus* 18b; *Charmides* 156b-157c), into prominence. In Plotinus, the soul did not descend into being; indeed nature appears in the *Enneads* as a source of temptation (*Enneads* IV.4.43.23-

6). Plotinus inveighs, as well, in this passage, against magic, a particularly vicious form of externality. For Plato, however, and for Iamblichus, the cosmos was a crucial part of philosophical healing: the lost harmony of a polis returned when “its sacrifices and feasts ... fit the true nature order” (*Laws* 809e); further, Plato argued, when ritual is responsive to the cosmos, the intelligence of humans is increased (*Laws* 809e): to be drawn into the gods, one needed to act in concert with the revelation of divinity in the natural order. The therapy of *paideia*, thus, drew one from self-assertion to such concert; theurgy, a physical, acted-out knowing suited to the soul’s embodied state, was its most potent tool.<sup>19</sup>

The Father of the Universe, in the *Timaeus*, created humans by mixing in the same bowl in which he combined all the original elements of the universe, divine and material, “what was left of the former ingredients” (*Timaeus* 41); human souls, “the lowest of the divine beings” (*De Mysteriis* 34. 8) were, as a result, a composite of everything. While no detailed record of theurgic ceremonies exists,<sup>20</sup> it is known that they involved the ritual use of stones, plants and animals: because such objects were particularly intimate to human beings, having been formed from different allotments of the same substances, and because these objects bore the “signatures” of the gods, they possessed a peculiar power to provoke a recollection of origin and the reformation of a life.

Since it was necessary that earthly things not be deprived of participation in the divine, the earth received a certain divine portion capable of receiving the Gods. The theurgic art, therefore, recognizing this principle in general, and having discovered the proper receptacles, in particular, as being appropriate to each of the Gods, often brings together stones, herbs, animals, aromatics, and other sacred, perfect and deiform objects of a similar kind. Then, from all of these, it produces a perfect, pure receptacle.  
(*DM* 233, 7-16)



Rods, pieces of wood, pebbles, stones, corn or wheat (*DM* 141, 14-142,3), though souless, manifest the gods, make “all things clear and known,” though they themselves have no noesis. But they must be disturbed from their usual setting by insertion in ritual for their capacity to draw understanding to be released; the dawning of this understanding has nothing to do with human intellectual endeavour: theurgy, indeed, “reveals ideas that transcend all knowledge” (*DM* 142,5-10). Rhythms and melodies; particular movements; certain forms of speech bore the *sunthemata* of the gods<sup>21</sup>; the marks of divinity in incantation, certain names, designs scratched on the ground (*DM* 129,15-17), exposed in ceremony, equally could pull interiorities outside of thinking into divinity. Human embodiment, the soul’s ontic familiarity with things, meant that its most promising approach to divinity was necessarily epistemologically unlit, an oblique way of unknowing.

In the ascesis of ritual, one did what one could not know, the form of one’s action assuming the form of divine creative action, the providentialism of cosmogenesis; this congruence, however, was not an object for self-awareness: theurgy was efficacious while remaining ineffable.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the “meaninglessness” of symbols, the chanted names of the gods for instance, was central to their anagogic power: “Even if they are unknowable to us, this very unknowableness is its most venerable aspect, for it is too excellent to be divided into knowledge.”(*DM* 255,17-256,3). The indivisible names, unfriable because of their incoherence, matched “the mystical and ineffable image of the Gods” in the soul, and these monadic names, iterated, chanted, held whole in the puzzled voice, woke the soul (*DM* 255,17-256,3). Unlike Pophyry’s soteriology, Iamblichus’ path of renewal included a form of prayer; the affective source of this prayer was poverty (*DM* 47, 13-48,4) that would not turn

from the cognitive emptiness of “tokens”(*sunthemata*) of divinity, but would find its appetite, imageless, starved of presumption, build before it.



The presbyter’s work is to draw the imagination of initiates into the beneficence and compassion of the artifact of divine eros, being itself, provident, shapely, where what is higher attends to what is lower, where all things operate as paradigms of obedience for others; thus those instructed may return to what is estranged in themselves. The presbyters, “light-bearing,”(*EH* 505D) achieve this charismatic healing, “initiating others into the hierarchy,” (505A) through rites “which are images of the power of divinity”(505B): theirs is the theurgic gift of bestirring the erotics of memory aside from thinking, the instigation of home-going through “divine working,” in those who have been purged by a diaconate, so that they are made “receptive to the ritual vision and communion,”(508A) incubated within “cleansing enlightenments”(509B) and the enclaustration of scripture.

The theurgic formation enacted through the presbyter, Dionysius suggests, begins with the ceremonial movements of those involved in his consecration (509B-516C): even the fact that the priest kneels on both knees in the ordination ceremony, while the deacon kneels on one during his initiation, has anagogic import: the clerics humility is shown as double, as his charism is -- he purifies, he uplifts -- and his enactment of this sign works this quality into him, as it forms the attentiveness of those to be uplifted, preparing them “to enter contemplation”(516B). All are enfolded, thus, through the symbolism in ceremony, into the

erotic dynamism of the cosmic hierarchy as they act it out in ritual, the hierarch who “receives on his head the scriptures,” laying hands on the presbyter, the presbyter acting out his doubly bent state under the “divine yokes”(516B), the purged lifted -- and so a restoration of a luminous polis in transformative gesture is made to appear.



The apotheosis of the *corpus dionysiacum*, *The Mystical Theology*, that poem exercising such great influence on the theology of the Western church, that small, succinct medicine, is yet another linguistic ritual performed for the presbyter Timothy; its therapeutic purpose -- correction and illumination -- is again isomorphic with the sort of receptivity native to the charism of the priest.<sup>23</sup> It includes, as do *The Divine Names* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, a sketch of the beginning of the universe, an account negated even as it is uttered: the poem is a formational exercise appearing as mimesis then cancelled as representation, a linguistic healing as an incantatory uplifting.

Trinity!! Higher than any being,

any divinity, any goodness!

Guide of Christians

in the wisdom of heaven!

Lead us beyond unknowing and light,

up to the farthest, highest peak

of mystic scripture,

where the mysteries of God's Word

lie simple, absolute and unchangeable  
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.

Amid the deepest shadow  
they pour overwhelming light  
on what is most manifest.

Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen  
they completely fill our sightless minds  
with treasures beyond all beauty.

(MT 997A-B)

This introductory language presents a spiritual exercise to the reader, in which the imagination is induced again to hold the complete architecture of the cosmos, the manifest world, and the logos hidden (*mystikos*) above it: once the imagination is so contorted, attentive in such an impossible way, it is enjoined to undo itself -- “leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can ....”(997B) The interior eye, under these counter pressures, is “undivided” and abandoned, enduring anagoria in this transfixed emptiness, “uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow,” a dazzling darkness (1000A). The formational endeavour is augmented by secrecy (“see to it that none of this comes to the hearing of the unformed” 1000A). The unformed are those overtaken by the powers of discursive thought, by dogmatic theology, by the bright surface of the physical world in such a way that being cannot become an object of

contemplation -- such preoccupations place initiation into divinity beyond reach. To disclose the true nature of things in the context of such noetic commitments would shut down all aspects of theurgic initiative. Some sort of collapse of such powers indeed is a precondition for philosophic speech, for the Cause which is both “eloquent and taciturn” is manifest only “to those who travel through foul and fair, who pass beyond the summit of every ascent, who leave behind them every divine light, every voice, every word from heaven, and who plunge into the darkness...”(1000C) In such a cognitive stripping, knowing is a being-taken-in, a “belonging” where one is “neither oneself nor someone else”(1001A).

