

Intimations of Theurgy in George Gemistos Plethon’s Commentary on the *Chaldean Oracles*

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Introduction

Although George Gemistos Plethon attributes his Neoplatonic philosophy and Neopagan religion to a “golden chain” that begins with Zoroaster and culminates in Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus, he is commonly supposed to have had little regard for theurgy. Indeed, the surviving parts of his *Book of Laws*, in which he promises “Ritual reduced to simple practices, without superfluity, and yet sufficient,”¹ do not betray any interest in theurgy. We have the titles of the destroyed chapters, and a few might have addressed theurgy, but there is insufficient reason to suppose so.² Moreover, he charges the Egyptian lawgiver Menes with inaugurating a religion “charged with useless and bad rites” (ἀγιστείας),³ which might be considered a rejection of theurgy, and he nowhere mentions either the Hermetica or the Kabbalah.⁴ So it is reasonable to suppose that Plethon was uninterested in theurgy, or at very least considered it outside the scope of his *Laws*.

Plethon assembled his edition of the *Chaldean Oracles* from the collection of Michael Psellos, omitting six and slightly altering the text of a few others; he also drew from Psellos’ commentary, but purged of attempts to reconcile the oracles with orthodox Christianity.⁵ He rearranged their order, organizing them, apparently, by ontological priority. In his more detailed *Commentary on the Magian Oracles of Zoroaster’s Magi*,⁶ discussed here, they ascend the ontological scale; in his *Brief explanation of the more obscure passages in these oracles*,⁷ they descend.⁸ Because he believed that the oracles had been handed down from the Magi, the followers of Zoroaster, he called them the *Magian Oracles* (μαγικά λόγια).

The *Chaldean Oracles*, as we now understand them, are intimately connected with theurgy, but Vojtěch Hladký observes, “Plethon, unlike Psellos, completely ignores the theurgical context contained in the original *Chaldean Oracles*,” and, “For Plethon, the *Oracles* have nothing to do

¹ *Leg.* pref., 4.

² E.g., *Leg.* I.23 Purifications, III.33 Prayer, III.42 Oracles, three chapters on sacrifices (III.37–39), and four chapters on *daimones* (II.18–22).

³ *Leg.* III.43, 252.

⁴ Woodhouse (1986) 59–61

⁵ For general background on Plethon’s selection and commentary on the Oracles, see Woodhouse (1986) ch. 4, Tambrun-Krasker (1995) 152–156, Athanassiadi (2002), Hladký (2014) 35–39, 61–63.

⁶ Μαγικά λόγια τῶν ἀπὸ Ζωροάστρου μάγων — Ἐξηγήσεις εἰς τὰ αὐτὰ λόγια.

⁷ Βραχεῖά τις διασάφησις τῶν ἐν τοῖς λογίοις τούτοις ἀσαφεστέρως λεγομένων.

⁸ Hladký (2014) 37. A more detailed outline: Tambrun-Krasker (1995) 47–48.

with theurgy or any religious rites or beliefs and they are a kind of philosophy veiled in poetic language.”⁹ Polymnia Athanassiadi notes “Plethon’s marked indifference to the ritual aspect of the Chaldaean Oracles.”¹⁰ Dylan Burns, in contrast, claims that Plethon accepted Psellos’ magical interpretation of the Oracles and interpreted them “to the end of creating a discourse about magic.”¹¹ My aim here is to exhibit suggestive evidence that Plethon perceived the practice and value of theurgy in his collection of oracles, and especially in his *Commentary* on them.¹² Certainly, what we find points to the more contemplative, so-called “higher theurgy” rather than to theurgy using material *sumbola* and *sunthêmata*, but the same principles apply.¹³

Orders of Being

It will be worthwhile to say a few words about the orders of being that Plethon finds expressed in the *Oracles*, which he claims to agree with the doctrines of the Pythagoreans and Platonists, and attributes to the Magi, the disciples of Zoroaster. The orders of being correspond to and are caused by the three kings mentioned in the Platonic *Second Letter*:¹⁴

Ep. 2. 312e1–4

Related to the King of All are all things, and for his sake they are, and of all things fair he is the cause. And related to the Second are the second things and related to the Third the third. (tr. Bury)

Plethon cites Plutarch,¹⁵ who says Zoroaster defined three orders of beings (ὄντα). In Plethon’s words, “the first is the one that is eternal (αἰώνιον); the second is the one that is temporal (ἐγγρονον), but which is everlasting (ἄϊδιον); the third is the mortal (θνητήν) part.”¹⁶ Each of these realms had a corresponding god (its king), according to Plutarch: Horomazes (Ahura Mazda), Mithra, and Ahriman, respectively. Horomazes is associated with light and illumination, Ahriman with darkness and ignorance; Mithra is the mediator. Plethon explains that in the *Oracles* Horomazes is called “Father” and Mithras is called “Second Nous.” The transcendence of the Father, the First God, is expressed in this oracle:

(35) ... the Father snatched himself away,
and didn’t close his fire in Noeric Power.¹⁷

⁹ Hladký (2014) 38.

