

# Voices of the Fire: Understanding theurgy

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It is a sacrilege not to preserve the immortality of the soul, raising it to the level of the holy and uniting it to the divine with bonds which cannot be broken or loosened, but by contrast to pull and drag downwards the divine which is within us, confining it to the earthly, sinful and Giant- or Titan-like prison. (Damascius, *Phil.Hist.*19 Athanassiadi)

Let us become fire, let us travel through fire. We have a free way to the ascent. The Father will guide us, unfolding the ways of fire; let us not flow with the lowly stream from forgetfulness. (Proclus, *De philosophia Chaldaica*, fr.2)

## Defining theurgy

Contemporary Western scholars habitually repeat the assumption that the term *theourgia* was coined in the exotic circles of those misguided semi-Oriental (and, therefore, “marginal”) miracle-workers who imagined that the road to salvation lies not in the bright palace of “reason” à la Sextus Empiricus, but in the pious hieratic rites. Consequently it is argued that on analogy with the term *theologia* (“speaking of the divine thing”) these miracle-workers invented *theourgia*, namely, doing divine things, performing sacramental works.

Many modern scholars too straightforwardly affirm this rather artificial dichotomy. However, from a traditional perspective, rites may also be said to “speak” and may include all kinds of *logoi*. For example, in ancient Egyptian ritual, speech not only makes the archetypal realm of noetic realities manifest in the liturgical realm of visible symbolic tokens and actions, but also performatively accomplishes theurgical transition and transposition of the cultic events into the divine realm, thereby establishing a relationship between the domain of noetic (*akhu*) Forms and the series of

manifestation (*kheperu, bau*).<sup>1</sup> In this hieratic context, the term *akhu* means “radiant power,” “noetic light,” “solar intelligence,” and is closely related with the conception of eidetic and demiurgic name (*ran, or ren*). Only the gods (*neteru*) at the level of intelligible and intellective principles, iconographically depicted by the great Ennead (*pesedjet*), are able to use the “radiant power of words” (*akhu typyw-ra*) in their truly creative ontological sense. As Jan Assmann remarks,

Sacred, radiantly powerful words report an otherworldly, divine sphere of meaning that is imposed on the reality of this world in a manner that explains and thus makes sense of it. Instead of supplying definitions, Egyptians would state names, that is, the sacred and secret names of things and actions that the priests had to know to exercise the radiant power of the words.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars of the likes of E. R. Dodds and his predecessors take it as dogma that *theourgia* is an invention of Chaldean Platonists. Admittedly, there is little doubt that the practice of pseudonymity is evident in Neo-Platonism, but pseudonymity itself does not necessarily diminish the intrinsic veracity of the content of a particular tradition. Yet the language used by Dodd’s and others is uncomfortably dismissive. They talk of *theourgia* as a dubious creation of those Chaldean philosophers who they accuse of “forging” the so-called *Chaldean Oracles*. Similarly such scholars appear to almost take pleasure in ridiculing the Ephesian theurgist Maximus and in mocking those who, instead of talking about the distant transcendent gods, allegedly “create” them, following “the superstitions of the time.”<sup>3</sup> This almost scandalous “creation of gods” through the methods provided by certain telestic science (*hē telestikē epistēmē*) is often deliberately misunderstood.

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<sup>1</sup> I have considered the Egyptian theory of divine speech/names, including the specifics of transmission and questions of historical context in my forthcoming paper, ‘Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy.’ It is worth recognising here that, as Gregory Shaw points out, ‘Neither Iamblichus nor any of his Platonic successors provide concrete examples of how names, sounds, or musical incantations were used in theurgic rites. There is a great wealth of evidence from nontheurgical circles, however, to suggest that theurgists used the *asema onomata* (“meaningless words”) according to Pythagorean cosmological theories and a spiritualisation of the rules of grammar’ (*Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, p.183).

<sup>2</sup> J. Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, D. Lorton (tr.), Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001, p.92.

<sup>3</sup> E. R. Dodds *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p.286.

