# Symbolic Poetry, Inspired Myths and Salvific Function of Allegoresis in Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic*

MIKOŁAJ DOMARADZKI / *Poznań* /

τὰ γὰρ σύμβολα τούτων, ὧν ἐστι
σύμβολα, μιμήματα οὐκ ἔστιν.
Procl. *In rem* I 198, 15–16

οἱ μῦθοι τὰ πολλὰ διὰ τῶν συμβόλων
εἰώθασι τὰ πράγματα ἐνδείκνυσθαι.
Procl. *In Tim.* I 30, 14–15

Proclus' account of symbol and poetry has for a long time been recognized as highly original and profoundly influential.[1] While the philosopher's hermeneutical insights have

[1] Thus, for example, Cardullo (1985: 20) stresses that "la dottrina del simbolo in Proclo, assume – nelle sue forme piú mature – delle caratteristiche tali da renderla estremamente originale e «suggestiva» di fecondi appro-

received substantial scholarly attention, the present paper will briefly consider Proclus' fascinating views on the symbolic function of poetry, the pedagogic as well as the hieratic value of myths and the salvational role of allegorical interpretation.[2] The article will be organized in the following way: firstly, Plato's onslaught on mimetic art will be touched upon; then, attention will be paid to the major assumptions of Proclus' hermeneutics, subsequently, Proclus' theory of three kinds of poetry will be discussed, upon which his account of the difference between the myths of Homer and those of Plato will be dealt with; finally, Proclus' conviction about the soteriological power of allegoresis will be examined. The ensuing considerations will focus primarily on Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic*.[3]

## Plato's dismissal of poetry as μέγιστον ψεῦδος

Proclus develops his original theory of symbolic poetry in direct response to Plato's unsparing criticism of mimetic art. Whilst Plato argues that that poetic mimesis has no value whatsoever, the philosopher levels two fundamental charges (*Resp*. 603 a 11–b 2) against it: imitative art is far from (πόρρω) all truth (ἀληθείας) and all reason (φρονήσεως). These accusations reflect Plato's epistemological and ethical concerns, respectively.

Plato perceives (*Tim*. 39 d 8–e 2) the world of phenomena as merely an "imitation of the everlasting nature" (τῆς διαιωνίας μίμησις φύσεως). Thus, by describing the sensible world, the poets reach solely the secondary reflections of the true reality (i.e., the intelligible world). Their mimetic art produces, thereby, exclusively false appearances, as it fabricates copies of the copies. It is for that reason that Plato repeatedly insists that deceptive phantoms (εἴδωλα) are the only thing that imitative poetry has to offer (cf. e.g. *Resp*. 598 b 6–8, 599 a 7, 599 d 3, 600 e 4–6, 601 b 9–10, 605 b 7–c 4). As mimetic poetry conjures up barely illusions, it has to be exiled from the ideal state.

Yet, there is another reason for the banishment of poetry. False and deceptive as the poets' phantasms are, they, nonetheless, exert a powerful impact on the minds of people. Plato famously differentiates between intellect (νοῦς) and opinion (δόξα). According to the philosopher (*Tim*. 51 e 2–6), the former results from teaching, is always supported by a true reasoning, remains impervious to persuasion and is, therefore, ascribed to the

---

fondimenti teorici e storiografici per lo studioso del pensiero neoplatonico". In a somewhat similar vein, Struck (2004: 238–239) hails Proclus as the author of "the first surviving systematically formulated alternative to the notion that literature is an imitation of the world". For a discussion of Proclus' impact on later theories of symbol and poetry, see e.g. Struck (2004: 254–277 and 2010: 69–70); cf. also the collection of essays in Gersh (2014).

[2] In my understanding of Proclus' hermeneutics, I am greatly indebted to the following works: Gallavotti (1933); Friedl (1936); Buffière (1956); Coulter (1976); Dillon (1976); Sheppard (1980), Cardullo (1985); Lamberton (1986); Brisson (1996); van den Berg (2001); Struck (2004); Pichler (2006) and Chlup (2012).

[3] The text is from Proclus, *In Platonis rem publicam commentarii*, ed. W. Kroll, 2 vols. Leipzig, 1899–1901. Where no English reference is provided, the translation is my own.

gods and only to very few individuals; the latter, on the other hand, arises from persuasion, is contrary to reason, remains open to persuasion, upon which it is attributed to every man. The aforementioned dichotomy underlies Plato's notorious diagnosis (*Resp.* 607 b 5–6) that there is "an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (παλαιὰ μέν τις διαφορὰ φιλοσοφίᾳ τε καὶ ποιητικῇ). The feud between philosophy and poetry is due to the fact that the latter appeals to our emotions rather than to reason. Thus, Plato recognizes (601 b 1) that "a certain great charm" (μεγάλη τὶς κήλησις) is characteristic of all poetry, upon which he makes it clear (605 b 3–5) that the mimetic poet invariably "stirs up, fosters and strengthens this part of the soul that destroys the rational part" (τοῦτο ἐγείρει τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τρέφει καὶ ἰσχυρὸν ποιῶν ἀπόλλυσι τὸ λογιστικόν). As the poet kowtows, then, to the unintelligent component of the soul, his art demoralizes and depraves men.

Hence, the deceptive and irrational nature of poetic mimesis compels Plato to dismiss (*Resp.* 377 e 6–7) the myths of Homer and Hesiod as "the greatest lie" (τὸ μέγιστον [...] ψεῦδος). When rejecting the myths of the poets, Plato repudiates not only the literal sense of these narratives but also any attempts at interpreting them allegorically. When denouncing such myths as the binding of Hera, the hurling of Hephaestus and all "such battles of the gods" (θεομαχίας ὅσας), Plato puts it in no uncertain terms (*Resp.* 378 d 3–8) that such tales "must not be admitted into the State" (οὐ παραδεκτέον εἰς τὴν πόλιν), regardless of "whether they have any hidden meanings or not" (οὔτ' ἐν ὑπονοίαις πεποιημένας οὔτε ἄνευ ὑπονοιῶν), since "a young person cannot judge what is an allegorical sense and what is not" (νέος οὐχ οἷός τε κρίνειν ὅτι τε ὑπόνοια καὶ ὃ μή).[4] Plato's repudiation of allegoresis is a consequence of his rejection of poetry: given the deceptive and irrational nature of poetic mimesis, any reading of the poets (whether allegorical or literal) is bound to be misguided.[5]

### Proclus' dilemma: μέγιστον ψεῦδος or ἔνθεος ποίησις?

Plato's repudiation of poetry is hardly palatable for Proclus, who takes the poetry of Homer to be neither delusive nor demoralizing, but rather divinely inspired (cf. e.g.

---

[4] Plato's criticism of allegoresis suggests that the practice must have become quite common before his time, cf. e.g. Wehrli (1928: 89); Tate (1929: 143); Buffière (1956: 124); Lamberton (1986: ix) and Struck (2004: 49). While Plato is evidently familiar with the various allegorical interpretations of the myths he alludes to, the philosopher firmly repudiates the idea of extracting any latent sense from them. For illuminating discussions of the connection between the earlier term ὑπόνοια and its later equivalent ἀλληγορία, see e.g. Buffière (1956: 45–48); Pépin (1976: 85–92); Whitman (1987: 263–268) and Blönnigen (1992: 11–19). Cf. *infra*, n. 34.

[5] With regard to this, Ramelli and Lucchetta (2004: 59) aptly explain that "il rifiuto del metodo allegorico applicato al mito dipende dai poeti, che non attingono alla verità: perciò è vana l'esegesi allegorica che cerca di svelare nelle loro opere una supposta verità espressa simbolicamente". Pichler (2006: 30, n. 55) puts forward a similar diagnosis: "Die Frage nach einer ὑπόνοια, die erst die διάνοια des Autors verständlich machen soll, spielt für das Erreichen der Arete keine Rolle".