¹⁰ Athanassiadi (2002) 249.

¹¹ Burns (2006) 169.

¹² Three of Psellos’ oracles that Plethon left out of his collection (Psellos 6, 8, 39 = 150, 206, 149 des Places) are “magical” in content and might seem to imply that Plethon rejected theurgy, but Tambrun-Krasker (1995) 156 argues that Plethon omitted them because they involve magic in the pejorative sense of γοητεία rather than the philosophy of the Magi.

¹³ On the notion of a “higher theurgy” see Rosán (1949) 213–14, Sheppard (1982), and Majercik (1989) 35–6, 39–45.

¹⁴ *Or. mag.* 19.15–18. Citations are to the Tambrun-Krasker edition

¹⁵ Plutarch, *Is. & Os.* §46–47, 369E, 370A.

¹⁶ *Or. mag.* 19.19–20. Translations are my own.

¹⁷ *Or. mag.* 33 TK = 3 CO. Citations are to the oracle’s number (TK) in Tambrun-Krasker (1995) 1–4. In the text, I have numbered the oracles as they are in Plethon’s *Commentary*, which separately numbers some oracles that are combined in more recent editions. For comparison, I also cite the oracle’s number (CO) in des Places (1996) and Majercik (1989), although in a few cases Plethon’s text differs, as noted.

Plethon asserts that the Father is absolutely uncreated and unique, separated from all other gods. His fire, that is to say, his transcendent divinity, is not limited by emanation into his own Noeric Power (νοερᾶ δυνάμει), that is, into the Second God, who is next after him. Indeed, although everything desires the supreme god's divinity, it is incommunicable (οὐδ' ὅλως μεταδοτόν), not because he is unwilling to share it, as Plethon explains, but because it is impossible to do so.¹⁸ Nevertheless, everything is generated by the divine fire of the First God:¹⁹

(31) ... all things were born of the One Fire.²⁰

All of the absolute and perfect noetic species²¹ were created by the First God and delivered to the Second God to be ruled and guided:

(32) The Father finished everything and handed them
to Second Nous, whom you, the human tribe, call First.²²

Everything brought forth by him bears the likeness of Second Nous and of the remaining noetic substance (νοητῆς οὐσίας), but comes ultimately from the supreme Father. As a consequence, uninformed people think the Second God is the demiurge of the cosmos and mistake him for the supreme First God.²³

In Plethon's Neopagan *Book of Laws*, the First God is called Zeus. In his absolute unity he exists in an order by himself, above the eternal, supercelestial gods; he is called One-itself (αὐτοέν), Being-itself (αὐτοών), Good-itself (αὐτοαγαθός), pre-eternal (προαιώνιος), etc. He causes or emanates the second rank of gods, the highest of whom is the Second God or Demiurgic Nous, called Poseidon, of whom the other supercelestial gods are images. As Zeus causes the realm of eternal beings (the supercelestial gods), so Poseidon and the other supercelestial gods produce the realm of everlasting celestial gods, who exist in time and space. Kronos, head of the Titans (a lower order of supercelestial gods), and Helios, chief of the celestial gods, together create the mortal realm.²⁴

The oracles tell us that certain supercelestial *noeta* are themselves minds capable of *noesis*:

(33) The Iynges, thought by Father, also think themselves,
by his unutterable counsels moved to understand.²⁵

According to Plethon, the Iynges are the noetic forms (τὰ νοητὰ εἶδη) that have been conceived (νοούμενα) by the Father or First God, and the oracle tells us that they themselves also conceive (νοοῦντα). Their conceptions or notions (νοήσεις) are excited by the unutterable or unspeakable (ἀφθέγκτοις) counsels of the Father. Moreover, "moved" refers not to spatial displacement, but to timeless intellection (νοήσεως), that is, to an eternal relationship among notions (νοούμενα). The Father's counsels are called unspeakable, which implies they are unmoved as well, for speaking is motion. The meaning is that these Forms have an unchangeable relation to the

¹⁸ *Or. mag.* 19.14–19.

¹⁹ *Or. mag.* 17.4.

²⁰ *Or. mag.* 29 TK = 10 CO.

²¹ *Or. mag.* 17.6: τὰ νοητὰ δηλαδὴ εἶδη.

²² *Or. mag.* 30 TK = 7 CO.

²³ *Or. mag.* 17.6–13.

²⁴ *Leg.* I.5, 44–52; III.15, 108.

²⁵ *Or. mag.* 31 TK = 77 CO.

notions (νοούμενα), not a transient relation like the soul's. That is, *noeta* are eternal—outside of time—and exist in eternal relationships; their images in our timebound mind (*dianoia*) are connected with them at some times, not at others. In his *Laws*, Plethon identifies the noetic forms with the gods, who are also created by the First God Zeus, and are in an eternal noetic relation with one another, and so perhaps they can be identified with the *Iynges* as well. In his *Brief Explanation*, the *Iynges* are described as minds (νοῦς) and separated forms (εἶδη τὰ χωριστά).²⁶ Plethon explains that they are called *Iynges* (ἰγγες, the magical instruments used in erotic spells) because they erotically attach what is below to themselves.²⁷ This higher theurgy therefore makes use of the noetic forms rather than physical instruments to achieve union.