For Dodds, it is an ‘animation of magic statues in order to obtain oracles from them’.<sup>4</sup> This sounds like a reinterpretation (employing “magic” in a derogatory sense) of Proclus, who says that the telestic art, by using certain symbols (*dia tinōn symbolon*), establishes on earth places fitted for oracles and statues of the gods (*kai chrēstēria kai agalmata theon hidrusthai epi gēs*).<sup>5</sup> The term *telestikē* is derived from the verb *telein* (to consecrate, to initiate, to make perfect). It is distinct from any idea of a kind of rustic sorcery (*goēteia*).<sup>6</sup> Rather it is a means to share or participate in the creative energies of the gods by constructing and consecrating their material receptacles, their cultic vehicles, which then function as the anagogic tokens, as *symbola* and *sunthēmata* (symbol and sign).

We might wonder if the Greek term *theourgia* is not simply a rendering of some now forgotten Egyptian, Akkadian, or Aramaic term related to the complicated vocabulary of temple rites and festivals. These hermeneutical performances followed the paradigms of cosmogony and served as vehicles of ascent conducted by the divine powers (*sekhemu, bau*) themselves.<sup>7</sup> If this is the origin of *theourgia* then it is obviously incorrect to think that the Chaldean Platonists of Roman Syria, who allegedly created and promoted the term *theourgia*, also invented the thing itself, that is, the tradition of hieratic arts and of their secret, theurgical understanding.

Our purpose in this essay is to consider the understanding of *theourgia* presented to us by the likes of Iamblichus, Damascius and Proclus. For them *theourgia* is of Egyptian origin, and this is satisfactory for our purposes; that is to say, we are less concerned with historical context and chiefly interested in the metaphysics of *theourgia* as it was conceived of in the Neo-Platonic tradition. What is at issue is an understanding of *theourgia* in the context of a real and precise metaphysics, which is its proper domain, as opposed to viewing *theourgia* as simply part of “the superstitions of the time.”

## Theurgy

The word “theurgy” is not that which is most frequently used by the ancient Neoplatonists when they discuss cosmological, soteriological or liturgical issues. As A. Louth remarks,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.292.

<sup>5</sup> Proclus, *In Tim.* III.155.18.

<sup>6</sup> Neoplatonic tradition emphasises this distinction between *goēteia* and *theourgia*

<sup>7</sup> This understanding of Egyptian rites is considered in detail throughout the works of Jan Assmann.

In Iamblichus theourgia refers to the religious rituals—prayers, sacrifices, divinations—performed by the theurgist: it is one of a number of words—theourgia, mustagōgia, hiera hagisteia, thrēskeia, hieratikē technē, theosophia, hē theia epistēmē—which have all more or less the same meaning and which are frequently simply translated théurgie by É.des Places...<sup>8</sup>

Damascius often prefers the terms *hiera hagisteia*, *hierourgia* (hierurgy, holy work, cultic operation) instead, or speaks of ‘theosophy which comes from the gods’<sup>9</sup> and of the ancient traditions (*ta archaia nomina*) which contain the rules of divine worship.<sup>10</sup> The Greek terms *hieratikē* and *hieratikē technē* (hieratic art, sacred method) are also rendered simply as “theurgy” by modern scholars.

For Damascius, *hieratike* is “the worship of the gods” (*theōn therapeia*) which ‘ties the ropes of heavenbound salvation,’<sup>11</sup> that is, raises the soul to the noetic cosmos by means of the ropes of worship, like in the Vedic and ancient Egyptian hieratic rites, or like in the anagogic recitations of the *Qur’an*. This *hieratikē technē* is designated as the “Egyptian philosophy” which deals with certain spiritual alchemy consisting in gnostic *paideia* (instruction) as well as in transformation, elevation, and immortalisation of the soul (the winged *ba* of the true philosopher or the initiate).

The return of our souls to God presupposes either the fusion with the divine (*theokrasia*), or perfect union (*henōsis pantelēs*).<sup>12</sup> This hieratic method of spiritual “homecoming” is praised as the higher wisdom, namely, the Orphic and Chaldean lore which transcends philosophical common sense (*tēn orphikēn te kai chaldaikēn tēn hupsēloteran sophian*).<sup>13</sup>

For the late Neoplatonists, theurgy (including all traditional liturgies, rites, and sacrifices which are ordained, revealed, and, in fact, performed by the gods themselves) is essential if the initiate priest is to attain the divine through the ineffable acts that transcend all intellection (*hē tōn ergōn tōn*

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<sup>8</sup> A. Louth, ‘Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite’, *The Journal of Theological Studies* 37, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, p.434.