The approach to this knowing is not a prehension but a “clearing aside” (*aphaeresis*) of, among other things, understandings set in place by the exhaustive praises of affirmative theology; but this cancelling is not anti-rationalist obscurantism: it is the height of reason. This knowing involves no stretch to an object but a trued subjectivity; it is more than ineffable, an active unknowing (1033B). This unknowing itself, still, is more than the negation of assertion in the *via positiva*: what the contemplative “belongs” to is equally beyond denial; it is not conceptual; it is not power; it is not light, not wisdom, not divinity, not goodness, not being, not non-being (1048A-D), yet it permits, or rather is, consanguinity.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Greek *presbyteros*, elder, compar. with *presbys*, old, an old man; cf. Sanskrit *purugava*, a guide, a leader (originally of a herd of oxen).
- <sup>2</sup> See Pierre Hadot on the fundamentally psychagogic nature of ancient texts, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1995), pp. 64-5.
- <sup>3</sup> On theurgy, see H.D. Saffery "New Objects Links Between the Pseudo Dionysius and Proclus," in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, Dominic J. O'Meara, ed. (Albany: New York State University Press, 1982), pp.64-74
- <sup>4</sup> On the use of *symbola* in Iamblichus, see Sarah Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Nondiscursive Thinking in Plotinus, Proclus and Damascius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 139.
- <sup>5</sup> See Rappe pp. 11-12, 94-99 on Plotinian pedagogical style. Plotinian metaphor may well be one of the roots of later theurgic practice, but Plato's use of melody in the formation of the Guardians in the *Republic* is an equally likely source.
- <sup>6</sup> Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (Weimarer Ausgabe 6, 52)
- <sup>7</sup> Ronald Hathaway, in *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo Dionysius* (The Hague, 1969), pp. 31-5, lists twenty-two suggested authors. Rene Rogues, in his *Structures theologique de la Gnose a Richard de St. Victor* (Paris: Presses universites de France, 1962), pp. 63-91 offers a survey of the attempts to clarify the authorship of the four extant Dionysian texts. Henri-Dominique Saffery in "New Objective Links Between Pseudo

Dionysius and Proclus” argues the impossibility of such a task. The number of Neoplatonists in Hathaway’s list underscores the suspicion of influence Saffery seeks to confirm by his close linguistic analysis of Dionysius, Proclus and John of Scythopolis, the earliest Dionysian commentator.

<sup>8</sup> An account of this debate appears in Jaroslav Pelikan’s Introduction to *Pseudo-Dionysius, the Complete Works*, Colm Luibheid, trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). pp. 13-5.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton CT: Morehouse Barlow, 1989), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> See H.D. Saffery “From Iamblichus to Proclus and Damascius, ” in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egypt, Greece, Rome*, A.H. Armstrong, ed. ( New York: Crossroads, 1986 ), pp. 250-3 on the interiorization of the philosophic rituals as a result of the desacralization of pagan temples.

<sup>11</sup> *Indices Pseudo-Dionysiani* (Louvain, 1941); also see H.D. Saffery, “New Objective Links Between Pseudo Dionysius and Proclus,” p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 122.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 177.

<sup>14</sup> *The Works of Aristotle*, W.D. Ross, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908-31 ), Vol, 12, fragment 15. With Iamblichus, the Neoplatonist mistrust of discursive reason reaches its highpoint: “ It is not thought that links the theurgist to the gods: else what would hinder the theoretical philosopher from enjoying theurgic union with them? The case is not so. Theurgic union is attained only by the perfective operation of the unspeakable *acts* correctly performed, acts which are beyond all understanding; by the power of the unutterable symbols

which are intelligible only to the gods ” (*De Mysteriis* II. 11).

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Barlow, 1989), pp. 53-4.

Louth points out that the function of the priest (presbyter) is to illuminate. *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, as *The Divine Names*, then, is meant to enlighten, as opposed to purify and perfect, since it is composed by a presbyter for the edification of another presbyter. But often the undertakings become conflated: baptism is a priestly charism, thus an illumination: it is, however, simultaneously purification.

<sup>16</sup> Libranus, *Protemplis* 30.8, quoted in H.D. Saffery “The Piety and Prayers of Ordinary Men and Women in Late Antiquity,” in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egypt, Greece, Rome*, A.H. Armstrong ed. (New York: Crossroads, 1986), p. 200.

<sup>17</sup> The standard translation is *Les Mysteres d’Egypte*, E. des Place, trans. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966).

<sup>18</sup> See also *Timaeus* 22. There is no such thing as an old Greek, the ancient Egyptian priest, says Plato, remarked to Solon.

<sup>19</sup> A.C. Lloyd, “The Later Neoplatinists,” in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, A.H. Armstrong, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 287-93. Lloyd sees the Iamblican position as a consequence of his cosmology, just as was Plotinus’ opposition. Gregory Shaw in *Theurgy and the Soul: the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), p. 12 argues that Plato’s own notion of paideia involved a hierarchical unfolding of the powers of the soul along with an enfolding of the soul in the harmonies of the cosmos. Much of my discussion on theurgy in this section is indebted to Shaw.



<sup>20</sup> See Philippe Derchain, "Pseudo-Jamblique or Abammon," *Chronique d'Egypte* 38(1963), 220-26, for the argument that places in *De Mysteriis* a single ritual borrowed from the ceremony of the sun's renewal at Abydos.

<sup>21</sup> See *Symposium* 215e for an account of the theurgic effect on Socratic speech on Alcibiades.

<sup>22</sup> See Shaw, pp. 109-10, on the ineffability of theurgy.

<sup>2</sup> On the notion of poesis as a "sacred action," numinous medicine, see Jerome Rothenberg, "Pre-face," in *Maria Sabina, Selections*, Jerome Rothenberg, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. v and xviii.

## Chapter Six

### The Work of Desire

*The Cloud of Unknowing*, convivial, confiding, anonymous, fourteenth century, traces the life of those stirred. Do not read this book, the author warns, unless you have begun the practice it describes -- if you do not already know intimately what the book says, have not striven, that is, "long time before" to come to a contemplative living (1), are not gusted now by an "inward stirring under the privy counsel of God," while still not knowing what you do (2), readership only will place you at risk. "Whisperers, tale-bearers," the curious learned in particular must not meddle with this book; even those practiced in the active life of good works should spend no time with it. The proscription is an act of mercy: the book inevitably will appear to the nonerotic as something it is not -- as technique, as analysis, as dogma on the mystical life, as a yard-stick of piety. Not only will it not cohere as any of these -- will require an impossible subsidizing labour; it will be lost to caricature -- but it will manufacture error (2): it will place in the unengaged reader one of a variety of interior difficulties which the book will be powerless to undo. The book, then, cannot be read safely from a distance; readership, in its case, involves a particular labour; this position is not self-selecting, nor is the labour shaped by one's purpose: the erotic ambition of the book's true reader places certain necessary tasks before him and with these the book will act as a balm. *The Cloud of Unknowing* cannot be instruction, in other words, only confirmation within such a life, can be nothing other than comfort. And it can succour, of course, only those who have entered the undertaking -- perhaps without choosing this, perhaps without knowing what they do -- it has under consideration. It works in this way as a piece of phenomenology, idiosyncratic, yet

useful to others; it can tell you where you are or might have been in a journey well under way. It is closed to those who have not started; it is a therapy that imperils those not caught in the desire it tracks.



The book stands in a rich tradition of ascetical and mystical theology -- Augustine, pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scotus Eriugena, Bernard of Clairvaux -- but its premier authority is Richard of St. Victor, prior of the abbey of St. Victor, especially his work on asceticism, *The Twelve Patriarchs* or Benjamin Minor, and his treatise on contemplation, *The Mystical Ark* or Benjamin Major, both works written between 1153 and 1162. *The Twelve Patriarchs* is a tropological reading of Genesis 25: 19-35: - 29, the tale of Jacob, "a quiet man living in tents," (*Gen.* 25: 27) his wives Leah and Rachel, his twelve sons and one daughter. Richard grasps these characters as the pattern of an interior life that ends in contemplative attention; this life arrives at its apogee with the birth of the youngest child, Benjamin, "a young man in ecstasy of mind," figure for the highest forms of contemplation. But it begins with the birth of Ruben, Leah's first son, whose name means "God has seen my abasement", and who represents the vision of God through an "intuition of dread." (*The Twelve Patriarchs*, VIII)

The text of scripture, for Richard, possesses, unlike virtually all other books, an instructive, transformative hiddenness; it is "written on the inside of the page and the outside," (*Revelations* 5: 1, *Ezekiel* 2: 10) able to satisfy those with a mystical appetite, while

providing “pasture” to those content with what shows clearly.<sup>1</sup> The interior writing is not an argument, not a proof, not system, not dogma, but a psychagogic shape holding the power to place a turn in the psyche of particular readers. Let the mind play on this shimmering hiddenness, on this recessed, supraluminous writing, sequestered, lost almost without trace in the story, and it will begin to enact the occult pattern it apprehends.