*In rem* I 110, 7: ... τὴν Ὁμήρου διάνοιαν ἔνθεον οὖσαν ... I 112, 2–3: ... ὁ ποιητὴς ... ἐνθέως ... φησιν or I 120, 6: ... ἡ ἔνθεος ποίησις ...).[6]

Thus, the above discussed Platonic onslaught on the poetry of Homer has left Proclus with the following dilemma. If Plato's disparagement of Homer is right, then the entire traditional *paideia* that builds on the sacred authority of the poet has to be repudiated. If, on the other hand, Plato's censure of Homer is wrong, then the whole Neoplatonic tradition that builds on the infallible authority of the philosopher needs to be called into question.[7] As things stand, then, it seems impossible to preserve the intact authority of both Homer and Plato, for one is clearly caught between the devil of discarding the poet and the deep blue sea of doubting the philosopher.

When trying to steer clear between the Scylla of rejecting Homer and the Charybdis of betraying Plato, Proclus makes two important assumptions. Firstly, he is willing to acquiesce (*In rem* I 80, 4–5) that "the Homeric myths do not imitate the divinity well" (τοὺς Ὁμηρικοὺς μύθους οὐκ εὖ μεμιμῆσθαι [...] τὸ θεῖον), whilst, at the same time, he argues (*In rem* I 198, 14) that apart from the mimetic poetry that Plato quite rightly condemns there is also a higher form of poetry which "explains the divine matters through symbols" (διὰ συμβόλων τὰ θεῖα ἀφερμηνεύουσα). Secondly and relatedly, Proclus makes the following assumption:

> It seems to me that the grim, monstrous, and unnatural character of poetic fictions moves the listener in every way to a search for the truth, and draws him toward the secret knowledge; it does not allow him, as would be the case with something that possessed a surface probability, to remain with the thoughts placed before him. It compels him, instead, to enter into the interior of the myths and to busy himself with the thought which has been concealed, out of sight by the makers of myth and to ponder what kinds of natures and what great powers they introduced into the meaning of the myths and communicated to posterity by means of symbols such as these.
>
> δοκεῖ δέ μοι καὶ τὸ τῶν ποιητικῶν πλασμάτων τραγικὸν καὶ τὸ τερατῶδες καὶ τὸ παρὰ φύσιν κινεῖν τοὺς ἀκούοντας παντοδαπῶς εἰς τὴν τῆς ἀληθείας ζήτησιν καὶ εἶναι πρὸς τὴν ἀπόρρητον γνῶσιν ὁλκὸν καὶ μὴ ἐπιτρέπειν ἡμῖν διὰ τὴν φαινομένην πιθανότητα μένειν ἐπὶ τῶν προβεβλημένων ἐννοιῶν, ἀλλ' ἀναγκάζειν εἰς τὸ ἐντὸς τῶν μύθων διαβάλλειν καὶ τὸν κεκρυμμένον ἐν ἀφανεῖ τῶν μυθοπλαστῶν περιεργάζεσθαι νοῦν, καὶ θεωρεῖν ὁποίας μὲν

---

[6] Lamberton (1986: 22–31) offers a thorough discussion of this ancient view of Homer as ὁ θεολόγος and of Proclus' account of Homer's ἔνθεος ποίησις (1986: 181–183). See also Pichler (2006: 67–68). In connection with the assumption that "Platon est un théologien", Brisson (1996: 122) rightly stresses that this assumption defined a double task for the School of Athens: "dégager de l'œuvre de Platon cette théologie et montrer qu'elle s'accorde avec toutes les autres théologies: celle de Pythagore, celle des *Oracles chaldaïques*, celle d'Orphée, et celles d'Homère et d'Hésiode". Leaving aside the question of Plato's irony, we should note that the philosopher can at times speak very highly of the poets – an opportunity that was seized by Proclus (cf. *In rem* I 154, 12–159, 6).

[7] Cf. e.g. Coulter (1976: 46, 112–115); Lamberton (1986: 182–183 and 2000: 80) and Brisson (1996: 138–139).

φύσεις, ἡλίκας δὲ δυνάμεις ἐκεῖνοι λαβόντες εἰς τὴν αὐτῶν διάνοιαν τοῖσδε τοῖς συμβόλοις αὐτὰς τοῖς μεθ' ἑαυτοὺς ἐσήμηναν.[8]

These two assumptions constitute the cornerstone of Proclus' hermeneutics: on the one hand, poetry is much more than just a mimesis and, on the other hand, poetry has to be read appropriately (i.e., allegorically) so that the poet's art could perform its salvific function. In other words, Proclus argues that it is only when a poet is reduced to a mere "imitator" that his poetry rightly repels us as crude, naïve and even blasphemous. More often than not, however, such poetry transpires to be divinely inspired and truly transformative, when the poet is taken symbolically.

## New tools of poetry: σύμβολα in lieu of μιμήματα

As noted above, Plato rejects mimetic art on the grounds that it makes an abortive and manipulative attempt at imitating the phenomenal world: since poetry mimics the lowest level of reality, it deludes and debases the souls that are exposed to its pernicious spell. In response to the Platonic attack on poetic mimesis, Proclus diagnoses that it is only one type of art that deserves to be condemned as such a false imitation. Thus, Proclus famously distinguishes (*In rem* I 177, 4–196, 13) between three kinds of poetry that correspond to particular "states" (ἕξεις) of the soul from the lowest to the highest; these types of poetry being the mimetic, the didactic and the inspired one.[9] When presenting his theory of the three psychic conditions and the related poetic modes, Proclus specifically insists that there is a type of poetry that is perfectly capable of reaching the true reality (the intelligible world). When contrasting the imitative and the symbolic mode of poetic composition, Proclus argues that while the former is not suitable for theology, the latter is its indispensable tool.

The lowest type of poetry corresponds to the lowest life of the soul that is characterized (*In rem* I 178, 3–4) by "inferior powers" (καταδεεστέραις δυνάμεσιν) and "imaginations as well as irrational sensations" (φαντασίαις τε καὶ αἰσθήσεσιν ἀλόγοις). Whilst this is the life that people lead when they immerse themselves in the sensible world and renounce philosophy altogether, the poetry that reflects this state of the soul is described by Proclus (*In rem* I 179, 16–17) as "mixed together with opinions and imagina-

[8] Procl. *In rem* I 85, 16–26. Translation by Coulter (1976: 57). Brisson (1996: 141) nicely explains (*ad loc.*) that the grotesque character of myths presupposes the concept of double reference: "C'est le caractère scandaleux du mythe qui indique la nécessité de l'interpréter. Une telle interprétation se fonde sur la notion de double référence. Le discours mythique sert de limite entre le monde des apparences et celui de la réalité véritable; il renvoie de ce côté-ci aux êtres d'ici-bas, et de l'autre côté aux réalités du monde d'en haut". Cf. also Cardullo (1985: 132).

[9] Cf. e.g. Gallavotti (1933: 44–54), Friedl (1936: 56–59); Buffière (1956: 27–31); Coulter (1976: 107–108); Sheppard (1980: 162–202); Lamberton (1986: 188–196); Brisson (1996: 142–144); van den Berg (2001: 115–142); Struck (2004: 241–243) and Chlup (2012: 186–188).

tions" (δόξαις καὶ φαντασίαις συμμιγνυμένη), "filled up with imitation" (διὰ μιμήσεως συμπληρουμένη) and, thereby, "nothing else than mimetic" (οὐδὲν ἀλλ' ἢ μιμητική).