The Second God is the leader of the eternal beings who regulate the cosmos:

(34) Oh, how the world has rigid intellectual guides!²⁸

The most excellent of the noetic forms (νοητῶν εἰδῶν) brought down by the immortals into this heaven are, according to Plethon, the noeric guides of the cosmos (νοερούς ἀνοχῆας κόσμου), of whom the Second God is the chorus leader (κορυφαῖον). They are called “rigid” (ακαμπεῖς) because they are incorruptible (ἄφθαρτον).²⁹

In Plethon's *Laws*, the terrestrial daimons (χθόνιοι δαίμονες) are the lowest rank of divinity; the supercelestial god Hermes provides the Form of their souls.³⁰ In the surviving fragments, Plethon argues that all daimons are good;³¹ similarly the *Oracles* tell us:

(20) And Nature prompts belief that daimons all are pure,
and evil matter's offspring are both kind and good.³²

According to Plethon, “Nature” here refers to natural reason (ὁ φυσικὸς λόγος), which convinces us that the daimons are all pure (ἀγνούς), and this is because all things proceeding from God are good, for he is the Good-itself (αὐτοαγαθοῦ), and moreover that “evil matter's offspring” (τὰ κακῆς ὕλης βλαστήματα), by which the oracle means forms that are dependent on matter, are both kind and good. But why does the oracle call matter “evil”? Its essence (οὐσία) cannot be bad, because a bad essence cannot have good and beneficial offspring. Rather, it is “evil” only in so far as matter is the essence that is farthest from the Good and has the least participation in it. The oracle therefore means that if even the offspring of “evil matter,” that is, the last of essences, are good, then so much more so are the daimons, who have an excellent rank because of their rational nature (τῷ τε λογικῷ τῆς φύσεως) and their lack of mixture with mortal nature, for they have eternal aethereal bodies (vehicles), but not mortal bodies.³³

²⁶ *Decl. brev.* 21.7–8.

²⁷ *Decl. brev.* 21.8–10.

²⁸ *Or. mag.* 32 TK, cf. 79 CO. Plethon has modified Psellos' text, replacing πᾶς by ὃ πῶς.

²⁹ *Or. mag.* 18.8–12.

³⁰ *Leg.* I.5, 52; III.34, 160.

³¹ *Leg.* III.34, 138. Two of the destroyed chapters had titles II.19 “That the daimons are not bad” (Ὡς οὐ πονηροὶ οἱ δαίμονές εἰσιν) and II.20 “Rebuttal of slander against daimons” (Ἐλεγχοὶ τῶν κατὰ δαιμόνων διαβολῶν).

³² *Or. mag.* 19 TK = 88 CO.

³³ *Leg.* III.34, 176.

A hymn in the *Laws* enumerates a number of functions of the daimons, including purifying (καθαίροντες), elevating (ἀναγόντες), guarding (φρουρεῦντες), preserving (σώζοντες), and correcting (ὀρθοῦντες).³⁴ The *Oracles* mention:

(21) Avengers, the restraints (ἄγταιραι) of people.³⁵

Plethon explains that the avengers (ποιναί) are vindictive daimons (κολαστικαὶ δαίμονες) who restrain people, keeping them out of vice and encouraging them toward virtue. Although they may punish us or cause pain or misfortune, they do so for our correction and education and to serve the greater good.³⁶

The Human Soul

The Second God produces beings that exist in time (ἐγγρονον) but are everlasting (ἄιδιον), and thus the immortal human soul is produced by him, whom the oracles also call Father's Power (Πατὴρ δύναμιν), Noeric Power (δύναμιν ... νοεράν), and Paternal Nous (νοῦν πατρικόν):

(12) Since Psychê, by the Father's Power a radiant fire,
remains immortal, she is mistress of all life,
and holds full-measures of the cosmos' many clefts.³⁷

This radiant fire is a divine and intellectual essence, which imparts immortality to the soul because, as mistress of life (ζωῆς δεσπότις), her life cannot be taken away, for one cannot be the master of what can be taken away. Therefore, due to her perpetuity (ἀϊδιότητα), the human soul is periodically reincarnated, and therefore occupies many places—"holds full-measures of the cosmos' many clefts (κόλπων)"—according to her past lives. Plethon uses another oracle as an opportunity to explain the human soul:

(14) Neither spirit do you stain, nor deepen down
the plane...³⁸

He attributes to Pythagoras and Plato the idea that the soul is a substance neither wholly separable from all matter, nor wholly inseparable, but partly each, for it is separable potentially, but actually inseparable. This is because there are three kinds of forms in the cosmos: (1) Those wholly separate from matter, the supercelestial intelligences³⁹ or gods. (2) Those wholly inseparable from matter, whose substance is dependent on matter; when their body passes away, this kind of soul also is dissolved and perishes. These include the souls of nonrational beings. (3) Between these is a middle kind, the rational soul (including the human soul). Unlike supercelestial intelligences, it is always embodied (although sometimes only in an aethereal body). Unlike nonrational souls, the rational soul is not dependent on matter, but instead its body is dependent on it. Like the supercelestial intelligences, it is indivisible and able to contemplate

³⁴ *Leg.* III.35, 214, Hymn 14.