The two mothers, Leah and Rachel, monitor the rising of the soul: Leah, fruitful but with poor eyesight, represents affection; Rachel, more beautiful but nearly sterile, stands for reason: Leah is drawn by the pull of divine inspiration; Rachel is caught in the flame of divine showing (*The Twelve Patriarchs*, IV). Jacob, while seeking Rachel, unexpectedly finds himself in the embrace of Leah, Laban's eldest daughter, sent to Jacob's tent on his marriage night (*Gen.* 29:23-35): the route to contemplation passes through the ordering of the affections, this a jarring, a shock, a revulsion to the besotted, long-serving knower. Leah's weak vision means she loves with inevitable imprudence, eros endlessly attaching itself to what are distractions. The correction of this misalignment of desire, manifesting itself in prayer as psychic garrulity, drunkenness, begins with an experience of affliction (*Gen.* 29:32), a “holy fear,” Ruben's birth, and proceeds through a series of shocks -- grief, hatred of what one is and so on -- ending in the appearance of “ordered shamefacedness,” represented by the birth of Jacob's solitary daughter, Dina (“that judgement”). Richard's ascesis is not the work of an angelistic will, but builds, he says, from an “inner sweetness,” an “ecstasy of mind” (*The Twelve Patriarchs*, XXXIV; XL); one is drawn to it by a brush with quintessential beauty: the fruit of contemplation unaccountably precedes the undertaking of it, shame growing from ecstatic sweetness. One must begin the practice before he enters the

contemplative life, a choiceless beginning, the brief achievement of the end coming before and shaping the seeking of it. The full enjoyment of contemplation, in Richard's schema, however, follows shame: Benjamin is born after Dina. His mother dies at his birth (*Gen.* 35: 18): reason has no place in the experience of contemplative seeing, though it is indispensable in the approach to it.



*The Cloud of Unknowing* is addressed to a twenty-four year old cleric (3) who has recently begun to live as a solitary (4), perhaps a Carthusian.<sup>2</sup> The book is meant to aid him in the task of introspection he has already begun, the "busy beholding to the course and the manner" of his calling; the matter under examination is desire, for his calling, *The Cloud* makes clear, is an erotic one in which he is led by "a leash of a lovely longing" (3). His chief work now is to "all ways stand in desire" (5) throughout his life: this work is a continuation and a spreading of his present practice. The desire that directs his life appears somewhat estranged from him: he stands in it, while it appears to stand outside him and pull him; his work, he is told, is merely to "consent" to it (5), undergo it. Though pulled, however, he still requires direction (4): part of this direction is aid offered in the uncovering of a pattern in one's longing.

The intent life, the life that is stirred, *The Cloud* says, has a watercourse: the Common, Special, Singular and Perfect lives: the first three -- the ordinary lay life, the clerical life, the solitary life -- can be begun and finished within nature and within the span of one's life; the last can be begun now but comes to term only in beatitudo. A "boisterous beholding" gives *The Cloud* author the stages of this progression -- the highest insight in this phenomenology,

this direction, can be nothing more than an eyeballing in; he undermines his observations as science -- yet each are inevitable, given desire: "in the same order and in the same course" do they come (3): one's wanting in this work is fastened by "a leash of lovely longing"; one is tugged along: you feel, then, the draw in your wanting which completes the erotic teleology, yet do not experience it as teleology. The desirer simply acquiesces; his desire shapes his will until in all his life he stands in desire, and this desire flows to a single point: all one does in the life of contemplation is look at divinity and let it act as it pleases (5). In this state of transfixity, you move toward pliancy; you move toward loneliness, in which you turn away from creatures and their works with apparent carelessness; this turning away is "the work of the soul that most pleaseth God," (5) and is oddly altruistic, "cleansing," and brings to virtue not only the one detached but strangers as well. None of this can be accomplished by the will -- it is a hard and wonderful thing to do with that muscle (6) -- but is extremely easy, "the lightest work of all," when the soul is visited by, as Richard Methely has it in his fifteenth century Latin translation, a sensible lust, *sensibili delectatione*.

Lift up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love; and mean himself and none of his goods. And thereto look that thou loathe to think on aught but himself, so that nought work in thy mind nor in thy will but only himself. And do that in thee is to forget all the creatures that ever God made and the works of them, so that thy thought or thy desire be not directed or stretched to any of them, neither in general nor in special. But let them be with a seemly recklessness, and take no heed of them. (5)

Such a focus -- the life of looking and passivity, a leaving of others and what they do, these things subsequently contracting into autonomy (7) -- produces an experience of profound disorientation in the one so drawn, an interior darkness which the book calls the

cloud of unknowing, a period of epistemic collapse, which leaves only an arrested desire -- a naked intent unto God -- that seems to bear no relation to human purpose. It, in fact, appears initially to stand over and above such purpose, subverting, re-arranging. The soul wants nothing other than divinity, but it experiences this now as distance, something unavailable to interior sight, to reason, to affect: all these powers are disabled by the dark. One is denuded of what identity these bring; one is cast outside one's life, placed in unlikeness, an unconsolated state in which even the hope of divine proximity is removed (10-11).

The temptation to console oneself will be strong under these circumstances. One may seek, for instance, the "profit" of "minding" others, ghostly or made, in this state of deprivation, "minding" the qualities of God, the charm of the saints, the delight of heaven -- may wish to undergo the ordinary images of religious life: but these ministrations, proffered by the imagination, their piety notwithstanding, in fact debilitate and must be eschewed, even though such meditations appear to feed the contemplative purpose. In fact they muddle the aim of the one in contemplation, "the eye of a shooter . . . upon the prick that he shooteth to" (11), enervate this evacuated look by draping its nakedness with forms and must be hid, says the author, in a cloud of forgetting, in favour of an affective life above the imagination, above thinking, a life of "smiting" that thick cloud with "a sharp dart of longing love" (12).



The apophaticism of *The Cloud* draws on Richard of St. Victor's contemplative epistemology adumbrated in *The Twelve Patriarchs* and *The Mystical Ark*. In the last book, a

treatise on the forms of mystical prayer, Richard gives six levels of contemplation: in imagination and according to imagination; in imagination and according to reason; in reason and according to imagination; in reason and according to reason; above but not beyond reason; above and seemingly beyond or against reason (*The Mystical Ark*, Bk. I, VI). Each of these stages, which may be roughly simultaneous as well as sequential, is an attempt to surmount the near-impossibility of the “carnal mind” rising to the knowledge of “invisible things” (*The Twelve Patriarchs*, XIV); in this effort, the imagination, rendering impalpabilities into visible things, is the most primitive faculty, yet a necessary propaedeutic to higher forms of attention, bringing reason to “that place to which it did not know how to go by means of itself” (*The Mystical Ark*, Bk. II, XVII). The imagination, mobile, lifting the mind to wherever “wonder carries it” (*The Mystical Ark*, Bk. I, VI), breeds amazement, preparing reason for the task for which it must sublate itself to complete in the growing contemplative, drawing reason to its limit; but the imagination has no competence with that sweep of phenomena for which visible similitudes would be reductive: it is neither probing or prudent here, but rather Phaedrusean in the range of its delight, indiscriminate, conflating unlike things which have but a surface resemblance. In the sixth “watchtower of contemplation,” reason itself is subverted in preference to a permeability permitting the “irradiation of divine light,” an alert, craning passivity, the early formation of which is the achievement of the imagination, breeding in the mind an alacrity for ravishment. An effort to visualize the Trinity, say, one of the numinous things beyond both imagination and reason, or to offer a plausible account of it, forecloses on the possibility of contemplating it. This observation is not an obscurantist norm but a remark on an epistemological economy. *The*



*Cloud* writer, avid, with hyrbistic appetite for what is higher, elects to "leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to love that thing I cannot think" (12). This work is not arduous, given erotic engagement, or long: "the shortest work of all that man may imagine. It is neither longer nor shorter than an atom . . ." (6), equal, exactly, to a single volitional stirring.



Erudition is a danger; curiosity is a danger; "natural wit" is a danger: yet *The Cloud* does not press for a naive intuitionism; it is not anti-intellectual, not Romantic, not the promotion of religious vitalism. It does resist, though, the hegemony of reason: this power is not equal to all tasks, though it is prone to a misleading solicitude in which it conceives it is. God is incomprehensible to knowing, but not to loving, where he appears as "sweetness" (8), the feel of the cognition of paradise.

The contemplative must set himself against "thoughts": these enervate the naked gaze; efforts to explain the nature of the look are emigrations from contemplative practice. "And if any thought rise and will press all ways above thee, betwixt thee and that darkness, and ask thee saying: 'What seekest thou, and what wouldst thou have?' say thou, that it is God that thou wouldst have . . ." And in him, say, 'thou has no skill.' And therefore say 'Go thou down again'; and tread him fast down again with a stirring of love, although he seem to thee right holy, and seem to thee as if he would help thee to seek him." (12)

The force of analytic inquiry, outside the sphere of its competence, is a kind of dissipation: it decays into "chatter"; the pursuit of questions it fosters transmogrifies to a

“scattering”; the interior representation of noumenal things one seeks becomes a lowering; the ratiocinative impulse must be “trodden down” in this cloud of forgetting. This sort of probe, enthusiastic to depict all moments of intentionality, which the book bars from the higher forms of attention, is nevertheless necessary in the lower ranges: indeed, these are the very efforts that make the later suprarational forms of contemplation possible; they assemble the proper telos for such attention and wed the mind to it; in a sense, they should never be jettisoned though in the further reaches of contemplation must be kept in utter quietude in the cloud of forgetting. The ghost of these efforts remains in the fixity and the trueness of the contemplative gaze: yet if these same efforts were to turn toward the focus they had assembled, they would leave it “broken” and “undone.” (14) The cloud of forgetting is a refusal of reason its consolations once it strays beyond its gift.