<sup>9</sup> Damascius, *Phil.Hist.* 46D.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 42F.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4A.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 4A-C.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 85A.

*arrhēton kai huper pasan noēsīn*).<sup>14</sup> Thus, a theurgic union with the gods is the accomplishment (*telesiourgia*) of the gods themselves acting through their sacramental tokens, *ta sunthēmata*. The awakened divine symbols by themselves perform their holy work, thereby elevating the initiate to the gods whose ineffable power (*dunamis*) recognises by itself its own images (*eikones*).

Dionysius the Areopagite borrows the term *theourgia* from Iamblichus and Proclus, but uses it not in the sense of religious rituals which have the purificatory, elevating, and unifying divine force. Now this term designates certain divine works or actions, such as the divine activity of Jesus Christ (*andrikēs tou Iēsou theourgias*).<sup>15</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite also speaks of one's deification and *koinōnia* (communion, participation) with God; assimilation to God effected through participation in the sacraments.<sup>16</sup> This is *henōsis* (union) accomplished by partaking the most sacred symbols of the thearchic communion and of "divine birth" achieved through the hermeneutical *anagōgē* (ascent) and *epistrophē* (return to the Cause of All). However, as P. E. Rorem remarks,

...the uplifting does not occur by virtue of rites and symbols by themselves but rather by their interpretation, in the upward movement through the perceptible to the intelligible.<sup>17</sup>

Arguing that theurgical action directed by the gods and aimed at *theourgikē henōsis*, theurgical union, has nothing to do with "wonder working" (*thaumatourgia*), Iamblichus regards theurgy as the cultic working of the gods (*theōn erga*) or as divine acts (*theia erga*) in the metaphysical and ontological sense, which reveal the hidden henadic foundation of all manifested series of being, thereby re-affirming or re-collecting the ultimate divine presence in everything. As G. Shaw observes:

That presence was ineffable, but what lay beyond man's intellectual grasp could nevertheless be entered and achieved through ritual action,

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<sup>14</sup> Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 96.43-14.

<sup>15</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy* 181B.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 161D 1-5.

<sup>17</sup> P. E. Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbolism within the Ps-Dionysian Synthesis*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984, p.116.

which is why Iamblichus argued that theurgy transcended all intellectual endeavours.<sup>18</sup>

If regarded as a designation of divine actions performed at different levels of manifested reality, which itself is nothing but the multi-dimensional fabric of *theōn erga*, disclosed following the noetic paradigms of procession and reversion (*proodos* and *epistrophē*), then theurgy cannot be viewed simply as a ritualistic appendix of Platonism, but rather as its innermost core and its hidden essence. Consequently, not only the Neoplatonic-Chaldean hieratic mystagogy may be designated as “theurgy,” but all hierurgical procedures (liturgies, invocations, visualisations, contemplations, prayers, sacramental actions, textual investigations, interpretations of symbols) which involve the direct assistance of the superior classes (angels and semi-mythic teachers) and which activate the self-revelatory illumination in one’s re-ascending from the inferior to the prior. All of them may be regarded as “theurgical.”

Hence, theurgical, as universal and divine, is opposite to anything particular and individualistic, anything based on one’s own subjective whims and egocentric drives. Without the fundamental realisation of our own nothingness (*sunaisthēsis tēn peri heauton oudeneias*),<sup>19</sup> nobody can be saved, because in theurgical union gods are united with gods themselves or rather ‘the divine is literally united with itself’ (*auto to theion pros heauto sunesti*).<sup>20</sup> This is in no way communication between the mortal man and the immortal divinity (as one person addressing another), but rather communication of the divine in us with the divine in the universe. According to Iamblichus:

It is plain, indeed, from the rites (*ergōn*) themselves, that what we are speaking of just now is a method of salvation for the soul; for in the contemplation of the “blessed visions” (*ta makaria theamata*) the soul exchanges one life for another and exerts a different activity, and considers itself then to be no longer human—and quite rightly so: for often, having abandoned its own life, it has gained in exchange the most

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<sup>18</sup> G. Shaw, ‘Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus’, *Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought, and Religion* 41, New York: Fordham University Press, 1985, p.1.