³⁵ *Or. mag.* 20 TK = 161 CO.

³⁶ *Leg.* II.6, 76, 78; III.34, 188.

³⁷ *Or. mag.* 12 TK = 96 CO.

³⁸ *Or. mag.* 14 TK = 104 CO.

³⁹ *Or. mag.* 10.8–9: τοὺς νοῦς δὴ τοὺς ὑπερουρανίους.

beings, even so far as the First God. Because it can know eternal beings, it must itself be everlasting.

Plethon goes on to explain that the third kind of soul is always attached to an aethereal body, which is its vehicle. The aethereal body is immortal because it is in perpetual contact with an immortal rational soul, but it is also animated with its own nonrational soul, which is an image (εἶδωλον) of the rational soul and includes the faculties of imagination and sensation. In the *Laws*, Plethon uses *aether* (αιθήρ) as a synonym for the element fire, and says that the aethereal vehicles of the celestial gods are fiery, which is why they are visible, whereas the vehicles of earthly daimons and humans are invisible, because their aether is more like warm breath.⁴⁰ The rational soul is connected to the aethereal body through its highest faculty, the imagination (φαντασίας), and in humans the aethereal body, which is immortal, is connected to a mortal body during incarnation.

The souls of daimons are similar to human souls, Plethon explains, only more noble, and they have nobler vehicles, which cannot be mingled with corruptible matter, and so daimons don't have mortal bodies. Likewise the souls of the celestial gods are much better than the daimons' and possess better vehicles, which are bright because of "the greatness of their active potentiality."⁴¹ Plethon says that the above seem to be the ancient doctrines on the soul taught by the Magi, the followers of Zoroaster. He interprets the oracle to mean that we should not contaminate the subtle spirit (πνεῦμα) of which the aethereal vehicle is composed and make it denser by inclining too much toward the mortal body. It is described as a plane (ἐπίπεδον) not because it is two-dimensional, but because of its subtlety (λεπτότητα); it becomes dense, however, if too much attention is paid to corporeal matters.

Descent and Ascent of the Soul

With this background, we turn to oracles more relevant to theurgy, beginning with the first in his collection.

- (1) Seek thou the soul's way, whence or in what rank
to serve the body; to that rank from which thou flowed,
thou mayst rise up again; join act with sacred speech.⁴²

Plethon tells us that the Magi, the followers of Zoroaster, like many other ancient sages, taught that the human soul is immortal, but descends from time to time into a mortal body, which it animates and orders with its power, and then returns above. In that realm there are many lands (χώρων), one radiant (ἀμφοφασαῶς), another wrapped in darkness (ἀμφοικνεφοῦς), and others partly bright and partly dark. A soul that has descended from the radiant land and has performed well its function on earth will return to that land, otherwise it goes to a darker one, according to its life here below. The oracle tells us to seek the soul's way (ψυχῆς ὄχετόν) by which the soul has flowed into the body (σοι ἢ ψυχῆ ἐρρύης), and therefore the way it may return home. I

⁴⁰ *Leg.* III.34, 160, 176.

⁴¹ *Or. mag.* 11.16: μέγεθος δραστηκῆς δυνάμεως.

⁴² *Or. mag.* 1 TK, cf. 110 CO. Plethon has conjectured corrections to Psellos' text, replacing και by συ and ὑπέβη και πῶς before ἐπὶ τάξιν by ἀφ' ἧς ἐρρύης after it.

suggest that we may interpret this path as the soul’s divine lineage (σειρά), its line of descent and later ascent.

Plethon explains “join act with sacred speech” as follows: “sacred speech” (ιερόν ... λόγον) refers to divine worship (θεοσεβείας), and “act” refers to theurgic ritual (τελετήν), meaning that the ascent of the soul⁴³ requires divine worship and theurgic rites (τελετή). Although Plethon seems to interpret the oracle as referring to the soul’s ascent at the end of an incarnation,⁴⁴ the oracle text is equally applicable to a theurgic ascent while alive (“dying before you die”), as suggested by theurgic vocabulary (*teletê, anagôgê*).

As explained above (oracle 14), the image (εἶδωλον) of the rational soul is the nonrational part that is joined to the rational part and animates its aethereal vehicle; this allows the nonrational part to join in the ascent to the radiant land:

(15) And of the radiant place,⁴⁵ the image has a piece.⁴⁶

Plethon explains the oracle to mean that the nonrational image has a share of the radiant land (ἀμφιφαῖ χῶρον), for the rational soul is permanently connected to its vehicle (which is animated by the nonrational soul). In the *Laws*, Plethon explains that the imagination is the principal faculty by which ritual works, and therefore it has a privileged position in the highest part of the nonrational soul, connecting it to our divine part.⁴⁷ Therefore, through its roots in the radiant land, it can lead the soul in its vehicle back to it (see also comments on oracle 14 above).