The ambition for “a sharp and clear beholding,” (15), present in all forms of discursive thinking, is nature, is good: inquiry in pursuit of explanation brings the unlike toward the human sphere by finding it a home in human language and taxonomy; it locates the individual in the scheme of things, and thus is the rudiment of humility. Reason's highest work undertaken in the lower part of contemplative life is, then, ascetical: the placing of the human in the largest of all possible accounts, quickening “good ghostly meditations and busy beholdings unto a man's own wretchedness with sorrow and contrition,” (16) these exercises, as mathematics for the Pythagoreans, training the mind to awe. Reason is unfortunate, *The Cloud* author says, when it supposes it alone can accomplish what the contemplative finally seeks -- “to be knit to God in spirit, in onehead of love and accordance of will” (16) -- when in fact all it can manage is a oneness in human terms, a reduction of unspeakability to speech;

here a self-flattering caricature appears. The true union cannot be achieved in nature, only in grace: a phantom limb of interior seeking, thus, lies above the rational probe: an emptiness, a lack, an availability is higher, though to be genuine it must be an artifact of reason manifest as discernment. A confused, unsatisfied, blind stirring of wanting is better than an apparently clear beholding of even the highest things: this burnished clarity simply blocks the reached-for darkness.

This blind stirring is not a search for knowledge, but a reformation of the one who experiences it: it finds no clarity, unearths no account of what it cranes toward, yet only the stability, the singleness of mind native to this naked intent can bestir virtue, the form of ekstasis, for Plotinus, in the quotidian life, in particular the encompassing virtues of humility and charity. Humility has a special noumenal efficiency here, for in its perfect form -- the dumbfounding that comes from awe before what is divine -- it provokes a faultless ordering of the affections (24). One cannot visualize or name the divine but can become what participates in what divinity is -- without, of course, having a firm sense that this is what one does -- taking on the *mum noesis* of identity: this is a return to one's first state. Out of this inchoate, nonreportable, helpless transfixity before the dark cloud of what one cannot say comes an approach to prelapsarian health, for this erotic reaching alone "destroyeth the ground and the root of sin." (21)

This is a hidden labour: it appears to be preoccupation with nothing to those who stand outside it and inevitably arouses their disapproval (29) -- Martha's protest over Mary's alert attention (Luke 10: 38-42) is the paradigmatic instance of such an evaluation -- since to the non-contemplative, grounds for the strenuous engagement do not appear to exist; it

itself appears to be a wasting of time. Awestruck humility carves down the contemplative -- it carves only the one who has fallen into the gaze: ravishment quells one to a sweet gravitas. One so hushed will not mount a defence in the face of the disapproval of the nonerotic: to do so would be to slide from the gaze, and the wish for this would not occur to one held in transfixity. One in this work, further, seeks no release from pain, no increase of reward, nought but the gaze, the heart's ocularity. The contemplative "hath no leisure" to distinguish among persons, preferring one to the other (37): all are equally dear (38); he has no interest other than this beating on the cloud: nothing beneath this comforts (34). Humility is a "forgetting" of what lies beneath this blind stirring, an uninterest in consolation other than the qualified, subverted, virtually erased consolation of contemplation; it is the end of amour-propre, the ground of wanting lesser things; it is the not-feeling of one's entitlement. An avidity for the one thing necessary (Luke 10: 42) breeds detachment elsewhere: humility grows from ravishment, and is the simplification and intensification of desire.



The life of contemplation begins with shame -- is preceded by the birth of Dina: at its furthest reach, it is a self-forgetting which is simultaneous with attention to divine things which are above and seemingly beyond reason (*The Mystical Ark*, Bk. IV, IX), the embarrassment of reason that would be impossible without the exercise of reason. But the contemplative life precedes the extra-rational experience of contemplation in the form of a

particular fixity of mind: "And loathe to think on aught under God. And go not thence for anything that befalleth." (21). This transfixity of mind, this "blind stirring of love," has a transformative power that exceeds that of even the most extreme ascetical practices (21): desire alone in *The Cloud of Unknowing* alters the one who would know.

The representation of anything, but especially pious things, simply deflects this desire: theological rumination, ontological curiosity, disarm the ascetical transformative power within erotic engagement. The probing thought, bent on the transformation of divinity into image, into speech, keen to provoke virtue "will let thee see the wonderful kindness of God, and if thou listen to him, he desireth not better. For soon after, he will let thee see thine old wretched living; and, peradventure, in seeing and thinking thereof, he will bring to thy mind some place that thou hast dwelt in before this time. So that, at last, ere ever thou knowest, thou shalt be scattered, thou knowest not where. This cause of this scattering is: that first thou didst wilfully listen to that thought, and then thou didst answer him, receive him, and let him have his way." (13) Here the ascesis of eros, noetically sightless, is the higher form of knowing, reaching beyond both the imagination and reason, opposed to them in their protean, invasive state, even though it is formed by the energy of both (13). It is not a knowing, but an altering to a shape which is a version, an ideogram, of what cannot be said.

If there is to be any speech associated with the higher form of prayer, the naked intent "lapped and folden in one word, so that thou mayest have better hold thereupon," *The Cloud* author insists it should be no more than monosyllabic expostulation. This is the "short and pure" prayer of St. Benedict (*Rule of St. Benedict*, 20), the versicle of John Cassian (Ps. 69: 2) that does not distract desire but molds it, intensifies it; it is a vehicle of forgetting, driving

down sequential thought, repelling the lushness of imagination (13-4; *Conferences*, 10, 10); it is a means "to beat on this cloud and this darkness above thee." (14)

The "cloud of unknowing" itself is a cognitive incapacity that has an ascetical effect: a stripping preparatory to deference: beat ever more on this cloud. Such a pressing brings one to meekness and charity (22), the dispositions that encapsulate all virtue. The desire to know, without the hope of comprehension, the disoriented, epektatic eros of contemplation, smooths and arranges the affections into the harmony of virtue (22; *The Mystical Ark*, Bk. IV, IX).



One beats on the cloud with a naked intent; this nakedness is threefold: one's desire is without image, without anticipation, without consolation. One pursues no lifting of discomfort; the "perfect prentice" "recketh nor regardeth whether he is in pain or in bliss," (36) but is housed in an empty wanting. The emptiness of the reach has two sources: the blinding, disarming impulse of desire and the hard work of forgetting. The practice of this momentum, alacritous emptiness is taxing at first but becomes light-filled and restful as devotion builds (39).

Sometimes the cloud is penetrated from above by the dusky illumination of nonreportable, nonrepresentatable contemplative insight, which explains little, which may be spoken only with the great peril of misspeaking it and alienating oneself from its power, yet which, like affect-heavy metaphor when undergone but not comprehended, intensifies

emotion, heightening one's proximity to the beloved, while abolishing the distance of knowing.

Then will he sometimes peradventure send out a beam of ghostly light,  
piercing this *cloud of unknowing* that is betwixt thee and him, and  
show thee some of his secrets, the which man may not and cannot  
speak. Then shalt thou feel thine affection inflamed with the fire of his  
love, far more than I can tell, or may or will at this time. (39)

The tongue cannot speak such incidents well, threatens inevitably to transform them  
to hurt.



The work of contemplation -- the travail of forgetting, the easy labour of blind beating  
against what cannot come to speech, the stirring, the quick visitations -- demands a separation  
from the "world" the place of reward, of redress, of efforts to seek release from pain, of the  
enjoyment of consolation, of plotting its increase; it works such a separation. Equally, it  
requires a removal from the active life, the altruistic political world of service, where the  
common good is sought (40). Both this life and the life of the world and the consolations of  
each are sublated by the contemplative undertaking, a psycho-ontological political work, a  
work of repair, restoring the well-being "where all woe is wanting," lost through the erotic  
deformity of Adamic sin (41). This restoration reinstitutes the interior balance of ordered  
affections, the "cleanness" of awe and wanting before what is divine, an accord within  
creation. The life of desire anticipates the beauty of Doomsday (41).

The more the nakedness -- the emptiness -- of erotic pressing is compromised by the

consolations of reverent visualizations, however, of images of location and anticipation, by representations of satisfaction ("stirrings of sin"), the more the momentum of this beating decays, and the contemplative work of apokatastasis is jeopardized: it can be lost entirely to its slyest counterfeit, the people, fully-rendered religious imagination; with this, one is exiled from the eros of contemplation. *The Cloud* recommends two psychagogic exercises for relief from the weight of thoughts: pretend that they do not press with such force, while looking over their shoulder at what they obscure, the divinity enclefted in unknowability; if this fails, "cower then down under them as a caitlif and a coward overcome in battle; and think that it is but folly to strive any longer with them; and therefore thou yieldest thyself to God in the hands of thine enemies," willing an engulfment, identifying oneself with helplessness: this will tip into a love-sense of liquefaction (Ps. 21: 15; *The Mystical Ark*, Bk. IV, XV): you, small, are melted into wanting, imagination here and before subverting the effervescence of imagination.