<sup>19</sup> Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 47.13-14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.7-8.

blessed activity of the gods. If, then, it is purification from passions and freedom from the toils of generation and unification with the divine first principle that the ascent through invocations procures for the priests (*henōsin te pros tēn theian archēn he dia tōn klēseōn anodos parechei tois hiereusi*), how on earth one can attach the notion of passions to this process?<sup>21</sup>

### Descending lights and animated cult images

The Egyptian temple rites, from which the Neoplatonic *hieratikē* at least partly stems, may be called theurgical in the etymological sense of this word, because the Egyptian cult activity (itself staged as an interplay of divine masks) is based on a genuine encounter with the divine presence, with the immanent “indwelling” of God’s transcendent energies. The gods (*neteru*) do not literally dwell on earth in their cultic receptacles (statues, temples, human bodies, animals, plants), but rather install themselves there, thereby “animating” images and symbols. A deity’s *ba* (manifestation, noetic and life-giving power, descending “soul”) is somewhat united with the cult statues, processional barques, shrines, reliefs on the walls, sacred texts and the entire temple or the temple-like tomb.

The statue as a proper receptacle (*hupodoche*) for the divine irradiation is analogous to the purified human body of the royal person or of the “dead” initiate, and the descent of a deity’s *ba* resembles the approach of an active Platonic Form which informs the passive womb of matter and, consequently, establishes the manifested theatre of articulated and animated shapes. So the divine *ba* descends from the sky (or rather appears from the atemporal inwardness, since theophanies *a priori* constitute all manifested reality) onto his cult images (*sekhemu*) and god’s heart is united with his cult images.

*Sekhem* usually means “power,” but in this context it designates sign or symbol of power, as well as image or sacred icon. As Iamblichus remarks, ‘the light of the gods illuminates its subject transcendently’ (*kai tōn theōn to phōs ellampeī choristos*),<sup>22</sup> since even visible light (or heliophany of Ra at the level of his shining Disk, *Aten*) proceeds throughout the visible cosmos:

On the same principle, then, the world as a whole, spatially divided as it is, brings about division throughout itself of the single, indivisible light

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 41.9-42.1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 31.4.

of the gods (*to hen kai ameriston tōn theōn phōs*). This light is one and the same in its entirety everywhere, is present indivisibly to all things that are capable of participating in it, and has filled everything with its perfect power; by virtue of its unlimited causal superiority it brings to completion all things within itself, and, while remaining everywhere united to itself, brings together extremities with starting points. It is, indeed, in imitation of it that the whole heaven and cosmos performs its circular revolution, is united with itself, and leads the elements round in their cyclic dance...<sup>23</sup>

When the animating *ba* comes from the sky and descends (*hai*) on his image (*sekhem*), this metaphysical action (or divine work, *ergōn*) simply means the special ritualistic re-actualisation, re-affirmation, and re-petition of the cosmogonic scenario at the level of both cult images and purified human bodies who need to be re-assembled by the unifying divine spirit. This accomplishment (*telesiourgia*) is tantamount to the restoration of the Eye of Horus, which is equated with “offering” (*hetep*, or *hotep*), simultaneously meaning harmonious reintegration of parts (parts of the scattered Osirian *eidos*, restored in accordance to the whole truth, *maat*) and noetic satisfaction.

The cult statues presumably have two natures, one divine (when permeated by the *bau* of the gods, like the house of Ra is irradiated by his miraculous unifying rays) and one inanimate and material which must be consecrated in order to reveal the inner divine presence both in its perennial theophanic and specialised cultic sense. Therefore Assmann says: ‘As creators of these statues, humans are reminded of their own divine origin, and by piously tending and worshiping them, they make the divine at home on earth.’<sup>24</sup>

However, the daily rituals which consist in awakening, greeting, purifying, anointing, dressing, feeding, and worshiping the cult statue as well as the process of sacrificial offerings (which are symbolically designated as the restored Eye of Horus and around which the ritual revolves) are not to be conceived ‘as a communication between the human and the divine, but rather as an interaction between deities,’<sup>25</sup> that is, as a real divine *ergōn*, the holy “work” performed by the gods and all superior classes.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 31.9-32.2.