The second oracle in Plethon’s collection cautions against being too focused on our mortal embodiment:

(2) Incline not down, beneath the Earth there lies a cliff,
which draws one down the seven steps, beneath her is
the throne of dire Necessity.⁴⁸

Plethon explains that throughout the *Oracles* “Earth” refers to mortal nature and “fire” often refers to the divine (as we saw in oracle 12 above). Here, “Earth” means the mortal body, and because we are embodied here on Earth, we risk a metaphorical fall. The seven steps⁴⁹ refer to the seven planets, delivering us to Fate, the throne of dire and unalterable Necessity.⁵⁰ Therefore by stooping down, by focusing too much on the mortal body, we subject ourselves to what is not up to us (οὐκ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν) and sacrifice our freedom. Thus our desires will be frustrated so long as they are bound to the body. Fortunately oracle 1 has already taught us that we may reascend along the way we came by means of sacred words and rituals.

⁴³ *Or. mag.* 5.13: τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ταύτην ἀναγωγὴν.

⁴⁴ *Or. mag.* 4.13–5.2: ἦτοι ἐπὶ τινα χρόνον ἐργασομένην αὐτῷ, καὶ ξωώσουσάν τε καὶ κοσμήσουσαν ἐκ τῶν δυνατῶν, καὶ αὐτὴς ἐνθένδε ἐκεῖσε ἀποχωρεῖν.

⁴⁵ *Or. mag.* 12.7: τόπον ἀμφιφασοντα.

⁴⁶ *Or. mag.* 15a TK = 158.2 CO. The oracles that Plethon numbers 15 and 16 are quoted by Synesius as one oracle (but in the order 16, 15), and so recent editions of Plethon’s commentary label them 15a and 15b (the TK numbers here). Psellos, like Plethon, treats them as separate oracles in the order 15, 16; see Majercik (1989) 108.

⁴⁷ *Leg.* III.34, 150, 152, 188.

⁴⁸ *Or. mag.* 2 TK, cf. 164 CO. Plethon has ἦν ὑπο δεινῆς instead of Psellos’ ὕφ’ ἦν ὁ τῆς (PG 122, 1132b2). Moreover, unlike recent editors, Plethon accepted the third line, which is not in verse.

⁴⁹ *Or. mag.* 5.17–18: Ἐπτάπορον δὲ βαθμίδα.

⁵⁰ *Or. mag.* 5.18–19: δεινὴν τινα ἰδρῦσθαι καὶ ἀπαράτρεπτον ἀνάγκην.

Although the human soul is not ashamed of her embodiment, she strives to unite with God:

- (11) The human soul will somehow clasp God to herself,
and having nothing mortal, she is wholly drunk with God,
for she boasts harmony, where mortal bodies stand.⁵¹

Plethon explains that the human soul strives to embrace God, who is her constant defense, and to join with him. She does this by striving to resemble him as much as possible (for example, I would add, by turning away from the body, becoming still and impassible, concentrating into the immortal *nous*). Then she is completely drunk with God and replenished with divine benefits. Although the soul is immortal, she is proud of her contribution to the harmony of the All, for it is our role as humans, with our immortal souls and mortal bodies, to unite these two great realms—the immortal and the mortal—by our periodic incarnation (as Plethon explains in the *Laws*⁵²). Thus the All is adorned with one harmony.

The Father's illumination coming from the radiant land reveals the soul's way back to him:

- (7) You must make haste to light, and to the Father's beams,
from whence was sent to thee a soul full-clothed with *nous*.⁵³

The light and beams of the Father proceed, according to Plethon, from the land ($\chi\omega\rho\omicron\nu$) of the soul, which is radiant ($\acute{\alpha}\mu\phi\iota\phi\alpha\eta$). From it the soul came fully clothed with *nous*, and by it can return. From other oracles (6, 9, 28 below), we know that the *nous* contains the symbols that lead our soul back to her homeland. Therefore the *Oracles* advise:

- (13) Seek Paradise.⁵⁴

For Paradise represents the radiant land of the soul,⁵⁵ according to Plethon. If we do not return to the Father's light, then we fail in our duty as humans:

- (8) Alas! The Earth bewails them, even to their children.⁵⁶

The Earth—that is, Nature—bewails those who do not hasten to the light, because their souls have been sent to adorn mortal nature, and they do not fulfill this function if they fail to seek the light and hence live badly. This failure infects their children as well, whom they educate badly. Here we can see Plethon implying we have an obligation to ascend the beams of the Father, not just at the end of life, but during our sojourns here. Nevertheless, the soul's desire to ascend is not sufficient in itself:

- (6) But the Paternal *Nous* accepteth not her will,
until she flee oblivion, and pronounce a word,
inserting memory of the pure paternal sign.⁵⁷

⁵¹ *Or. mag.* 11 TK = 97 CO.