Richard of St. Victor's fifth and sixth stages of contemplation consider craning intelligence that is above but not beyond reason and above and against reason. The mystical theology he propounds in *The Mystical Ark* comes from an allegorical reading of the construction of the ark of the covenant (*Exodus* 25: 10 ff): in the highest forms of contemplation, his text is the two golden cherubim which Moses is instructed to place on either side of the throne of mercy, their stretched wings overshadowing it. "Cherub"



represents fullness of knowledge; the figures are angelic, symbolizing an intelligence within human range, yet beyond the power of human reason (*The Mystical Ark*, Bk. IV, I), being beyond sense experience and, in the case of the second cherub, beyond similtude: they are made of hammered gold -- one comes to this knowing through compunction rather than investigation, through sighs, through lamentation (*The Mystical Ark* Bk. IV, VI). It is ecstatic knowledge, entry into "the lofty secret places of divine incomprehensibility." The righthand cherub represents knowledge which reason cannot discover, yet can confirm, announcing some commensurability between human and divine things, a scale, "divine similtude in rational substances"; the lefthand cherub "stands on the side of dissimiltude" (*The Mystical Ark*, Bk. IV, VIII): both sorts of knowledge are available only through showing or the witness of authority: one is either swept here or led.

Each of the cherubim's wings is outstretched: their "continual stretching" is the eagerness of the ecstatic mind for divine contemplation "in every place, at every time," the pursuit of it everywhere with longing, waiting for the divine showing without relief, in unbroken suspense, alert, compuncted. Waiting -- Elijah's waiting at the entrance of the cave, face covered, is emblematic (I Kings: 19: 13; *The Mystical Ark*, Bk. IV, X) -- replaces here the probe of reason.



Desire is strange; it breeds estrangement; desire is strange: it seem distant; delivered yet not assumable; larger-than-self; the self quintessentially: it appears to stand outside,

ingenious, telos-scenting, gusting. It enacts a work in whom God chooses: it refuses the causality of merit (45); it infiltrates the contemplative and becomes the vector and the haste of his interiority: desire follows the delight of God, is what one cannot know likes (45), is the joy of this external force. Intimate, kidnapping, lifting, disconcerting, beneficent, its push and easy pull make it nothing other than desire, yet it is not this “but a thing thou knowest never what, that stirrest thee to will and desire thou knowest never what,” (45-6), a meta-personal exigence, unreadable, seemingly supplanting the self.

It cannot be chosen, cannot be manufactured; what one most elementally needs -- union with the source of being, the larger self of oneness -- is not even desirable without this work begun within one, not even desirable unless one has the single desire that alone can desire it: the soul without this sent impulse is not alive (45). This stirring makes you *atopos* -- the nonerotic mutter -- it makes you unlike yourself, stripping you of the use of sight, reason, affect, imagination, thrusting you toward the upset and nonrefusability of the cloud.



Desire may be built and shaped by hesychastic exclamations (SIN, GOD); in time, it nudges into sorrow: a raw sense of self appears to stand between the contemplative and the pulling cloud, a “lump of sin,” the individual apprehended as essentially malaligned by cupidity. This sense arises with sorrow; only “ghostly sorrow” can relieve it, this “naked knowing and feeling” of one's being (56). This corrective sorrow is *penthos*, the experience of tears in Cassian through which the soul comes to be inflamed, is brought to the mute

“prayer of fire” (*Conferences*, 9: 25-7). This sadness which is prayer, is erotic, is not despair: if it truly comes from desire, it leans toward discretion (54) even in the matter of tears; it eschews all sorts of strain. *Penthos* smooths the impulse to self: in it, the self is felt as a congealed mass of inaptness; felt thus it occludes less the passage to the cloud, while strained simulacra of this work, melodramatic dolor, roccocco physical effects, are vanities, the self gaudily asserted, blocking the encounter with divine opacity.

One enters the counterfeits of ghostly sorrow through literalism -- a “fleshly and bodily” apprehension of compunction in which the novice labours to produce a sensation of interior burning (58), compunction as physical symptom -- and the refusal of counsel. If one is not impelled by desire in this work, he is incapable of a lyrical reading of this possible sorrow; the pliancy of waiting is beyond him. He has no ear for such response: he plunges ahead with a perilous muscularity (59). The desire that breeds sorrow, that breeds flame, avoids the inattention of presumption; self-effaced, alert for the unanticipatable, unmingled with externality, ghostly, it will hide itself and grow (60). The substance of all perfection is a good will -- Augustine's *Tota vita christiani boni sanctum desiderium est* <sup>3</sup>: a good will is acquiescence to the desire -- appearing as sorrow, appearing as loneliness, appearing as reach -- visited on the contemplative (63); if one is truly erotic, he will believe, further, that desire has nothing to do with consolation (64), and will seek neither the consolation nor the desire.



Desire chastens language: it halts what is meant ghostly from being appropriated

bodily. Without the “work of this book,” however, the visitation of this keen, non-directable stirring, one's understanding will be inevitably anti-metaphorical, and one will be led into various grotesqueries of interiority as a result. This is especially true with the words “in” and “up”; read literally, they produce strange behaviour -- “some set their eyes in their head as though they were sturdy sheep beaten in the head, and as though they should die anon. Some hang their heads on one side, as if a worm were in their ears. Some pipe when they should speak . . .” (67) Read a psychagogic book like *The Cloud* as something other than suggestive, pointing, as phenomenological encouragement to those already caught in the work, and it will produce strain and posturing: it could drive the nonerotic mad (66).

To hear resonantly, playfully, compellingly, heuristically, yieldingly -- as one would receive metaphor -- what is meant psychagogically is a sign one is exercised by desire's work. The nonerotic cannot stop themselves from reading psychagogic remarks as physical description, as analysis, as physical injunction, this misreading a sign of their unengaged state; it is a quick step from this to unseemly behaviour that is presumptuous, exhibitionistic, driven by a plain greed for hidden things. A fleshy construal is disastrous because it is too accommodating to human categories (73): it is aggrandizement, not fecund loss. The nonerotic are anti-metaphorical; literalism proofs them against the upheaval in an encounters with the cloud, so nothing new comes from their efforts beyond more outlandish enshrinements of the status quo. They are not moved; they do not move.



Someone who takes up this work, is lifted by this dynamism, is governed by it and is brought to beauty, says *The Cloud* (69), both physical and interior beauty, so that he will come to seem attractive, no matter how ill-favoured in appearance he may have been. Such beauty comes from a particular sort of seeing, one where the vigorously anthropomorphic imagination, the sentimental imagination, have scant place: the effort to pierce the heaven with one's eyes, the belief that one has such special powers of beholding, are leagued with both fanatical conviction and massive efforts of self-promotion.

These men will sometimes with the curiosity of their imagination pierce the planets, and make a hole in the firmament to look in thereat. These men will make a God as they like and clothe him full richly in clothes, and set him on a throne, far more curiously than ever was he depicted on this earth. These men will make angels in bodily likeness, and set them about, each one with diverse minstrelsy, far more curious than ever was any seen or heard in this life. (73)

When the impulse to religious clarity, the impulse to arrive at complete ontological accounts, are seen as apogeeal cognitive states, one comes to ugliness and is a threat both to oneself and others, though the danger is apparent only to the erotic. When one's thinking has lost the indeterminacy, waiting, ambivalence, proteanness of metaphor and heuristic, it has lost all erotic qualities and shunts toward the burlesque, the self-inflated, the judgemental and dogmatic.

The project to map interior states, the cognitive ambition to make all visualizable, is the sign of an unmusical being; this ambition sinks the one who has it further into

unmusicality. To misread, say, "lift up," "go in," "stirring," and "rest" as physical directions, this tin ear toward the nature of psychagogic utterance, is to depart from the practice in which one supposes one is engaged: it is not only wrong, but also is antagonistic to beauty. All bodily things must be sublated to ghostly things (78); even what is fully rendered, such as Christological doctrine, must be read, as well, as heuristic -- that is, understood in desire (78) -- to be complete. A lyrical sensibility in ghostly matters alone alters the soul to beauty: here is the height of cognition for it can transform. Be nowhere, then, *The Cloud* advizes, not in, up, beyond: starve the mind of images on which to work.