The lowest type of poetry is obviously mimetic, as it aims to imitate the sensible world. However, mimetic poetry can imitate the world of phenomena correctly or incorrectly. In the former case, it is labeled as *eikastic*, whereas in the latter – it is characterized as *phantastic*. Thus, Proclus clarifies (*In rem* I 179, 29–32) that the former "produces images" (εἰκαστικόν) and "strains for the correctness of its imitation" (πρὸς τὴν ὀρθότητα τοῦ μιμήματος ἀνατείνεται), whilst the latter "produces phantasms" (φανταστικόν) and "offers solely apparent imitation" (φαινομένην μόνον τὴν μίμησιν παρεχόμενον).[10] While mimetic poetry might, then, attempt to adequately imitate the truth or forsake it entirely in favor of fabrications, Proclus suggests that Plato's criticism of Homer is valid with regard to the latter type of poetry. Needless to say, however, it is only sporadically that Homer is guilty of such imitative poetry that incorrectly mimics the sensible world.[11]

The second type of poetry is ascribed to the life of the soul that can reach "the being of the beings" (τὴν οὐσίαν τῶν ὄντων),[12] upon which this poetry is characterized by Proclus as:

> full of advice and the best counsel and packed with intelligent moderation: it offers participation in prudence and the other virtues to those so inclined by nature.
> νουθεσίας καὶ συμβουλῶν ἀρίστων πλήρη καὶ νοερᾶς εὐμετρίας ἀνάμεστα φρονήσεώς τε καὶ τῆς ἄλλης ἀρετῆς προτείνοντα τὴν μετουσίαν τοῖς εὖ πεφυκόσιν.[13]

While this kind of poetry has been labeled as "didactic"[14] or "scientific",[15] it treats of such issues as the making of the universe, the nature of the soul or the individual's moral duties. Hence, its primary fields of investigation fall within the scope of physics and ethics

---

[10] When putting forward this distinction, Proclus cites (*In rem* I 189, 3–190, 2) the *Sophist*, where Plato famously differentiates (235 d 1–236 c 7) between "two kinds of mimetic art" (δύο [...] εἴδη τῆς μιμητικῆς): the art of producing images (εἰκαστικὴ τέχνη) is said to imitate "according to the proportions of the model" (κατὰ τὰς τοῦ παραδείγματος συμμετρίας), whereas the art of producing phantasms (φανταστική) is said to bring out "not the actual proportions but the ones that [only] have an appearance of being beautiful" (οὐ τὰς οὔσας συμμετρίας ἀλλὰ τὰς δοξούσας εἶναι καλάς), since here the imitators "renounce the truth" (οὐ χαίρειν τὸ ἀληθὲς ἐάσαντες). It should be noted here that Plato actually rejects both types of mimetic art (i.e., φανταστική as well as εἰκαστική). For a justification of this view, see Sheppard (1980: 188–189).

[11] Proclus diagnoses (*In rem* I 192, 21–28) that Homer's poetry produces phantasms when the poet has the sun sprang up out of the lake (*Od.* III 1).

[12] Procl. *In rem* I 179, 6. Translation by van den Berg (2001: 116).

[13] Procl. *In rem* I 179, 10–13. Translation by Lamberton (1986: 191).

[14] Sheppard explains (1980: 183) that although Proclus ascribes educational value to all poetry, he, nevertheless, explicitly singles out one particular kind of poetry as didactic on the basis of how it presents its material: the defining characteristic of didactic poetry is that it teaches directly. It may not be superfluous to note that Proclus' treatment of the *Works and Days* suggests that he viewed the poem as didactic and not inspired poetry, see Sheppard (2014: 71) with references.

[15] van den Berg (2001) offers a reconsideration of Sheppard's (1980) account of the second type of poetry.

rather than theology. Proclus stresses (*In rem* I 198, 21) that a distinctive feature of this type of poetry is that it characterizes a life which departs from deceptive imitation and proceeds towards knowledge or science (ἐπιστήμη). Importantly, however, this life of the soul and the corresponding poetry aim to know the truth rather than unite with it.

The highest life of the soul takes the form of a union with the divine (i.e., the One and/or the gods).[16] In this state, the soul is said (*In rem* I 177, 16) to be "connected with the gods" (συνάπτεται τοῖς θεοῖς), whilst the poetry that reflects this state of the soul is defined (*In rem* I 178, 24–25) as "madness superior to moderation" (μανία [...] σωφροσύνης κρείττων). Undoubtedly, the most noteworthy characteristic of the highest kind of poetry is that it conveys its message through "symbols" (σύμβολα) or "tokens" (συνθήματα), rather than through "images" (εἰκόνες).[17] Consequently, its defining feature is that it is not mimetic *sensu stricto*, since there is no mirror-like similarity between the poetic portrayal of an event and the theological truth that is cloaked in this fictive world.

Although this symbolic poetry is still characterized as "mimetic", Proclus significantly reinterprets the concept of "imitation", as he asserts (*In rem* I 198, 15–16) that "symbols are not imitations of those things which they are symbols of" (τὰ γὰρ σύμβολα τούτων, ὧν ἐστι σύμβολα, μιμήματα οὐκ ἔστιν). When describing the specificity of this symbolic "imitation", Proclus further elucidates (*In rem* I 198, 16–18) that symbols can actually be the very "opposite" (ἐναντία) of their referents, such as, for example: "the shameful of the beautiful and that which is contrary to nature of that which is in accord with nature" (τοῦ καλοῦ τὸ αἰσχρόν, καὶ τοῦ κατὰ φύσιν τὸ παρὰ φύσιν). The assumption that symbols can be the opposite of what they stand for makes it possible for Proclus to answer three important and interrelated questions: 1) What is the difference between Plato's and Homer's myth-making? 2) Why can the highest kind of poetry be represented by various horrifying and abominable deeds of the deities? 3) How should such outrageous passages be read if this divinely inspired poetry is to fulfil its soteriological function?

---

[16] Buffière (1956: 27) rightly notes that this state "n'est autre que la contemplation plotinienne".

[17] Two points deserve to be made here. First of all, it has to be stressed that the distinction between the terms σύμβολον and εἰκών can be rather fuzzy in Proclus, cf. e.g. Dillon (1976: 254); Cardullo (1985: 178) and van den Berg (2001: 123). The scholars have emphasized that Proclus seems, at times, to be using the two practically synonymously, a spectacular example being *In Euclid*. 128, 26: σύμβολον ... καὶ εἰκόνα (see van den Berg 2001: 123, n. 45 for more examples). Relatedly, the terms σύμβολον and σύνθημα are also frequently used interchangeably by Proclus, especially in the fields of exegesis and theurgy; cf. e.g. Müri (1976: 34, 40–42); Sheppard (1980: 145–161); van den Berg (2001: 93–101); Struck (2004: 234) and Chlup (2012: 192). In his classical study, Müri (1976: 9) has traced the origins of this synonimity to such interrelated meanings as "Erkennungszeichen", "Erkennungswort" and "Losung", an illustrative example being Euripides' *Rhesus* 572: σύνθημα and 573: σύμβολον (see Müri 1976: 9 for more examples). As far as the complex relationship between the terms εἰκών, σύμβολον and σύνθημα in Proclus is concerned, Cardullo (1985) offers the most extensive and elaborate study of this issue. Yet, while the scholar finds, for example, "una sottile ma pur sempre individuabile differenza" between σύνθημα and σύμβολον in the sixth dissertation of Proclus' commentary (Cardullo 1985: 163–164), these interesting semantic nuances will not be discussed in what follows (for a fascinating overview, see Cardullo 1985: 209–223).

## Plato's and Homer's μυθοποιΐα: the παιδευτική and ἐνθεαστική division

By Proclus' time, terms such as "myth" and "symbol" came to be frequently used interchangeably with reference to any allegorical sense, since myths were typically perceived as symbolic of higher truths.[18] Proclus' commentary to the *Timaeus* provides us with an example, when the philosopher famously observes (I 30, 14–15) that "myths usually indicate things through symbols" (οἱ μῦθοι τὰ πολλὰ διὰ τῶν συμβόλων εἰώθασι τὰ πράγματα ἐνδείκνυσθαι). Proclus makes this remark in connection with his argument (I 30, 11–14) that the summary of the *Republic* explains the making of the universe "through images" (εἰκονικῶς), whilst the narrative about Atlantis does the same "through symbols" (συμβολικῶς).[19] What is interesting about this observation is that it suggests a willingness on Proclus' part to allegorically interpret *any* myth.[20] If, however, *all* myths can be regarded as allegories of higher truths, then this raises the question about the difference between the myths of Plato and those of Homer.