⁵² *Leg.* III.34, 140, 180, 182, 184, 194, 196; III.43, 250.

⁵³ *Or. mag.* 7 TK = 115 CO.

⁵⁴ *Or. mag.* 13 TK = 165 CO.

⁵⁵ *Or. mag.* 10.2: Τὸν ἀμφιφασὴ τῆς ψυχῆς ἡδῶρον.

⁵⁶ *Or. mag.* 8 TK = 162 CO.

⁵⁷ *Or. mag.* 6 TK = 109 CO.

Plethon explains that the will or desire of the soul is not sufficient for ascending to the Paternal Nous, that is, to the Second God, who is also the demiurge of the soul. She must escape the oblivion (λήθης) that she suffers through connection to her mortal body. But in addition, she must speak a certain word (ῥῆμα) or formula (λόγον) in her thoughts, which recalls to mind a paternal divine symbol or watchword (συνθήματος), namely, the command to pursue the good.⁵⁸ By recalling these divine symbols, the soul makes herself acceptable to her maker. This oracle and Plethon’s interpretation mention explicitly the theurgic symbols implanted in the individual *nous* by the Second God. Another oracle has been interpreted to imply that controlled breathing was used in certain theurgic practices.⁵⁹

(9) The soul’s expellers with the breath⁶⁰ are easily freed.⁶¹

Plethon explains that the *logoi* expel the soul from vice and allow her to breathe (ἀναπνεῖν). It is easy to strip off the oblivion (λήθης) associated with the body, which keeps the *logoi* enclosed, and thus to free them. According to oracle 6 these *logoi* recall from forgetfulness (or the concealment of the unconscious) the symbols or watchwords (*sunthēmata*) that allow the soul to ascend. The collective unconscious shows the way:

(22) Let lead the soul’s immortal depth, and all thine eyes
extend quite upward.⁶²

Plethon explains that we should allow the divine depth (τὸ θεῖον βάθος) of the soul to guide us and to direct upward “all of our eyes,” which means all of our knowing faculties (γνωστικὰς δυνάμεις). Psychologically, this means that we are allowing the archetypes of the collective unconscious—the symbols hidden in its depths—to guide us in the ascent. That is, the symbols and watchwords that we need for the ascent reside in the depths of the *nous* that we have from the Second God:

(28) Paternal Nous implanted symbols into souls.⁶³

Plethon explains that Paternal Nous, who is the demiurge of the substance (οὐσίας) of the soul, has implanted into our souls the symbols (τὰ σύμβολα) that are images of *noeta*.⁶⁴ Therefore every soul contains in herself the reasons or principles of beings.⁶⁵ These symbols, the images of the *noeta*, should be used to raise us up to the *noeta* themselves:

(29) Learn the noetic, which exists beyond thy *nous*.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ *Or. mag.* 7.6: τὴν τῆς τοῦ καλοῦ διώξεως ἐντολήν.

⁵⁹ Majercik (1989) 38, 188.

⁶⁰ *Or. mag.* 8.7: Ψυχῆς ἐξωστῆρες ἀνάπνοοι.

⁶¹ *Or. mag.* 9 TK = 124 CO.

⁶² *Or. mag.* 21 TK, cf. 112 CO. Plethon has δ’ ἄρδην πάντ’ where Psellos has δὲ πάντα ἄρδην (PG 122, 1137b11-12); his δὲ is omitted in recent editions. Both Plethon and Psellos have ἠγεῖσθω for the first word, rather than οἰγνύσθω, as now accepted.

⁶³ *Or. mag.* 27 TK, cf. 108 CO. Plethon has ταῖς ψυχαῖς instead of Psellos’ κατὰ κόσμον.

⁶⁴ *Or. mag.* 16.7–8: τὰς τῶν νοητῶν εἰδῶν εἰκόνας.

⁶⁵ *Or. mag.* 16.8–9: τοὺς τῶν ὄντων ... λόγους.

⁶⁶ *Or. mag.* 28a TK, cf. 1.13 CO. Oracles 29 and 30 in Plethon’s enumeration (28a, 28b TK) are single verses from a longer oracle (1 CO). Plethon’s text differs slightly from Psellos’, and he has Μάνθανε where 1.13 CO has ὄφρα μάθης.

Plethon’s commentary advises you to learn the noetic, which exists in actuality beyond your *nous*, for although the images (εἰκόνες) of the *noeta* are implanted in your *nous* by the demiurge, they are in your soul only potentially. It is therefore necessary to have gnosis of the *noetic*⁶⁷ in actuality (ἐνεργείᾳ). Restating Plethon in psychological terms, the archetypal symbols, which exist as potentials in the unconscious, must be activated (or *constellated*) in order to be effective in theurgy, thereby using innate images rather than material icons.⁶⁸ In this way we contact the *noeta*—that is, the gods—themselves.