And although thy bodily wits can find there nothing to feed them on, for they think it nought that thou dost, yea: do on then this nought, and do it for God's love. And cease not, therefore, but travail busily in that nought with a watchful desire to will to have God, whom no man may know. For I tell thee truly that I had rather be so nowhere bodily, wrestling with that blind nought, than be so great a lord that I might when I would be everywhere bodily, merrily playing with all this aught as a lord with his own. (86)

Labour "fast" in this nought, the book urges; the labour is a hurtling noetic darkness; all that remains is attention which is unconsolated, imageless, homeless, pressing, craning toward the beautiful daimonic thing that draws from the other side of names, representation, analysis, sight, yet which may be touched in desire. Successive readings of such looks as *The Cloud of Unknowing* will accomplish this stripping of desire's reach and assist in its acceleration.

### Notes

1. Issac of Stella, Sermon 9, in *Sermons on the Christian Year*, Vol. One, trans. Hugh McCaffery (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979).
2. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. James Walsh, S.J.(New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 116, note 14. Walsh is quoting the speculation of Richard Methley, his annotations to chapter one of his Latin version of *The Cloud* (MS Pembroke College, Cambridge: 22c)
3. Augustine, In Epist. Joannis, tr. 4, *Patrologia Latina*, J.P. Migne, ed (Paris, 1844-55),xxxv,col.2008

### III



## Chapter Seven

### Going Home

When I moved on to that forty acres that so changed me, minimalist hills I later discovered were sandhills, delta of an ancient river, what I eventually came to like about place was its boniness. Even before I planted a garden, before I started cutting poplar deadfall, blow-down, for stove we put in after two years, when I was just moving around on it, starting to be able to pick out deer trails, I liked the way the land gave almost nothing. It was so blonde, friable, dry, intractable, threadbare. But at the very beginning, the first six months, the first winter, all of this worried me -- a little grass, blow- outs where there was bare sand below an overhanging thatch of jumper roots -- there wasn't enough for the eye: I thought I'd starve. I remembered one of the apothegmata Merton had collected: if you don't manage to take in the genius of the place, let it say its piece through you, the place will cast you out. And I saw that these hills, these poplar islands, could just shrug me off, no problem. With some desperation, I drove myself to find a way into the good graces of this particular bit of land. I didn't have any place else to go; I couldn't manage being sent away. But I had no confidence I could learn to bed down where events had brought me.



I hadn't lived in Saskatchewan for almost fifteen years, though I'd been back for visits. Being here now was different: no plane back, no somewhere else. Things presented themselves differently. And I discovered that it was almost impossible for me to breathe here:

everything, I realized, looking around, still in the city, that had shaped my growing up in Regina, churches, the university, sports teams, buildings downtown -- the triumphalism of a prairie town -- all appeared to hover a foot or so off the ground; and this hovering made me feel strangely breathless. Or sometimes it seemed as if all of it was leaning backward from this place as if it were caught in a wind of nostalgia for some old country, some metropolis, wherever the action currently was believed to be. What had been built here didn't seem to move easily in the body of the locale; this whole massive effort of civilization put together through incredible effort by European settlers and their descendents appeared tentative, seemed to have its eye on some other place, waiting for judgement; it was elsewhere. It appeared ready to move at any moment. I realized that at forty, though I had been probed by many psychologists, spent eight years in Jesuit formation, read many books, I had done nothing to educate myself to be someone who could live with facility, familiarity, where he was born. This incompetence, when I finally saw it, floored me. Then we moved on to the land, and I saw I really was in trouble.



We need to find our own way to take this place into our mouth; we must re-say our past in such a way that it will gather us here.



This place is so unlike us -- all places, maybe but this place especially: many, as a

result, of our gestures toward it have been graceless: the busy program to plant forests on the plains started at Dundurn and other military bases, so that the land could look like landscape and we could love it, the relentless use, these days, of chem-fallow. Finally we just filled it with our will, so that the land came to look tired in its heart: almost empty but crammed with human intention, sick with a sameness that came from us.



Between 1990 and 1999, I patrolled two pieces of terrain, the Moosewood Sandhills and the South Saskatchewan River between Pike Lake and Fish Creek, the hills and river section in north central Saskatchewan just where short grass prairie enters aspen parkland. And I tried to make sense of what I was doing in this endless pacing and looking, lying down and looking. I felt pulled, of course; I felt I had been assigned a post; but I could make very little sense of what I was up to. I worried a single thought for nearly ten years: how to be here? I thought that the European intellectual tradition, our form of interiority, had very little to offer someone transfixed by a question like this -- Christianity, Greek philosophy construed as ur-rationalism, experimental science -- ontologies that traditionally had appeared to obliterate the beckoning weirdness of specificity. None offered a quiet path into things, in none, it seemed, the abashed decorum that appeared appropriate in approaching the distant, unlike world. Only eros, a probe originating in me, that knew nothing, was empty, pressing, seemed promising -- longing, loneliness for things, a nostalgia for a hyperbolic state of union which likely originated in nothing other than an attempt by desire itself to describe its own

unchecked imagination. So I wrote and thought and talked, and moved not at all on my question. I read the underside of the old tradition, the whispered part, the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, various collections of desert apothegmata, Cassian's *Conferences*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Divine Names*, *Peirphyseon*, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *Gravity and Grace*, read them in a full-tilt heterodox way, read them as the erotic masterpieces of the West: and I tried to watch what my own desire did. The three books I wrote over this period, *Moosewood Sandhills*, *Living in the World as if It Were Home*, *To the River*, were an attempt to track some sort of erotic unfolding going on at the same time in me. I am still thinking the same thought, but in another quadrant now, still walking, still homeless where I am. Desire shows more of itself, its unanticipatable meandering.

The more I turned things over in my mind, the more the conviction grew that attention to eros seemed more promising than commitment to any ontology or to any ethics. Consanguinity or the impulse to this seemed more fecund than analytic knowing, the thing for which I had been educated to reach -- and this erotic proximity, it finally dawned on me, came only through the stripping of wanting.



What does desire do as it unfolds? Is there necessity here? A river bed? I read Plato -- the feather master -- tried to read him by burrowing beneath all the interpretations, then carefully pored over the book he read for erotic instruction: the *Odyssey*. The long, watery striving in that poem, the mammoth, unparalleled affliction of the mind-bright man, the man

of many turns, who knows every trick, sleepy, inventive, shimmering Odysseus, resourceful, immaculately solitary, the one who always remembers home, the untrustworthy one, the graced, rash man who becomes nothing other than his longing for home, the sleepy one, the sleepy one, his yearning materializing into a journey along the axis mundi itself -- here was the paradigm for the range of what Plato wanted to say about desire, here the example that unbridled his speech. Late capitalism's nomadism, its own particular pursuit of homelessness, its sad, weary anarchy -- no wonder few of us now are erotic: who could endure the full range of her yearning in this always-blunting milieu, who could inch toward it, pull off this feat of inching toward it? Everything drifts toward money's unintended telos of placelessness; we are not craning, not small, hurt by rootlessness; we are disasterously kept, "healed" of a saving disquiet -- so how can we be where we are?



Corral, Frenchman River valley, south-western Saskatchewan, early spring, 1999, still snow in the berry thickets along the coulee sides, a big wind out of the north west. The fence doesn't hold anything now: it's like a failed argument for the immortality of the soul: everything dies. More than a fence, it tingles with numberless pressings toward a precise sufficiency; old, it is a museum of muscled anxiety which, to calm itself, has tried to flicker into the near-invisibility of utility. The medieval strain of it -- the fence, like abstract argument, has the fly-like suppleness of pure design; it needs no real weight: the force of intention, the mass of ingenuity, fix it to the earth. Like argument, too, it brings the thin

consolation within the belief in the therapeutic nature of intricacy: structural complexity matches the world a map, a discipline.

Something has been thrown massively into the fence: it is oiled with masculinity; there can be nothing of the one who made it that remained in reserve; he has crammed himself into what is made; the distance of the maker -- the cool remove, the utilitarian calculation -- doesn't show in his work. He isn't aloof from his tool; he's "gone bush" in this empty place, but what he's bolted into is not the strangeness of things here, but the false balm of techne. There is a pacing inside the tool.

The five strands of barbed wire are attached to large posts -- which look implausibly like split-rail cedar (there is no cedar for miles and miles) and which are still rooted deeply by lengths of still more barbed wire, one piece twisted around itself twenty times or more. Picture the hunkered, black weight of the shoulders and forearms behind this wrenching. But why use barbed wire in the first place as tie wire? Instead of clipping off his excess wire, he's drawn it back into the fence, looping it around each of his five strands, a dawdle and a decoration, a speaking of wire.