Proclus provides us with an answer to the question somewhat earlier (*In Tim*. I 30, 4–10) when he refers to the Pythagorean custom (ἔθος) of teaching first with likenesses (τῶν ὁμοίων), then with images (τῶν εἰκόνων) and finally with symbols (τῶν συμβόλων). This means that although all myths can be examined with respect to their allegorical sense, some are merely preparatory, whereas others address individuals who have attained a certain level of initiation. Thus, Proclus famously assumes (*In rem* I 76, 17–86, 23) that a myth can be either παιδευτικός ("educational", "pedagogic") or ἐνθεαστικός ("inspirational", "divinely inspired"). According to this dichotomy, *paideutic* myths are designed as an introductory guidance for those individuals who are still under training, whereas *entheastic* myths are for those few who have progressed in their training sufficiently to be able to reach the Intellect, the gods and the true reality.[21]

---

[18] This has been duly stressed by, among others, Pépin and Müri. Thus, Pépin (1976: 78) aptly observes that "l'Antiquité (...) emploie à peu près indifféremment (...) les termes de «mythe», «allégorie», «métaphore», «figure», «symbole», «signe», etc.". Somewhat further, Pépin (1976: 90–91) expands the list to include such concepts as μῦθος, τύπος, τρόπος, μύθευμα, πλάσμα, μίμημα, *fabula*, *fictio*, *figmentum*, *significatio*, *insinuatio*, *similtudo*, *figura*, rightly diagnosing that the common denominator of all these concepts is that they allow one "d'exprimer une chose en semblant en dire une autre, généralement plus concrète". In a similar vein, though in a somewhat different context, Müri (1976: 28) notes that the concept of symbol (along with τεκμήριον and σημεῖον) came to play an important role in the development of allegoresis, since "auch der Mythendeuter die Spannung zwischen wörtlicher und erzwungener Aussage, den Abstand von Zeichen und Bezeichnetem, spürte".

[19] Coulter (1976: 41) stresses (*ad loc*.) that the distinction between εἰκονικῶς and συμβολικῶς that Proclus mentions in his commentary to the *Timaeus* is further elaborated in his commentary to the *Republic*. Incidentally, however, his rendition of the original ἐνδείκνυσθαι as "hint at" does not seem that fortunate, since it would be more appropriate for αἰνίσσεσθαι. Thus, Tarrant (2007: 125), for example, translates this crucial passage as follows: "in general myths have the tendency to give an indication of things through symbols". Although in a quite different context, Pépin (2000: 3–4) has interestingly suggested that the term ἔνδειξις be translated into French as "indice" rather than "indication".

[20] With respect to Proclus' interpretation of the Atlantis story, Sheppard (2014: 63) points out that Proclus treats this narrative "in the same way as he treats Homer or the Orphic poems".

[21] Cf. e.g. Coulter (1976: 49) and Cardullo (1985: 94, 149). See also Lamberton (1986: 197).

The implication of this dichotomy is that the myths of Plato are primarily paideutic, whilst those of Homer are predominantly entheastic.[22] The former are, then, labeled (*In rem* I 79, 12–14) as "more philosophical" (φιλοσοφώτεροι) and the latter are characterized as "belonging to the sacred rites" (τοῖς ἱερατικοῖς θεσμοῖς προσήκοντες). Hence, although all myths can be treated as allegories of higher truths, the difference between the myths of Plato and those of Homer consists in that the former serve the function of preparing young minds for the latter. Education must, therefore, *begin* with philosophical myths and *culminate* in hieratic myths. In this way, the student moves from the human towards the divine, since the former enable him to reach the intelligible realm, whereas the latter make it possible for him to unite with the gods.[23]

That is precisely why paideutic myths use "images" (εἰκόνες) that are "imitations" (μιμήματα) which seek to resemble their models as accurately as possible, whereas entheastic myths employ "symbols" (σύμβολα) that do not imitate, but rather hint at their referents through analogy (ἀναλογία).[24] While entheastic myths are, thus, symbolic,[25] Proclus explains that the creators of such myths:

> indicate some things by means of others, but not as using images in order to signify their models; rather, they use symbols that are in sympathy with their referents by means of analogy.
> ἄλλα ἐξ ἄλλων ἐνδείκνυται, καὶ οὐ τὰ μὲν εἰκόνες, τὰ δὲ παραδείγματα, ὅσα διὰ τούτων σημαίνουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν σύμβολα, τὰ δὲ ἐξ ἀναλογίας ἔχει τὴν πρὸς ταῦτα συμπάθειαν.[26]

As inspirational myths employ symbols rather than images, they make no pretensions to accurately imitate their referents. As these symbolic myths signify their referents through analogy rather than mimesis, Proclus can say (*In rem* I 198, 18–19) that "the symbolic mode indicates the nature of things even through what is most opposite to them" (ἡ δὲ συμβολικὴ θεωρία καὶ διὰ τῶν ἐναντιωτάτων τὴν τῶν πραγμάτων ἐνδείκνυται

---

[22] The difficulty is here that this dichotomy might *prima facie* suggest that Proclus perceived (the myths of) Plato to be somehow inferior to (those of) Homer (for such a conclusion, see e.g. Coulter 1976: 109). Nevertheless, educational myths should not be rashly equated with didactic poetry, since the relation between the two is very obscure in Proclus (cf. Sheppard 1980: 194). As we shall shortly see, the difference between Homer and Plato lies in the *form* rather than in the *content*: Plato and Homer offer the same truth, but the philosopher speaks from reason, whereas the poet speaks from revelation. Cf. *infra*, n. 32.

[23] Cf. van den Berg (2001: 132 and 134–135).

[24] Cf. e.g. Coulter (1976: 47–57); van den Berg (2001: 119–136) and Chlup (2012: 188–189). The latter two works offer a compelling criticism of the interpretation put forward by Sheppard (1980: 197) that analogy applies to images and not to symbols.

[25] A somewhat difficult issue is whether myth is to be associated with both the inspirational and the symbolic mode of exposition, or just with one of them. With regard to this, Gersh (2000: 18) has interestingly suggested that "(a) when Proclus considers Plato alone as theologian, he ranks the entheastic mode of exposition above the symbolic; and (b) when he considers Plato and Homer together as theologians, he allows the entheastic and symbolic modes of exposition to coincide".

[26] Procl. *In rem* I 86, 16–19. Translation by Chlup (2012: 188).

φύσιν).[27] Naturally, Proclus insists that the relationship between the symbol and its referent can never be reduced to a mirror image or reflection so as to demonstrate that Plato's criticism of mimetic art does not apply to the entheastic (symbolic) myths.

This becomes clear when Proclus contrasts the myths of Homer with those created by Plato.[28] According to Proclus, Plato was very careful not to portray the gods in an outrageous and blasphemous way: when coining his pedagogical myths, Plato employed images so as to educate about the divine matters. Hence, his myths imitate the gods without depraving and/or deluding young minds. Thus, Proclus stresses (*In rem* I 73, 16–22) that Plato "mystically explains the divine matters through certain images" (διά τινων εἰκόνων τὰ θεῖα μυστικῶς ἀναδιδάσκει) in such a manner that his "portrayals" (ἀπεικασμένα) and "likenesses" (ὁμοιώματα) are very much "like visible statues" (οἷον ἀγάλματα ἐμφανῆ).[29]

This means that Plato's myths imitate the gods in the same way as the statues of the gods imitate them, i.e., in both cases the imitation builds on an easily recognizable resemblance, albeit it always remains only an approximate rendition of the divine. Coining paideutic myths is similar to carving statues in that both these activities strive for some similarity when exploiting the visible (ὕλη) to represent the invisible (τὰ θεῖα) – the difference being naturally that a mythmaker uses words, whereas a sculptor uses stones. This explains why Plato's paideutic myths are free from any shocking and horrifying motifs that Homer's entheastic myths abound in: when presenting his hidden doctrines about the gods, Plato employed images (εἰκόνες / ἀπεικασμένα) and likenesses (ὁμοιώματα), upon which his portrayals of the deities are never opposite or contrary to the nature of the gods, but rather these depictions of the deities retain the similarity of the statues (οἷον ἀγάλματα).