If we have suitably prepared our souls, then we will receive divine illumination from the First God:

(26) From all sides to the pristine soul stretch reins of fire.⁶⁹

Plethon tells us that if we perform the theurgic ritual (τελετήν) with a pure heart that is simplified and purified of knavery (πανουργίας), then the reins (ἡνία) of fire will appear to us, and we may draw them in. He seems to be saying that the theurgist may be illuminated by the beams and light of the First God (oracle 7) and be led upward by the divine reins.

We have seen that the symbols and watchwords sown in our souls can raise us up to the *noeta* of the Second God, of which they are images, but to ascend to the First God:

(30) There is a notion known by just the flower of *nous*.⁷⁰

Because the Supreme God is perfectly one, we cannot comprehend him the same way as other gods (by means of the articulated *noeta*). Rather, we must activate (through contemplation) the supreme and singular part of our understanding (νοήσεως), which is called “the flower of *nous*” (τῷ τοῦ νοῦ ἄνθει). (The oracle itself is an evocation of *nous*: “There is a notion [νοητόν] known [νοεῖν] by just the flower of *nous* [νόου].”)

Theurgical Experiences and Consequences

We come next to a series of oracles addressing theurgical experiences and consequences. First we have a warning or caution:

(17) Do not expel, lest holding something she goes forth.⁷¹

Plethon interprets this oracle to mean that you should not expel the soul from the mortal body, for the soul would retain something (presumably bad) by this exit; indeed, ejecting the soul from the body violates the laws of nature. Plethon seems to understand this expulsion as suicide, by which a soul thus forced from its body would retain entanglements with the material world.⁷²

Therefore the theurgical ascent should be temporary until one’s incarnation has reached its natural end (as Plotinus explains in *Enn.* I.9(16)1, commenting on this same oracle). In fact, theurgical practices benefit the mortal body as well as the immortal soul:

⁶⁷ *Or. mag.* 16.13–14: τὴν τοῦ νοητοῦ γνῶσιν.

⁶⁸ MacLennan (2005).

⁶⁹ *Or. mag.* 25 TK = 127 CO.

⁷⁰ *Or. mag.* 28b TK = 1.1 CO.

⁷¹ *Or. mag.* 16 TK = 166 CO.

⁷² Tambrun-Krasker (1995) 107.

(18) ... If thou extend the fiery *nous*
to piety's work, the flowing body thou shalt save.⁷³

Plethon says that by extending your divine *nous* toward the exercise of piety (εὐσεβείας) and religious rites,⁷⁴ you preserve your mortal body and make it healthier by means of the rites (τελετής). We may note that Plethon specifically uses the language of theurgy and initiation (*teletê*), and that this oracle is relevant to a living theurgist, not to a person who has died.

In theurgical operations we must beware of deceptive visions and manifestations:

(19) ... From the cavities
within the Earth spring earthly dogs who never show
a sign that's true to mortals ...⁷⁵

During their rituals (τελετάς), according to Plethon, initiates (τελουμένων) may experience apparitions (φάσματα) in the form of dogs and other shapes. These arise from the cavities (κόλπων) of the Earth (mentioned in oracle 12 above), that is, from the terrestrial and mortal body, and especially from irrational passions implanted in it that are not yet sufficiently governed by reason. These are apparitions (εἶδωλα) of the passions of the initiate's soul⁷⁶ and mere appearances without substance (φαινόμενα ἀνυπόστατα), which have no true significance. (This oracle is usually supposed to refer to the dogs of Hekate,⁷⁷ but she has no role in Plethon's collection of *Magian Oracles* and has a different place in his theology in the *Laws*.) These misleading apparitions appear to theurgists who have not properly ordered their souls,⁷⁸ but the experienced theurgist will have veridical visions:

(24) If thou speak'st often to me, thou shalt see what's said,⁷⁹
for neither then appears the heavens' concave bulk,
nor shine the stars; the brilliance of the Moon is hid;
the Earth stands not; all things appear as thunderbolts.⁸⁰

Plethon remarks that the oracle is phrased as though a god is speaking to an initiate (τελουμένω), saying that if you frequently speak to me and invoke me (καλέσης με), you will witness everywhere what is said (αὐτὸ τὸ λεκτόν), that is, you will see me whom you invoke (καλεῖς). Then indeed you will perceive nothing but thunderbolts (κεραυνοί), a fire that darts everywhere throughout the cosmos. This is the true image by which we may perceive the god, but don't try to behold the god himself:

(25) Call not on Nature's self-revealing image.⁸¹

⁷³ *Or. mag.* 17 TK = 128 CO.

⁷⁴ *Or. mag.* 13.5–6: τὴν εὐσεβῆ τελετήν.

⁷⁵ *Or. mag.* 18 TK = 90 CO.

⁷⁶ *Or. mag.* 13.13–14: τῆς τοῦ τελουμένου ψυχῆς.

⁷⁷ Majercik (1989) 13.

⁷⁸ *Decl. brev.* 22.3: κατακεκοσμηκόσι τὴν ψυχὴν.