One corner post has been secured by punching long lengths of barbed wire under a heavy piece of pink granite; he's somehow dug under the stone to do this. The other three corner posts are attached to two inch thick steel rods driven deep: the maul has curled the dark metal at the end of each. Between the cedar posts, every six inches, he's wired in diamond willow branches he's collected from clumps along the stumpy, brown, Missouri-seeking river. There are at least four hundred of these twisted into the wire.

The fence, beautiful, mildly monstrous, is a mimesis of what? I cannot think the man

who made it did not also make a little money. A lushness in the wire points that way. Another corral, same style, is on an alkali flat a little further west in the valley, it, too, unused in sixty years.

Say he throws the pliers in the wagon and moves off. What sort of meal does he return to? I see a single supper, bachelor's delight, out of cans, supplemented by some quick frying. I also can imagine a meal produced intently, right on time, by a woman with red hands, lots of meat, potatoes, bread, coffee, pie. Either way, a thick, male solitude.



Some tasks appear endless, many-personed -- the building of the Panama Canal, the space program. Some of these long tasks are now mostly interior: the Great Depression; World War I; World War II; the Holocaust; the aboriginal loss of land, culture, a way of life: these must be worked on through a number of lifetimes, turned over and over; with some of them the chill will never leave the bones. We are so recently embarked on the undertaking of learning to be in western North America, we hardly know we're engaged in it. Being autochthonic, learning to be spoken by the grass and cupped hills. And what we must learn is not geography, not an environmental ethics, not a land-benign economics, not a history, not respect, but a style that is so much ear, so attentive, it cannot step away from its listening and give a report of itself. It thus can't be taught -- to attempt this would be to present a bogus norm capable only of fashioning dogmatism, some unearned conviction: but it can be participated in.



Desire, at its furthest stretch, intimate and outlandish, seems to have the lack of regularity, the ferality, of a strange mountain range: yield to its drift, its articulation, and it will position you in unguessable ways. Inventive, amassing, it is still easily blocked, even more easily nudged into forms that seem to resemble it but that are in fact ways of leaving it under the camouflage of apparent erotic engagement. Dogmatic conviction, wholehearted charm, keen immersion in the status quo, any form of hypertrophied certitude, philosophy of the usual sort: forms of exile from eros, "passion," ways to step from eros' momentum, to dodge its emptying, yet not feel the bite of self-betrayal.



Mary Oliver says the house you build is a dream-shape come to life. I built a root cellar in the late summer of 1991 when I was at my most confused with the land; I began the whole thing on little more than a whim late one afternoon when I started to dig into the south face of a low hill behind the house; I kept digging for three weeks, into the time of the earliest frosts, until I could no longer throw the dirt high enough to make it over my growing mounds. I made it down eight feet, nine feet -- at around six feet I found curiously shaped stones and a curve of deer bones. I poured footings for a 7' x 7' room, set in lag bolts, inserted a bottom plate over them and built the walls. I had to stop often to drive into town to get



books from the library to tell me what to do. I put the heaviest possible insulation into the walls and laid down a flat roof which I covered with straw bales, and then I buried the whole structure, later digging a ramp through the packed wet sand to the door. I knew the scrub land would eventually grow over the building but I got the process moving by throwing crested wheat seed on the mound; I left an opening in the roof for a length of black pipe to stick out, an air hole. I used to sleep in the buried house on hot nights through the following summer; I was looking for dreams; it was a place to wait. The root cellar was chunky, thick, thick-faced, dumb, stone-handed, intent: I thought I'd brought into the world a homunculus, thought I'd extruded a covert part of myself. I later saw it, after I'd done all the work, as some sort of listening post a distance out in the unknown terrain, the land that baffled me and the other world beside that world. God knows what I was after. I haven't seen the root cellar in years; I sometimes imagine that it's disappeared entirely, backed into the hill, fused.



Both ontologies and goodness have ossifying effects. Ontology points you toward intelligibilities, "presences," your imagination places in the world; the practice this generates is that of the self addressing one of the many hand puppets the imagination wears. Goodness tips naturally into rectitude, its moral narcissism; perhaps all along it was simply rectitude's finest name. So both systematizing pursuits -- the one reaching for an understanding of essence, the other for an ethics -- produce solipsistic practices, ways of standing apart from the world. But negative theology -- where ravished desire goes when pointed toward

something it can never say but can't turn from -- isn't know-nothing-ism, nor is it laissez-faire desiring: erotic reach is effective only if it is toward something that arrests you, impoverishes, pulls, something that names you yet seems inarticulably strange: eros pulls you home only if it is in the gravitational field of something unassimilably beautiful. One mustn't conflate injunctions concerning practice with assertions about the nature of the world; if you bow toward the world it doesn't mean you must imagine shards of divinity inserted in it as a hidden, higher reality; in fact, to so imagine is to turn yourself away from the world as the world entirely. It is to leave it.



My grandfather lost his wife, Florence Densley Blaylock, in the spring of 1929, then, shortly after, the two small farms he worked in the area around Sequin School, nor far from Gooseberry Lake, north east of Creelman, Saskatchewan. He moved from farm to rented farm in the early thirties, his four daughters leaving home at thirteen or fourteen to work for local families. During the harvest of 1940, he began to work for a big farmer in the Kipling area named Link; this man was good to him, and he stayed there a few years but he would not stay forever; for the rest of his life he moved around as a farm labourer: in his fifties, during the last years of the war, he was working on a ranch near Kelowna. My uncle Jack, his youngest child, told his father he was going into town sometime in the late summer of 1940, took the train into Regina instead, got drunk on cheap wine and passed out under the leaves of bolting, frost-touched rhubarb in the garden behind my mother's rooming house; he joined the army the next day, lying about his age, and later broke a leg in training in England the day before

his regiment took part in the Dieppe raid; later still he fought in France and Holland. Very little else was said about this or any other family event: the stories my mother and aunts tell have an atomic sort of economy: this happened, then this, nothing more. I used to see this as reticence, but now as a sort of mild, oblique *amor fati*.



Desire can bring you to a good place, approaching paradisiac unions, if it is pulled by quintessential occurrence, fabulous, unlikely, provoking the whole of wanting, something whose power to draw will lead you to believe you remember it from before: correcting desire appears unexpectedly as nostalgia. Being utterly disarmed by something beautiful, a moral gesture, a person, can he such an occurrence: again you will seem to remember. You will *see* a surpassing thing and know you have seen it as it is; you will realize you have always known it was without parallel even if it had not always been present in memory.



My aunt had a lung removed shortly before Christmas this past winter; she wasn't that far from her eighty-fifth birthday, so, maybe not surprisingly, she never recovered from the procedure, though she lived a further two months. She wasn't in pain -- this, apparently, was the point of the operation -- but her death shocked her when it came into view. I happened to be in Edmonton that year, at the university, and was one of the few of her family in the city; I

took her to see the doctor about the "spot" they'd recently discovered on her lung. I believe she thought she'd dodge this bullet, that she'd be told, after waiting more than two hours with others facing hard news, that the thing actually was an old tubercular scar. She was staggered, of course, once she learned her true state, but even as was pulled from the winter parking lot, it was obvious she was settling into herself to lift a cloudy weight.



We must start again learning how to be in this place, or at least I must. We begin from scraps. We should learn the names for things as a minimum -- not to fulfill taxonomies but as acts of courtesy, for musical reasons, entering the gesture of decorum. Part of such naming will be being quiet, useless, broken maybe, if one is lucky: perhaps something will come toward us. Read the shit, read the deer trails. Practice an activism of forgetting the royalty of one's name, of yielding, of stepping aside. This will be like breathing through the whole body, the new, larger body of a place that might take us in.

The world, though, will stay nameless, even as we learn our names for it; and this, though it may appear to be, is not erotic failure: a sense of the distance of things has a wonderful ascetic effect: it breeds deference; it provides optimum growing conditions for admiration. Then we may be fed and taught; knowing, in the end, is being looked after. It, this farness, returns us to our sober selves by relieving us of our self-ministrations, our self-priesting assurances that all is well or somehow will be. Keep to this distance, I say to myself -- without any loss of desire for the far things.

## Chapter Eight

### Getting into the Cabri Lake Area

Go to Leader and stay at the hotel across from the elevators if it's too cold to sleep on the river flat just north of the Estuary townsite. Estuary is west and north of Leader -- you'll have to pass by it eventually: only five houses or so left, two last summer with trucks parked in the yard, another one, a white bungalow set off to the west nearer the river, owned, rumour has it, by an American hunter who turns up every fall or so. Anyway, the Leader hotel. It's old, smells of cigarette smoke climbing through the ceiling from the small bar below; you could read the paper through the sheets. On the weekends, they have a buffet in the evening and morning. The town is doing well; a number of people there work at the PetroCanada plant at Burstall, a forty-five minute drive south west. If you arrive on a Friday night, visit the Swiss men's store owner the next morning before you set out: lots of stories and some interesting merchandise aimed at Hutterite colonies in the area.