Things look quite different, though, with the entheastic (symbolic) myths. While here the mythmaker must also have recourse to words, he is not bound by the requirement that his portrayal resemble the gods. That is why the authors of entheastic myths use the crude language of anthropomorphism. They employ that which is inferior to somehow represent that which is so superior that it cannot be rendered mimetically, but rather symbolically:

> The fathers of myth observed that nature was creating images of nonmaterial and noetic Forms and embellishing this cosmos with these imitations, depicting the indivisible by means of fragmented things, the eternal by means of things that proceed through time, the noetic through that which the senses can grasp, and portraying the nonmaterial materially, the nonspatial spatially

---

[27] van den Berg (2001: 120–125) has excellently shown though that symbols do not have to be absolutely opposed to their referents. See also Chlup (2012: 189). Cf. *infra*, n. 36.

[28] Cf. e.g. van den Berg (2001: 122 and 131) and Chlup (2012: 188).

[29] Coulter (1976: 48) suggests (*ad loc.*) that Proclus might be alluding here to the celestial myth of the *Phaedrus*. While Sheppard (1980: 149) rightly stresses that the term μυστικῶς is used here in the sense of both allegoresis and mysteries, Müri (1976: 31) provides a very good explanation for this fact: "Mysterien und Allegorese haben *ein* gemeinsames Merkmal: die Scheidung zwischen Eingeweihten und Außenstehenden".

> and depicting through things subject to change that which is eternally the same. When they saw this, in line with the nature and the procession of those things which have only apparent and imagelike existence, they themselves fabricated images of the divine in the medium of language, expressing the transcendent power of the models by those things most opposite to them and furthest removed from them: that which is beyond nature is represented by things contrary to nature; that which is more divine than all reason, by the irrational; that which transcends in simplicity all fragmented beauty, by things that are considered ugly and obscene.
> κατιδόντες γὰρ οἱ τῆς μυθοποιΐας πατέρες, ὅτι καὶ ἡ φύσις εἰκόνας δημιουργοῦσα τῶν ἀΰλων καὶ νοητῶν εἰδῶν καὶ τόνδε τὸν κόσμον ποικίλλουσα τοῖς τούτων μιμήμασιν τὰ μὲν ἀμέριστα μεριστῶς ἀπεικονίζεται, τὰ δὲ αἰώνια διὰ τῶν κατὰ χρόνον προϊόντων, τὰ δὲ νοητὰ διὰ τῶν αἰσθητῶν, ἐνύλως τε τὸ ἄϋλον ἀποτυποῦται καὶ διαστατῶς τὸ ἀδιάστατον καὶ διὰ μεταβολῆς τὸ μονίμως ἱδρυμένον, ἑπομένως τῇ τε φύσει καὶ τῇ προόδῳ τῶν φαινομένως ὄντων καὶ εἰδωλικῶς, εἰκόνας καὶ αὐτοὶ πλάττοντες ἐν λόγοις φερομένας τῶν θείων τοῖς ἐναντιωτάτοις καὶ πλεῖστον ἀφεστηκόσιν τὴν ὑπερέχουσαν τῶν παραδειγμάτων ἀπομιμοῦνται δύναμιν, καὶ τοῖς μὲν παρὰ φύσιν τὸ ὑπὲρ φύσιν αὐτῶν ἐνδείκνυνται, τοῖς δὲ παραλόγοις τὸ παντὸς λόγου θειότερον, τοῖς δὲ φανταζομένοις ὡς αἰσχροῖς τὸ παντὸς μεριστοῦ κάλλους ὑπερηπλωμένον.[30]

In this beautiful passage, Proclus stresses that it was the nature of the things that has inspired the poets to write symbolically. Just as that which is eternal must be portrayed through that which is transient and that which is intelligible through that which is sensible, so the creators of entheastic myths have to depict the transcendence of the gods through what is, in fact, most contradictory to them: thus, they describe that which surpasses nature through that which is unnatural, whereas that which surpasses all reason through that which is irrational. Hence, whenever Homeric myths strike us as grotesque and bizarre to the point of blasphemous, it has to be borne in mind that these anthropomorphic formulations are the only means for communicating the divine. Importantly, Proclus puts it in no uncertain terms that mythmakers employ this symbolism precisely to make us aware of the "transcending superiority" (ἐξῃρημένη ὑπεροχή) of the gods.[31] This means that the authors of entheastic myths coin these stories in such a way that these disgraceful portrayals of the gods make men conscious of the unbridgeable chasm separating humans from gods, while at the same time leaving no doubt that the narratives must be taken allegorically.

Everything that has been said so far makes it possible to see how Proclus perceives the difference between Homer and Plato. The philosopher characterizes (*In rem* I 159, 1) the former as "divinely inspired" (ἐνθουσιάζων) and "driven to Bacchic frenzy" (ἀναβακχευόμενος), stressing, at the same time though (*In rem* I 159, 3–4), that Plato provides us with the same truth, which he merely "bound fast with the irrefutable

---

[30] Procl. *In rem* I 77, 13–27. Translation by Struck (2004: 243). See also Cardullo (1985: 150); van den Berg (2001: 125) and Chlup (2012: 191).

[31] Procl. *In rem* I 77, 28. Translation by van den Berg (2001: 125). Cf. also Chlup (2012: 191).

methods of knowledge" (ταῖς ἀνελέγκτοις τῆς ἐπιστήμης μεθόδοις κατεδήσατο). This means that the difference between Homer and Plato resides in the *form* rather than in the *content*: the poet and the philosopher present the same truth, but the former speaks from revelation, whereas the latter speaks from reason.[32] That is why the narratives of the poet require a special exegetical approach.

## Allegorical approach to Homer's παραπέτασμα

Evidently, then, one has to apply allegorical interpretation to entheastic myths so as to properly identify the connection between the symbol and its referent. Thus, allegoresis makes us aware of the fact that it is only when we read Homer mimetically that his poetry seems crude and offensive, but when we read the poet symbolically, his poetry transpires to be theology κατ' ἐξοχήν. Accordingly, it is necessary to distinguish (*In rem* I 140, 11–13) between the "ineffable wisdom" (ἀπόρρητος θεωρία) concealed in the Homeric poems and their "apparent meaning" (τὸ φαινόμενον).[33] While Homer's epics must not be reduced to their surface meaning, Proclus frequently characterizes this meaning as παραπέτασμα (i.e., "cover", "veil" or "screen") to indicate that beneath this veneer a deeper (i.e., symbolic) sense has been hidden.[34] In other words, this παραπέτασμα hints enigmatically at a latent meaning that has to be retrieved through allegorical interpretation if the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are to be fully understood and appreciated.

Proclus provides us with a spectacular example of this kind of exegesis, when he famously interprets the hurling of Hephaestus as "the procession of the divine from above down to the lowest creations in the realm of the senses" (ἡ ἄνωθεν ἄχρι τῶν τελευταίων ἐν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς δημιουργημάτων τοῦ θείου πρόοδος), the binding of Kronos – as "the union of the whole of creation with the noetic and paternal transcendence of Kronos"

---

[32] As Buffière (1956: 29) nicely puts it: "Belle revanche pour Homère: l'exilé de la République revient en triomphateur; il prend place à côté de Platon et au-dessus de lui: car si Platon est pour les siens la plus haute autorité humaine, Homère est une autorité divine; l'un représente les lumières de la raison, l'autre celles de la révélation". Cf. also Cardullo (1985: 101). In a similar vein, Lamberton (1986: 170) explains that Plato and Homer actually revealed in their myths the same ultimate truth: "Homer's account of that truth is inspired – it is the product of divine μανία – and its value is therefore enormous, though its expression is correspondingly obscure. Plato came later to the same truth, often in fact starting from Homer's account of it, and demonstrated it more systematically".