<sup>24</sup> Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, p.41.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.49



According to the late Neoplatonists, the gods (like the Egyptian *neteru*) are present immaterially in the material things, therefore *ta sunthēmata* (the theurgic seats of elevating power) are regarded as receptacles for the invisible divine irradiations (*ellampseis*) involved in the cosmic liturgy of descent and ascent. Since the body is an integral part of demiurgic work, in its perfect primordial form serving as an image (*eikōn*) of divine self-disclosure, the condition and quality of embodied matter indicate the soul's internal condition. The human body as a fixed eidetic statue or as an iconographically established sequence of dynamic hieroglyphic script (analogous to a series of Tantric *mudras*) is an instrument of divine presence, because this presence may be either concealed, or revealed. Therefore *telestikē* is not to be thought as inducing the presence of a god (or of his representative daimon) in the artificially constructed receptacle (*hupodochē*) only. The divine *ba* can permeate the human body as well, thereby confirming the latter's ability to participate in the superior principles. When such "incarnation" becomes permanent, the human body itself is transformed and turned into the spiritual "golden statue."

The incantations (*epōdai*) are also to be viewed as the anagogic *sunthēmata* (signs) which function as a means of maintaining the providential link between the ineffable henadic essences and their symbolic expressions, or between the noetic archetypes and their existential images, in order to complete the soul's divine measures and reveal its re-assembled immortal body (*sah*, which is symbolised by the Egyptian royal mummy). Since the body is an index (*deigma*) of the soul's capacity to receive a divine presence, separation from the lower somatic identifications and false identities requires, as Shaw constantly argues,

...to determine the appropriate measures for that soul to engage the powers bestowed upon it by the Demiurge, and then to accelerate its growth into those measures by means of theurgic rites.<sup>26</sup>

The above mentioned measures suggest the ratios of the soul described in Plato's *Timaeus* (35b-36E; 43D-E), therefore through the correct performance of measured theurgic rites the initiate imitates the activity of

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<sup>26</sup> G. Shaw, 'Theurgy as Demiurgy: Iamblichus' Solution to the Problem of Embodiment', *Dionysius Vol. XII*, Halifax: Dalhousie University Press, 1988, p.51.

the Demiurge, conjoining parts to wholes and integrating the psychosomatic multiplicity into the presiding noetic unity.

### **Figures, names, and tokens of the divine speech**

Arguing that as the soul's descent took place through many intermediary levels, so also its ascent, which includes dispensing with thinking through images and dissolving "the structure of life which it has compounded for itself," Proclus compares *phantasia* (imagination) with "those Stymphalian birds which fly about within us, inasmuch as they present to us evils of form and shape, not being able at all to grasp the non-figurative and partless Form"<sup>27</sup>. The Platonic philosopher, like the bird-shaped *ba* of the Egyptian initiate, indeed must re-grow his wings in order to fly up to the stars (visible symbols of the eternal noetic archetypes) and, standing on the back of the ouroboric universe, like on the back of the Egyptian goddess Nut, to contemplate what lies beyond and what is, therefore, formless and colourless.

In spite of this deconstructive rhetoric which makes a sharp division between the things divine, directly perceived through intellection (*noēsis*) and those presented through verbally expressed imagination (*lektikē phantasia*), Proclus recognises a task for one living on the level of intellect (*nous*) to act by means of discursive reason and imagination. This is so partly because all manifested realities, being just a plaything of the gods—as Plato explicitly states<sup>28</sup>—appear as the demiurgic dream of the Creator. The entire animated cosmos is like the miraculous ship constructed by the Egyptian initiate in the Duat (the Netherworld), using the secret names and words of demiurgic, and therefore "magic," power (*hekau*).