Come down into the river valley past the old Estuary cemetery and the abandoned town: the large cement rectangle rising out of the grass with the square hole is the old safe of the Standard Bank. To the west is Bull's Head, an odd shaped bluff facing the confluence of the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan Rivers, deep water at the base of it, good for fishing. The ferry runs irregularly; if the man is on the other side when you get there, he'll see you and come over. Turn right when you've risen out of the valley and the valley's elm thicket and follow that crooked road east into the sun -- just as it bends north you might see some clouds of white dust heaving up in the distance, winds coming off a large alkaline plain.

That's where you're headed, Cabri Lake. You'll have to walk from the road, a long walk, cropped land, pasture, marsh, then a stretch no-one seems to be doing anything with -- I saw a huge coyote there last year: its head made me think at first it was a sheep. If you do manage to get into the land around the lake and talk to anyone about this, keep your directions to the place as vague as these.



The ascesis of staying where you are: your cell will teach you everything. I don't know anything right now. The land is there and I am here and I don't know anything. I keep lifting my mind to the light and peering in: nothing. My sort of people have always been moving through -- Alberta looks good these days, they say, maybe B.C. -- tuned to the anarchic flux of capitalism, a little too bright, a touch off plumb, with alacrity.



The acme of speech is language that carries the knowledge of its inevitable failure inside it: the word cannot be circumscription; it cannot name; it can't even confess with accuracy. But it still loves -- helplessly -- the world and so walks alongside it; it says what it loves is a red, red rose, says it's a sunset, dusk over a river, and names nothing with this, misspeaks what it points to but hears and reports a moan deep within the speaker. Such language can't identify what it wishes to name but it somehow manages to achieve a greater interior proximity to that thing. This is desire's speech, of course: beauty makes you lonely; beauty gives you a sweat of plans; thick, mufti-layered beauty makes you homeless. You

must have close to nothing for any of this to happen, though, it seems. Lyric language is a companion along this way -- it doesn't know what it's saying. The highest theology, pseudo-Dionysius says, is not definitional but hymnal: praise and wait for something to take you in.



Another interesting place to go is the sandhills around Senlac, half a day north -- sleep in the truck at the regional park there, close to the Alberta border, or take a room at the Sunset Motel, fifteen dollars a night the last time I was a guest. There's a large Manitou Lake at the north end of the huge range of treed-in dunes a little south of Neilburg, strange mounds surrounding it; there's abandoned towns scattered throughout the area, Artland, Winter, lots of community pasture and dirt roads, a place that could rub away a large part of your name. Most of the pasture is contiguous; once the cows are off, you could walk, you sense, forever.



Language that doesn't know what it's doing; desire that doesn't know where it's headed: I spend most of my time listening and hear pretty well nothing. Maybe I've run out of gas; maybe (against all odds) I'm being obedient to the last real thing I've heard. A nice place to go for breakfast is the Senlac cafe. In the beer parlour at night: oil workers and long time drinking buddies, some just returning from a brief retirement from the booze. The Anglican church in town is definitely unused; it looks as if they might open of the United Church for

funerals. All of the names of the streets have a British ring, Hastings, William: the cenotaph at the center of town has a plaque for The Great War with eleven names on it.



This is what I can tell you about Cabri Lake: a large salt flat surrounded by high brown hills. My guess, based on the size of the alkaline clouds the wind was lifting, is that it would take a day to walk from the south to the north end -- likely you wouldn't find any water as you went along: grass, grass, grass, then the big salt pan. I didn't get any further than the hills to the south of the white flat; that's where I saw the coyote ambling along, tilting its nose now and then until its nostrils were parallel with the wind; it didn't see us, didn't even appear to be wary -- who comes into these parts anyway?

You will find water, though, as you approach the southern hills, a couple of ponds, a stream and a salt marsh: take the east hillside of the stream as you move north: the west shore just leads you deeper into the marsh and that sort of mud can be unforgiving. I saw a godwit in one of the ponds you pass as you come toward the marsh.

There is a story that there is a large human effigy in the grass flats around the empty lake, or possibly in the surrounding hills, well hung, ecstatic; someone saw it from a small plane thirty years or so ago, and there was a newspaper report I vaguely remember. Your chances of finding it on foot are about nil. Or maybe it was seen further east in the Great Sandhills; I haven't heard any mention of it in a long time.





The Western contemplative tradition, Plato to Weil, and from even before Plato, his Odyssean, shamanic precursors, is a simple story: desire and having nothing; being scrapped down until you can see beauty; beauty itself scrapping you down. The idea is to get to positionless responsivity: utter permeability guarded by the temple dogs of collection and division: this, say the dogs, is genuine advance, that is plain cleverness. This pair comes toward you out of anamnesis, an experience of beauty so strong it makes you half crazy and gives you the strange sense that you remember now some early, perfect time when you simply knew. Such an experience both ruins you -- you will be ever unlike -- and is the way home. They will come up to you, the two dogs of discernment, friendly but not domesticated, animals out of the forest, and snuffle your hand. This in itself will be disconcerting.

Be as available to the right sort of daemonic exigence, says John Cassian, as a bit of down is to wind: the pure state is erotic nomadism: take this position as, at least, heuristic, and let it work you down.



Two other good places to get into are the valley of the Frenchman River, east and south of the Cypress Hills, and Rock Creek valley, in the East Block of Grasslands National Park, both part of the northern limit of the Missouri drainage. Go in winter if you can; you will be able to walk the river: the ice is thick enough except where beaver chew sticks out and has

made a small rapids; there you'll find open water even in the coldest weather. Listen to the river and you will be able to make out these places, current gurgle, current splash against ice, or simply follow the trail animals have made, mule deer, coyote, fox: cougar, people say, are moving east along all the river valleys, tracking an explosion in the white tail population.

Don McKay and I came in here three or so winters ago, mid-February, and spent one day slogging through waist-deep drifts down the coulees along the valley sides, having left our snowshoes in the truck: the valley top had no more than half a foot of snow on it and we thought we could safely forget the shoes. The next day we walked east along the river, coyotes sounding in sequence along one side of the valley, across the flats and up and along the other side in the afternoon. We found the odd kill site but not too much else appeared to be happening in the wide white place. When you come you can stay either at the ranchers' bar in Val Marie or the re-fitted convent on the southern edge of town. The bar in Mankota is a good place to eat if you are coming in late from the east.

It would be difficult to get into the East Block in winter; there's only a track from the gravel road and, of course, it's not ploughed; few people go there so no trail would be broken. You might make it if the snow cover is very light; close all gates after you pass through: someone is wintering cattle here and would appreciate your courtesy.

But if you can't get into the East Block in winter, try late summer after the golden eagle brood has fledged on the bluff where Rock Creek bends south. Come in from the north; that's the route everyone takes, but maps show there's an entry on the west though I've never felt eager to try it. In the winter, that way wouldn't be worth the risk; people don't seem to live out there, and there simply would be no way in; you could get stuck and freeze. A sudden

rain in summer would strand you in gumbo. But it might be worth a try in dry weather. Do a little shopping in Rockglen before you cane down this way and plan to spend a few days. The hills around are badlands, clay with rich grassy drainage clefts; there are antelope through here, some impressive rubbing stones. Camp anywhere.



Being in a place demands a practice: it isn't tourism or Romanticism: things aren't laid on, nor are they occultly given: here the practice is putting yourself out there and walking. There is almost always a wall of fear to pass through as you undertake an exercise like this, the temptation to turn the truck back at Rockglen or Wood Mountain, to stay not so long, to forget the whole thing. It's nervousness around being *atopos*, I think, being culpably away from others, wasting time: maybe what comes up to you won't be friendly. Push a little on it and the blockage yields somewhat. Do what you can; walk and see where it gets you. The walking, though, is not an instrument, not a means to arrive at some chthonic accord; as you walk, you are already as there as you're going to get, though you hardly feel this: the reeling, toppling condition of always wanting is as close as anyone gets to grace.

The Cabri Lake area -- I think I'll go back there this spring, or maybe I'll curve up to Gronlid and Arborfield at the edge of the Pasquia Hills Wilderness, thick aspen bush on the border of the northern forest -- I've been wanting to stop in at Arborfield for years. I don't know what I'm doing, and when I listen I hear nothing, my ear embedded in a blank on the band. I'll go where this not-speaking, not-hearing urges: it's a thin road but little else is on offer. Ruby Rosedale community pasture, Montrose community pasture: walking in the fall is

best when the light is exhausted, one of the last hawks circling overhead, too high for hunting, and the distance seems to drink you a bit at a time.

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