[33] Pichler (2006: 83 n. 183) correctly stresses that the term φαινόμενον "bezeichnet bei Proklos stets das, was der sinnlichen Betrachtung zugänglich ist".

[34] Cf. e.g. Procl. *In rem* I 44, 14, 66, 7, 73, 15–16, 74, 19, 159, 15–16, II 248, 27–28. Brisson (1996: 140) explains the παραπέτασμα metaphor in the following way: "Le discours mythique est assimilé à un objet placé devant un autre pour le cacher". See also Lamberton (1986: 185) and Sheppard (1980: 16), who stresses that the term is a standard way of signaling that a given myth requires allegorical interpretation. While Proclus speaks also (*In rem* I 44, 19–20) of τὸ πρόσχημα τῆς μυθοποιΐας, both these terms and the underlying idea appear in Plato's *Protagoras* (cf. e.g. 316 d 6: πρόσχημα and 316 e 5: παραπετάσμασιν). Finally, it may not be superfluous to note that Proclus uses also other terms with the reference to allegorical interpretation. Thus, for example, in the *Theologia Platonica* (I 22, 19–20) the classical term ὑπόνοια is used to define the purpose of physical allegoresis: τέλος ποιεῖσθαι τῆς τῶν μύθων ὑπονοίας τὰ φυσικὰ παθήματα – cf. Pépin (1976: 86). Cf. *supra*, n. 4.

(ἡ ἕνωσις τῆς ὅλης δημιουργίας πρὸς τὴν νοερὰν τοῦ Κρόνου καὶ πατρικὴν ὑπεροχήν), and the castration of Ouranos – as "the separation of the Titanic chain from the order that maintains the universe" (ἡ διάκρισις τῆς Τιτανικῆς σειρᾶς ἀπὸ τῆς συνεκτικῆς διακοσμήσεως).[35]

This piece of allegorical interpretation shows that the symbols which appear in entheastic myths are not *absolutely* opposed to their referents.[36] Obviously, we have here no copy-like images (εἰκόνες / ἀπεικασμένα) or accurate likenesses (ὁμοιώματα) and these symbolic portrayals of the deities are not like (οἷον) their physical statues. Nevertheless, there is some sort of similarity that provides a symbolic connection between *hurling* and *procession*, *binding* and *union*, *castration* and *separation*, etc. While these depictions signify their referents through analogy rather than mimesis, the relationship between symbols and their referents in entheastic myths is, thereby, motivated. The analogy may be at times very obscure, but a skillful interpreter will be able to ascertain that *hurling* hints enigmatically at a *procession*, *binding* – at a *union*, *castration* – at a *separation*, and so on

That is why Proclus further explains (*In rem* I 82, 20–83, 7) that what "in our world" (παρ' ἡμῖν) is perceived as "lower" (χεῖρον) and belonging to the "inferior" (καταδεεστέρας) order of reality, the myths employ with reference to the "superior nature" (κρείττονα φύσιν) in such a way that *binding* can stand for a "conjunction with the causes and ineffable union" (συναφὴ πρὸς τὰ αἴτια καὶ ἕνωσις ἄρρητος) rather than an obstruction, *hurling* can stand for "the generative procession as well as free and unrestrained presence in everything" (ἡ γόνιμος [...] πρόοδος καὶ ἡ ἄφετος ἐπὶ πάντα παρουσία καὶ εὔλυτος) rather than a violent movement, and *castration* can stand for a "procession of second-order beings from their own causes to a lower order" (πρόοδος τῶν δευτέρων εἰς ὑφειμένην τάξιν ἀπὸ τῶν σφετέρων αἰτίων) rather than a loss of power.

The opposition between the inferior meaning that corresponds to the sensible world (παρ' ἡμῖν / ἐνταῦθα) and the superior meaning that the corresponds to the intelligible world (παρὰ τοῖς θεοῖς / ἐκεῖ) is employed by Proclus to differentiate between the literal and the allegorical sense of a narrative. This distinction provides the foundation for Proclus' apology of Homer: when seeking to exonerate Homer from the charges that Plato has levelled against τὸ μέγιστον ψεῦδος, Proclus argues that Homer's poetry is predominantly symbolic, i.e., that the low and base language of the myths is only a symbolic description of the highest realities.

---

[35] Procl. *In rem* I 82, 10–18. Translation by Struck (2004: 251). Cf. also Coulter (1976: 53); Cardullo (1985: 128) and Lamberton (1986: 204). The latter work offers an extensive discussion of Proclus' specific allegorical interpretations (see Lamberton 1986: 197–232).

[36] Cf. *supra*, n. 27.

From the Neoplatonist perspective, all poems about the gods have to be allegorical, for the transcendence of the gods precludes accuracy of all human accounts of them (whether poetical or philosophical).[37] As no language can do justice to the immaterial and unchanging reality that it seeks to represent, literal portrayals of the gods as anthropomorphic beings must be taken as necessary concessions on the part of the poet. As the superior is, in fact, indescribable and inexpressible, these symbolic renditions are necessarily grotesque and monstrous. That is precisely how they make us aware of the fact that what they endeavor to describe and express is, indeed, indescribable and inexpressible. The apparently irreverent and sacrilegious descriptions of the gods must, then, be seen as necessarily material analogies that symbolically hint at the higher immaterial realities. Given that there is no direct similarity or copy-like resemblance between the symbol and its referent, it is only reasonable that the "binding" of one god by another can symbolically signify an "ineffable union", whereas the "hurling" of one god by another can symbolically signify a "generative procession". Irrespective of how imperfect these material analogies might seem, such renditions remain the only means for representing the divine.

Allegoresis shows, then, that it is only on the surface that Homer's naïve and/or blasphemous portrayals of the deities are irreligious, since underneath them a profound theology can be found.[38] As a matter of fact, these seemingly shocking descriptions of the gods are the best proof that the poetry of Homer is indeed divinely inspired and that the passages which Plato most vehemently attacks must actually be taken as the most symbolic (i.e., non-mimetic) ones. When this hermeneutical principle is applied, such horrifying deeds of the deities as banishment, imprisonment or castration of one god by another testify precisely to the divinely inspired authority of the poet. That is why Proclus insists (*In rem* I 193, 14–16) that when creating such myths the poet must have been "inspired by the gods" (ἐνθουσιάζειν) and "possessed by the Muses" (ἐκ τῶν Μουσῶν κατοκωχήν). That is also why he maintains (*In rem* I 198, 20–23) that a "divinely inspired poet" (ποιητὴς ἔνθους), who "reveals the truth about beings through signs" (διὰ συνθημάτων δηλοῖ τὴν περὶ τῶν ὄντων ἀλήθειαν) is actually "not an imitator" (οὔτε μιμητής).

These assertions show that the highest kind of poetry transcends the limitations of the mimetic one. A divinely inspired poet resorts to the crude and anthropomorphic language of myths to somehow represent the divine matters. While the various mythical formulations ("binding", "hurling" etc.) are used as necessary "material", allegorical interpretation reveals that these symbolic depictions of the immaterial reality are concealed from the vulgar, but available to those who have been properly educated in philosophy. That is why Proclus says (*In rem* I 85, 26–86, 1) that "such myths encourage those who are naturally suited to desire the wisdom hidden in them" (ἀνεγείρουσιν μὲν οἱ τοιοίδε μῦθοι τοὺς εὐφυεστέρους πρὸς τὴν ἔφεσιν τῆς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἀποκρύφου θεωρίας),

---

[37] Sheppard (1980: 17). Cf. also Lamberton (1986: 171–173) and Struck (2004: 244).