In this way both the Egyptian initiate, one who enters Duat before his physical death, and the Platonic philosopher follow the divine Intellect (the solar Atum-Ra) who produces all things and "in his bottomless thoughts" contains causally and in single simplicity the unified knowledge of all things and all divine works (*theia erga*) which are accomplished by the very fact of conceiving and noetically beholding them. It is, as Proclus says,

as if by the very fact of imagining all these things in this way, he were to produce the external existence of all the things which he possessed

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<sup>27</sup> Proclus, *In Parm.* 1025.

<sup>28</sup> Plato, *Laws* 7.803.

within himself in his imagination. It is obvious that he himself, then, would be the cause of all those things which would befall the ship by reason of the winds on the sea, and thus, by contemplating his own thoughts, he would both create and know what is external, not requiring any effort of attention towards them.<sup>29</sup>

Though the gods are without any visible shape or figure, they may be viewed with a figure in the psychic realm of imagination (say, in the microcosmic Duat, the Hathorian or Osirian Netherworld of the soul), since each soul is the *pleroma* of reality (*pantōn plērōma esti tōn eidon*).<sup>30</sup> So within the soul, like on the magic screen, all things are contained inwardly in a psychic mode. As Sara Rappe reminds us:

At the borderland between the material world and the purely immaterial world of intellect, this space of imagination offers a transitional domain that the mind can come to inhabit. This visionary space does not contain external objects nor illusions nor hallucinations. Rather, it is above all a realm of self-illumination...<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, in this “Osirian” mode, the soul is capable to see and to know all things, including figures of the gods who essentially are without any shape and figure, by entering into itself and awakening the inner powers which reveal the images (*eikones*) and symbols of the universal reality. Neither the outward, nor the inward psychic seer is capable of seeing without images. Thus, the nature of the things seen, in each case, corresponds to the nature and preparedness of the seer *himself*, that is, to the particular archetypal measures or configurations (those initially written on by *Nous*, the demiurgic Intellect) and to the actual contents of his existential and culturally shaped consciousness.

The Demiurge is the first and the only real seer and real speaker, whose “speech” is tantamount to the creative contemplation through the transcendent mirrors of imagination. Hence, his seeing and his speaking constitute the manifestation itself. Therefore creation of all things and the act of their naming are one and the same.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 959.

<sup>30</sup> Proclus, *In Parm.* 896.

<sup>31</sup> S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.173.

The theurgic ascent (the reversion of creation, now assuming the form of sacramental deconstruction) is also regarded as a rite of divine invocation. In a certain sense, invocation, incantation, and psalmody show the sacred road (*hodos*) to the divine world, leading the initiate singer into the Netherworld. This knowledge of incantation constitutes the theurgic core of the Orphic way and provides the cosmological setting for the Egyptian temple liturgies, based on the luminous interplay of *heka* powers.

Likewise, in the context of ancient Greek epic poetry, the poet's (who simultaneously is regarded as an inspired prophet-like *theologos*) song itself is 'quite simply a journey into another world: a world where the past and future are as accessible and real as the present'<sup>32</sup>. The journey of these divinely inspired poets is their song. As Peter Kingsley says: 'The poems they sing don't only describe their journeys; they're what makes the journey happen.'<sup>33</sup>

For the late Hellenic Neoplatonists, even to read the philosophical or hieratic text (somewhat analogous to the cosmic text of stars and celestial omens, regarded as a display of divine hieroglyphs) is to take part in a theurgic ritual. Rappe explains this as follows:

The soul, as the channel of cosmic manifestation, reads the world under one of two signs: the world is "other" than or outside the soul when it is engaged in the process of descent, whereas it is "the same" as and within the ascending or returning soul. Both of these great names are thus pronounced and understood by the soul, while in the moment of its pronouncement, the world itself is expressed. In fact, the world as a whole is just such a system of signs, due again to the activity of the Demiurge.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, in the Neoplatonic view, all manifested reality consists of different modes of divine speech, or different levels of revelation which operates with a system of signs and symbols that simultaneously manifest and conceal the One. Proclus: 'Heaven and Earth are therefore signifiers, the one signifies the procession from there and other the return'<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> P. Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, Inverness, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 1999, p.122.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123.

<sup>34</sup> Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, p.181.

<sup>35</sup> Proclus, *In Tim.* I.273.