⁷⁹ Plethon has λέκτον whereas recent editions have λέοντα.

⁸⁰ *Or. mag.* 23 TK, cf. 147 CO. Recent editions have a slightly different final verse: <τε> πάντα κεραυνοῖς instead of Plethon's τὰ πάντα κεραυνοί.

⁸¹ *Or. mag.* 24 TK = 101 CO.

Plethon's interpretation is that we should not seek to behold the self-revealing image (αὐτοπτον ἄγαλμα) of Nature, that is, the nature of God, for it is not visible to our eyes. Those phenomena that appear to initiates (τελουμένοις), such as thunder, lightning, and the rest, are only symbols (σύμβολα), not the nature of the god. Rather, a veridical vision of the god will not be of a man or dog or any other such definite apparition, but a flame devoid of shape:

(27) But when you see the very holy shapeless fire,
which shines by leaps and bounds throughout the whole world's depths,
attend the fire's voice...⁸²

That is, according to Plethon, when we behold this divine amorphous fire (ἀσχημάτιστον πῦρ θεῖον), which leaps throughout the cosmos, illuminating it with grace and benevolence, then we must attend its voice, which brings most truthful foreknowledge (πρόγνωσιν). Plethon's comments on these last five oracles all apparently refer to theurgic operations.

Conclusions

Although Plethon introduces the soul's ascent in the context of its return after an incarnation (oracle 1), other oracles state or imply that the ascent is a theurgical practice undertaken while still in a mortal body (oracles 2, 6–9, 11, 17–19, 22, 24–27, 29, 30). Let us summarize. Humans are reincarnated repeatedly, and this periodic descent of our immortal souls into mortal embodiment and return to their radiant home fulfills our function, which is to bind the immortal and mortal realms together, thus perfecting cosmic harmony (oracle 8). Moreover, Plethon's interpretations suggest that even during our embodied life we may make the ascent. First we must withdraw attention from our body, allowing the soul's vehicle to become light and subtle (14). Then we must "seek the soul's way," the path by which we descended into mortal life from our radiant home (1); the rays of the Father's fire, shining from our home, show us the way (7). If we perform the rituals with a pure heart and honestly, then the "reins of fire" will appear that lead us upward (26). The ascent is accomplished by a combination of ritual actions and sacred formulas and prayers (1). By speaking certain divine words and formulas in our minds, we recollect the divine symbols that have been implanted in our *nous* by the Paternal Nous, which allow us to approach the First God (6). These formulas are activated by stripping off the oblivion of the body in which the symbols are enclosed and concealed, which brings them to mind (9). We then allow the activated archetypal symbols in the depths of the psyche to direct our gnostic faculties and to guide us in the ascent (22, 29). These symbols, which are images of the noetic minds or gods, will raise us up to them (28), for the gods exert this attractive power, drawing us to union with them (33). The deepest such symbol, the flower of *nous*, is the symbol of the First God, who is absolutely one and can be known only by activating this symbol in our *nous* (30). Grasping God, we become drunk, suffused with his gracious benevolence (11). Through these practices we gain divine foreknowledge, achieve true freedom (2), and even improve our health (18). With practice we will be able to speak with the gods whom we invoke, who will appear as formless flames or thunderbolts flashing about; these are just signs of the god, but we should not seek to see the god himself (24, 25). Apparitions of people, dogs, or other definite shapes should be disregarded, for they are meaningless effects of irrational passions and an insufficiently

⁸² *Or. mag.* 26 TK = 148 CO.

ordered soul (19). When you perceive amorphous fire, attend the god’s voice, which brings true foreknowledge (27). After the ascent, we should return to fulfil our duties on earth (17).

If Plethon was sympathetic toward theurgy, as suggested by his commentary on these oracles, then why do we not find more explicit evidence of it? Obviously Plethon was circumspect about his Neopagan religious practice. Although, with care, one could get away with teaching Hellenism (Pagan philosophy), its ritual practice was another matter, which was punished harshly. Plethon had the cruel torture and execution of Juvenal and the thinly veiled threats of Scholarios (Gennadios) as sufficient reasons for caution.⁸³ Nevertheless, his *Book of Laws* was explicitly Pagan, and so we might expect to find theurgy in it, but we don’t. Possibly it was discussed in the destroyed parts, but one would suppose Scholarios would have preserved those parts, all the better to prove Plethon’s “crime.” More likely, Plethon viewed theurgy as a specialized, priestly art, and thus beyond the scope of the *Book of Laws*, which proposes a civic religion. If indeed he led a Pagan *phratría* in Mistra, then perhaps theurgy was taught orally and never committed to writing, for he agreed with Plato that the highest truths should not to be written down,⁸⁴ “so students would be wiser, keeping their knowledge in their souls rather than in books.”⁸⁵

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⁸³ Woodhouse (1986) 315–318; Siniosoglou (2011) 134–138.

⁸⁴ Woodhouse (1986) 67; Hladký (2014) 56.

⁸⁵ Plethon, *Contra Schol.* 983 D.

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