[38] Cf. e.g. Procl. *In Tim.* I 141, 24–25: ἡ παλαιὰ θεολογία ... παρ' Ὁμήρῳ.

stressing further (*In rem* I 86, 1–4) that the "apparent marvel-mongering" (φαινομένη τερατολογία) of such myths not only awakens the initiated ones to a quest for the truth but also keeps away the profane crowd.

## From allegoresis to theurgy: δαιμόνιος τρόπος τῆς μυθοποιΐας

That Homer's poetry is symbolic means that it must derive its "material" from the sensible world: entheastic myths portray the transcendence of the gods anthropomorphically just as nature depicts that which is intelligible through that which is sensible (see above). While the highest kind of poetry is, thereby, mediated in the world of phenomena, this phenomenal basis of symbolic poetry brings it close to theurgy, which also employs the material to invoke the divine.[39] Accordingly, Proclus draws an important parallel between the soteriological power of symbolic poetry and that of theurgic practices, as he compares the impact of symbols in myths with that of symbols in magic rites:

> The art, therefore, governing sacred matters distributes, in a fitting way, the whole of ritual among the gods and the attendants of the gods (i.e., the demons), in order that none of those who attend the gods eternally should be left without a share in the religious service due them. This art calls on the gods with the holiest rites and mystic symbols, and invokes the gifts of the demons through the medium of a secret sympathy by means of visible passions. In the same way, the fathers of such myths as we have been discussing, having gazed on virtually the entire procession of divine reality, and being eager to connect the myths with the whole chain which proceeds from each god, made the surface images of their myths analogous to the lowest races of being which preside over lowest, material sufferings. However, what was hidden and unknown to the many they handed down to those whose passion it is to look upon being, in a form which revealed the transcendent being of the gods concealed in inaccessible places. As a consequence, although every myth is demonic on its surface, it is divine with respect to its secret doctrine.
> ὥσπερ οὖν ἡ τῶν ἱερῶν τέχνη κατανείμασα δεόντως τὴν σύμπασαν θρησκείαν τοῖς θεοῖς καὶ τοῖς τῶν θεῶν ὀπαδοῖς, ἵνα μηδὲν ἄμοιρον τῆς ἐπιβαλλούσης θεραπείας ἀπολείπηται τῶν ἀϊδίως ἑπομένων τοῖς θεοῖς, τοὺς μὲν ταῖς ἁγιωτάταις τελεταῖς καὶ τοῖς μυστικοῖς συμβόλοις προσάγεται, τῶν δὲ τοῖς φαινομένοις παθήμασιν προκαλεῖται τὰς δόσεις διὰ δή τινος ἀρρήτου συμπαθείας, οὕτως ἄρα καὶ οἱ τῶν τοιῶνδε μύθων πατέρες εἰς πᾶσαν ὡς εἰπεῖν ἀποβλέψαντες τὴν τῶν θείων πρόοδον καὶ τοὺς μύθους εἰς ὅλην ἀνάγειν σπεύδοντες τὴν ἀφ' ἑκάστου προϊοῦσαν σειρὰν τὸ μὲν προβεβλημένον αὐτῶν καὶ εἰδωλικὸν ἀνάλογον ὑπεστήσαντο τοῖς ἐσχάτοις γένεσιν καὶ τῶν τελευταίων καὶ ἐνύλων προεστηκόσι παθῶν, τὸ δὲ ἀποκεκρυμμένον καὶ ἄγνωστον τοῖς πολλοῖς τῆς ἐν ἀβάτοις ἐξῃρημένης τῶν θεῶν οὐσίας ἐκφαντικὸν τοῖς

[39] Cf. e.g. Coulter (1976: 50–57); Cardullo (1985: 126–135); Struck (2004: 246–251 and 2010: 67–68) and Pichler (2006: 228–253).

φιλοθεάμοσιν τῶν ὄντων παρέδοσαν. καὶ οὕτω δὴ τῶν μύθων ἕκαστος δαιμόνιος μέν ἐστιν κατὰ τὸ φαινόμενον, θεῖος δὲ κατὰ τὴν ἀπόρρητον θεωρίαν.[40]

Symbols permeate the whole of reality.[41] What divinely inspired poetry and theurgy have in common is that they both build on the relation of "sympathy" between a σύμβολον (σύνθημα) and its referent. While the term συμπάθεια stands literally for an "affinity" or "fellow-feeling", in Proclus it designates a non-mimetic connection between a material object and an immaterial entity. Sympathy is, then, a magical power that connects the visible with the invisible. Hence, it is through the relationship of sympathy that the sacred symbols in entheastic myths and theurgic practices can bring individuals into the state of union with the divine.[42]

That is why Proclus says in the above-cited passage that mythmakers have created the surface images of their myths analogous to the lowest races of divine beings, i.e., demons. This means that entheastic myths and theurgic practices are "demonic" due to their phenomenal surface, but "divine" with respect to their symbolic meaning.[43] Indeed, Proclus explicitly stresses (*In rem* I 86, 10–13) that the "kinship of these myths with the tribe of demons" (τῶν μύθων τούτων πρὸς τὸ τῶν δαιμόνων φῦλον συγγένειαν) consists precisely in the "activity of making symbolic revelations" (ἐνεργείας συμβολικῶς [...] δηλούσης), upon which he further specifies that (*In rem* I 86, 20) "the mode of such myth-making is demonic" (δαιμόνιος ὁ τρόπος ἐστὶ τῆς τοιαύτης μυθοποιΐας). These assertions show that from Proclus' perspective being an interpreter of entheastic myths is tantamount to being a mystagogue.[44]

Everything that has been said so far makes it easy to understand why Proclus ascribes to allegorical interpretation of symbolic poetry the same soteriological power

---

[40] Proclus *In rem* I 78, 18–79, 4. Translation by Coulter (1976: 55–56).

[41] Brisson (1996: 142) suggestively explains that symbols are "les extrémités de séries divines qui depuis le haut descendent jusqu'aux derniers êtres en passant au travers de toutes les classes d'êtres qui se rencontrent dans le réel". This is precisely what makes the symbols in poetry very much like the symbols in theurgy: "on ne perçoit plus très bien la différence entre la nature d'un objet symbolique utilisé dans des opérations théurgiques" (Brisson 1996: 144).

[42] As Müri (1976: 34) nicely puts it: "Vermittels der heiligen Symbole (...) werden die Menschen in einen ganz andern Zustand versetzt; aus sich heraustretend, gehen sie ganz in Gott über".

[43] This has been aptly clarified by Cardullo (1985: 127) in the following way: "Il paragone con l'arte rituale e con la sua particolare natura ci fa comprendere meglio la conclusione procliana a proposito dei due aspetti del mito omerico: questo è appropriato ai demoni nel suo aspetto visible, e appropriato agli dei secondo la sua dottrina segreta". That is why entheastic myths produce the same effect as theurgic practices: "Come, infatti, il rituale ieratico, in virtú delle formule simboliche e degli aspetti irrazionali di cui si avvale, acquista valore iniziatico e provoca l'unione mistica con la divinità, cosí il mito omerico produce degli effetti analoghi, sopratutto grazie ai suoi simboli osceni e sconvenienti" (Cardullo 1985: 128). In a similar vein, Whitman (1987: 96) notes that symbolic myths and demons "serve preeminently as mediators to the truth". Brisson speaks in this context of a "double reference" (cf. *supra*, n. 8).