The name is an image (*eikōn*) of a *paradeigma*, a copy of a model which is established at the noetic level. The Greek *onomata* means both “names” and “words,” and these *onomata* are viewed as *agalmata* by Proclus. The cosmos as an *agalma*, an image, shrine, or statue of the everlasting gods (*ton aidion theon gigonos agalma*),<sup>36</sup> consists in the mysterious circularity of the great divine Name. Consequently, procession (*proodos*) and return (*epistrophē*) are the great names of the unspeakable Principle.

The ouroboric cosmos (ouroboric, because it resembles the circle-like body of the noetic Snake whose beginning and end are tied together) is to be viewed as the ontologically displayed divine text, the luminous golden globe full of animated hieroglyphs inside. The hieroglyphs are *medu neter*, “divine words” (or modes of divine speech), to say it in the Egyptian terms. This living *agalma*, or rather the entire constellation of *onomata*, *agalmata*, and *sunthemata*, is like a macrocosmic cult statue, a living embodiment of the divine Ideas, of the archetypal contents which constitute the plenitude of Atum.

While maintaining that *agalma* contains no implication of likeness and, therefore, is not a synonym of *eikōn*, Francis Cornford describes Proclus’ attitude towards the cosmos as the holiest of shrines in the following way. Plato, according to Proclus,

speaks of the cosmos as an *agalma* of the everlasting gods because it is filled with the divinity of the intelligible gods, although it does not receive those gods themselves into itself any more than cult images (*agalmata*) receive the transcendent essences of the gods. The gods in the cosmos (the heavenly bodies) are, as it were, channels conveying a radiance emanating from the intelligible gods. Proclus calls the Demiurge the *agalmatopoiος του kosμου*, who makes the cosmos as an *agalma* and sets up within it the *agalmata* of the individual gods.<sup>37</sup>

The names of the gods are an objective eidetic expression of their henadic essence, therefore deity is actually present in its name. Likewise, the supreme Principle is in his great names that constitute the manifested cosmos, since the One is the name of procession of the universe, and the Good is the name of its reversion. This means that the universe, *to pan*, is a

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<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Tim.* 37C.

<sup>37</sup> F. M. Cornford, *Plato’s Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, p.101.

set of demiurgic and theurgic tokens, like a hieratic statue having its body animated by soul. For example, the stars are *agalmata* made by gods for their own habitation, and ‘the cosmos with its eight moving circles is thought of as an *agalma* which awaits the presence of the divine beings who are to possess the motion symbolised.’<sup>38</sup>

In Neoplatonism, names are likened to “divine images” that are essentially symbolic and theurgic. They function within the metaphysical triad of remaining, procession, and reversion (*monē, proodos, epistrophē*), leading to the first principles and causes through their effects and traces. In addition, the divine names are regarded as “vocal images” or “spoken statues” (*agalmata phōnēnta*) of the gods, according to the otherwise unknown Democritus the Platonist.<sup>39</sup>

Within the frame of the eternal demiurgic and theurgic work (*ergōn*), there is no difference whether names are treated as being natural or conventional, *phusei* or *thesei*, because this opposition is too human, discursive, and partly illusory. For Proclus, at the level of human perception, things are “natural” in four senses: like animals and their parts, like faculties and activities of natural things, like shadows and reflections in mirrors, and like images fashioned by art (*technētai eikones*), those which resemble their archetypes. Names are regarded as being “natural” in the fourth sense. Therefore as Anne Sheppard says:

The view that names are naturally appropriate, like images fashioned by the painter’s art which reflect the form of the object, accords with the Neoplatonist view that artistic images reflect the Platonic Forms rather than objects of the sensible world. It is also quite consistent with the view that names are *agalmata* espoused by Proclus in the *In Crat.* and also in the Alexandrian Neoplatonist Hierocles.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.102.

<sup>39</sup> Damascius, *In Phileb.* 24.3.

<sup>40</sup> A. Sheppard, ‘Proclus’ Philosophical Method of Exegesis: The Use of Aristotle and the Stoics in the Commentary on the Cratylus’ in *Proclus lecteur et interprete des anciens*, J. Pepin and H. D. Saffrey (ed.), Paris: CNRS, 1987, p.149.