[44] In connection with the latter point, Brisson (1996: 122) rightly observes: "La tâche de l'interprète, qu'elle s'applique à la philosophie ou à la poésie, est assimilée à celle du mystagogue qui, dans les mystères, guide le postulant vers l'initiation et l'époptie". For a very good discussion of the relationship between allegoresis and ethics in Proclus, see Pichler (2006: 186–240).

that he finds in theurgic rites: studying the demonic nature of entheastic myths serves the purpose of knowing the divine and uniting with it. Accordingly, Proclus claims (*In rem* I 80, 10) that the symbolic (entheastic) myths "lift up" (ἀνάγουσιν) to the "contemplation" (θεωρία) of the gods, just as the grim and monstrous surface of these myths is said (*In rem* I 85, 16–26) to "compel" (ἀναγκάζειν) the listeners to "contemplate" (θεωρεῖν) what divinities the mythmakers have hidden in these symbolic myths.

In Proclus, allegoresis receives a religious justification, as it paves the way for authentic piety and genuine religiousness.[45] Without the aid of allegorical interpretation, Plato's criticism of Homer is valid, since the myths of Homer (and other poets) are doomed to primitive and immoral anthropomorphism. Yet, studying meticulously the demonic surface of various shocking and outrageous myths leads individuals to a genuinely sacred reality, as they are "lifted" and "compelled" to allegorically search for the true divinity concealed underneath these crude portrayals of deities. Thus, allegoresis transforms Homer's mythology from superstition and/or blasphemy to a profound religious experience. The soteriological power of allegoresis consists, thereby, in that it brings the initiated readers closer to the gods through revealing the true nature of the divinity hidden underneath the demonic: allegorical interpretation of entheastic myths makes union with the gods possible, for it makes us aware of the sympathy between these symbolic myths and their referents. In this way, allegoresis enables us to truly participate in the divine.

## Final remarks

When trying to mediate in the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, Proclus argues that it is only on the surface that Homer has "attributed to the gods all sorts of things which are matters of reproach and censure (ὀνείδεα καὶ ψόγος) among men".[46] According to Proclus, the truce between philosophers and poets can easily be achieved when it is understood that the highest kind of poetry needs to be read symbolically and not mimetically: if the poet's portrayals of the gods seem *prima facie* impious to the point of blasphemy, then allegoresis shows that these anthropomorphic depictions must be recognized as indispensable tools for communicating the divine. While symbols are the only vehicle for conveying the immaterial, they do not imitate the things they denote. Proclus insists that entheastic myths seek to do justice to the indescribable and inexpressible nature of the divine as accurately as humanly possible, i.e., symbolically. Thus, rather than being sacrilegious and irreverent, such myths illustrate that the immaterial can only be reached via the material.

---

[45] The same can be said of the Stoics' etymologizing, cf. Domaradzki (2012: 143–147).

[46] DK 21 B 11. Translation by Lesher (1992: 23).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY


**Baine Harris, R.**, 1976 (ed.), *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, Norfolk.

**Blönnigen, C.**, 1992, *Der griechische Ursprung der jüdisch-hellenistischen Allegorese und ihre Rezeption in der alexandrinischen Patristik*, Frankfurt am Main.

**Brisson, L.**, 1996, *Introduction à la philosophie du mythe*, vol. 1: *Sauver les mythes*, Paris.

**Buffière, F.**, 1956, *Les mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque*, Paris.

**Cardullo, L.**, 1985, *Il linguaggio del simbolo in Proclo. Analisi filosofico-semantica dei termini symbolon/eikôn/synthêma nel Commentario alla Republica*, Catania.

**Chlup, R.**, 2012, *Proclus: An Introduction*, Cambridge.

**Copeland, R., Struck, P.T.**, 2010, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, Cambridge.

**Coulter, J.A.**, 1976, *The Literary Microcosm. Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists*, Leiden.

**Dillon, J.**, 1976, "Image, Symbol and Analogy: Three Basic Concepts of Neoplatonic Allegorical Exegesis", in: Baine, Harris (1976), pp. 247–262.

**Domaradzki, M.**, 2012, "Theological Etymologizing in the Early Stoa", *Kernos. Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique* 25, pp. 125–148.

**Friedl, A.J.**, 1936, *Die Homerinterpretation des Neuplatonikers Proklos*, Würzburg.

**Gallavotti, C.**, 1933, *L'estetica greca nell'ultimo suo cultore (il neoplatonico Proclo)*, Torino.

**Gersh, S.**, 2000, "Proclus' Theological Methods: The Programme of *Theol. Plat.* I.4", in: Segonds, Steel (2000), pp. 15–27.

**Gersh, S.**, 2014, (ed.), *Interpreting Proclus: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, Cambridge.

**Lamberton, R.**, 1986, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*, Berkeley.

**Lamberton, R.**, 2000, "Language, Text, and Truth in Ancient Polytheist Exegesis", in: Whitman (2000), pp. 73–88.

**Lesher, J.H.**, 1992, *Xenophanes of Colophon. Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary*, Toronto.

**Müri, W.**, 1976, "ΣΥΜΒΟΛΟΝ. Wort- und sachgeschichtliche Studie", in: Müri (1976a), pp. 1–44 [repr. *Beilage zum Jahresbericht über das städtische Gymnasium in Bern*, Bern 1931, pp. 1–46].

**Müri, W.**, 1976a, *Griechische Studien. Ausgewählte wort- und sachgeschichtliche Forschungen zur Antike* (Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft 15), E. Vischer (Hrsg.), Basel.

**Pépin, J.**, 1976, *Mythe et allégorie: Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes*, Paris.

**Pépin, J.**, 2000, "Les modes de l'enseignement théologique dans la *Théologie platonicienne*", in: Segonds, Steel (2000), pp. 1–14.

**Pichler, R.**, 2006, *Allegorese und Ethik bei Proklos: Untersuchungen zum Kommentar zu Platons Politeia*, Berlin.

**Ramelli, I., Lucchetta, G.**, 2004, *Allegoria*, vol. 1: *L'età classica*, Milano.

**Segonds, A.Ph., Steel, C.**, 2000, (eds.), *Proclus et la Théologie platonicienne*, Leuven et Paris.

**Sheppard, A.**, 1980, *Studies on the 5th and 6th Essays of Proclus' Commentary on the Republic*, Göttingen.

**Sheppard, A.**, 2014, "Proclus as Exegete", in: Gersh (2014), pp. 57–79.

**Struck, P.T.**, 2004, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts*, Princeton.

**Struck, P.T.**, 2010, "Allegory and Ascent in Neoplatonism", in: Copeland, Struck (2010), pp. 57–70.

**Tarrant, H.**, 2007, (ed.), *Proclus. Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, Vol. 1: *Book I: Proclus on the Socratic State and Atlantis*, Cambridge.

**Tate, J.**, 1929, "Plato and Allegorical Interpretation", *Classical Quarterly* 23, pp. 142–154.
**van den Berg, R.M.**, 2001, *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary*, Leiden.
**Wehrli, F.**, 1928, *Zur Geschichte der allegorischen Deutung Homers im Altertum*, Borna und Leipzig.
**Whitman, J.**, 1987, *Allegory. The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*, Cambridge.
**Whitman, J.**, 2000, (ed.), *Interpretation and Allegory. Antiquity to the Modern Period*, Leiden.

MIKOŁAJ DOMARADZKI
*/ Poznań /*

## Symbolic Poetry, Inspired Myths and Salvific Function of Allegoresis in Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic*

The present article is concerned with Proclus' highly original and profoundly influential account of the symbolic function of poetry, the pedagogic as well as the hieratic value of myths and the soteriological power of allegorical interpretation. Thus, the paper begins with a brief discussion of Plato's dismissal of poetry as μέγιστον ψεῦδος. Subsequently, Proclus' theory of three kinds of poetry is examined, upon which attention is paid to his revolutionary idea that σύμβολα rather than μιμήματα are the tools of the highest kind of poetry. Then, Proclus' views on the difference between Plato's and Homer's μυθοποιΐα are considered. While the article concludes with an analysis of Proclus' conviction about the functional similarity of symbols in myths and those in magic rites, allegoresis is shown to have the same salvational role that Proclus ascribes to theurgy.

KEYWORDS
Proclus, Homer, Plato, poetry, imitation, symbol, myth, allegoresis, theurgy