

*Porphyry*  
*On The Cave of the Nymphs*

*Translation and Introductory Essay*  
*by*

Robert Lamberton

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# Introduction



## *Porphyry, Text, and Tradition*

Porphyry's essay on the cave of the nymphs in the *Odyssey*, which dates from the late 3rd century after Christ, can make a credible claim to be the oldest piece of literary criticism in the European tradition to survive essentially intact to our own time. In order to support this claim we would have to disregard — as critics — Aristotle and Horace (and perhaps the author of "On the Sublime," though that text may be later than Porphyry's), and in doing so we would have to abandon the cliché of classical scholarship that ancient criticism was an activity universally concerned with form and diction rather than meaning. Instead, we would simply have to understand "literary criticism" in terms of standard contemporary usage. Porphyry's essay is the oldest surviving European text devoted explicitly and exclusively to the elucidation of the meaning of another text: it is our earliest intact commentary on a literary text. As such it is the first source to which we can go for evidence on *how* that text, and by analogy other texts, were read, and the evidence it provides is devastating for the traditional (or more accurately the "Enlightenment") model of the relationship of reader and text.

But before considering its value as evidence we should place Porphyry's essay in its own context, as best we can. Porphyry himself was the disciple and literary executor of Plotinus. He came to Rome from Tyre, his birthplace, by way of Athens, where during the 250's he was the disciple of Longinus. In Rome, he sat at the feet of Plotinus, along with the rest of the circle, and became his new master's biographer and editor, apparently on the strength of his literary training among the Athenian Platonists. His given name was Malkos, which he hellenized first by direct translation to Basileus, later by metonymy to Porphyrios.

Those of his works which survive largely intact — including a *Life of Pythagoras*, an essay *On Abstinence from Animal Food*, an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*, the life of Plotinus attached to the *Enneads* and the present essay — represent only a small fraction of his voluminous output, much of which fell victim to Christian hostility (which he incurred deliberately and unflinchingly), rather than simple neglect. These works, along with others preserved in more fragmentary form, are enough to indicate his voracious curiosity and an imagination whose closest modern counterpart is probably to be found in a Cotton Mather, endlessly interrogating every phenomenon of the physical universe with the question, "What can I see of the Lord my God in this?" Like the Puritans, the Neoplatonists of late antiquity lived in a world whose provisional configurations were real only to the extent that they functioned as symbols, as prefigurations, of a non-material and unchanging reality.

We have no reason to think that Porphyry was an original thinker; in fact, the evidence of all his surviving works tends to indicate just the opposite. This does not decrease his value from our point of view and if anything it enhances that value, since we may reasonably suspect that whatever habits of mind — and specifically habits of *reading* — we find attested by Porphyry are by no means tendentious. Porphyry's method of commentary, the sort of reading reflected in that method, and his specific claims regarding the hidden meaning of the text in question, all come to him from the tradition he taps. He is sometimes specific regarding his sources — the appeal to authority is one of his most characteristic tropes — but his references may be more tantalizing than helpful. The major sources cited for specific interpretations in the essay on the cave of the nymphs are "Numenius and his companion Cronius," two thinkers of the century before Porphyry's own. We may safely call both Neopythagoreans, but beyond that label both are difficult to characterize in spite of the fact that some substantial fragments of Numenius are recoverable.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that in some context — perhaps his work "On the Secrets in Plato" — Numenius wrote a commentary on the Myth of Er in the final book of the *Republic*, and it is probable that this is the source of much of the material Porphyry utilizes to elucidate the *Odyssey* passage.<sup>2</sup>

If Porphyry's major source in interpreting the Homeric passage is a



Neopythagorean work on the interpretation of Plato, we may suspect that the scope of his intention and the goal of his commentary extend beyond what we usually understand as literary criticism, and there is no doubt that they do. Porphyry is concerned here with Homer to the extent that Homer is a source of truth, a theologian, a definitive and authoritative witness to a revelation shared by Pythagoras and by Plato and containing the key to the mysteries of the structure of the universe and the fate of souls. The definition of the canon of authoritative texts was an ongoing process in later Platonism, one which is difficult to map before the time of Numenius and Cronius and which came to full fruition only with Proclus and the last of the pagan Neoplatonists, in the 5th and early 6th centuries. The formation of the canon must certainly have been a stimulus to the hermeneutic activities of the thinkers who gave privileged status to these works and from its beginnings hermeneutics seems to have been bent to the task of reconciling apparent contradictions whether within the work of a single author or between authors.

This is a tradition well aware of the possibilities open to commentary, its major mode of expression. As Geoffrey Hartman puts it, "Commentary, the oldest and most enduring literary-critical activity, has always shown that a received text means more than it says (it is 'allegorical'), or that it subverts all possible meanings by its 'irony' — a rhetorical or structural limit that prevents the dissolution of art into positive and exploitative truth."<sup>3</sup> Given that Numenius, Porphyry and Proclus all concerned themselves with elucidating the meaning of Plato, who is the source to which all definitions of irony inevitably refer (whether in the context of appeal to authority or simply in search of illustration), it is not surprising that both possibilities are intensely present to their imaginations. The majority of Plato's speakers, and many of Homer's, are liars — their "truths" are expressed to be undermined, to be subverted — the latent, masked voice of the philosopher or poet does not mean what it says. The ultimate concern of these commentators, though, cannot be the destruction of all the meanings in the text (even if all the explicit or superficial ones may fall by the wayside in the process of commentary).<sup>4</sup> Their final concern will be to distill from those meanings, using their contradictions and their ironies as hints and justifications for the undertaking, the *true* meaning, what the text means *beyond* what it says. In this sense we may, within the context of the ancient definition of alleg-

ory (which is also Hartman's), call them all allegorists, though we should do so without losing sight of their grasp of the other pole of their activity, their potential destructive interaction with the explicit meanings of the text, as ironists.

But does this tradition of commentary which we encounter in substantial form in the 3rd century have deeper roots? There is no doubt that it does. The authoritative text which most occupied the attention of the Neoplatonists was the *Timaeus* and the earliest attested commentary on that dialogue goes back to Posidonius of Apamea, a platonizing Stoic of the 2nd and 1st centuries before Christ. The early history of commentary is also an area in which papyrology comes to our aid. Among the earliest papyri preserved in Greece is a fragment from Derveni in Macedonia, dated as early as the middle of the 4th c. before Christ, and containing portions of an Orphic hymn with allegorical commentary. Plato himself provides evidence that the works of Homer were taught "in allegories" in his time, though he mentions the fact — or has Socrates mention it — in the context of denouncing Homer as a basis for the education of the young, "whether [his obscene stories about the gods] are in the form of allegories or not."<sup>5</sup> What all of this suggests is that from the time of the Sophists at the latest — and perhaps much earlier — Greek education took the form of commentaries on texts, commentaries oscillating between the poles of allegory and irony but doubtless favoring the former. And this is precisely where the Greeks learned to read: their experience of the text has no primacy over their experience of commentary on the text. In 5th-century Athens, in the Middle Ages, in our own culture, texts exist only as pretexts and what is communicated in the guise of education — which is to say commentary, or criticism — is not texts, but encounters with texts.

Porphyry's encounter with *Odyssey* 13, 102-112 cannot, then, be considered an aberration, an atypical and perverse use of a text for ulterior motives. It is true that something of Porphyry's idiosyncratic approach to the material he treats — an encyclopedic inclusiveness and a fascination with the minutiae of cult and religious tradition — comes through in his essay. The text serves initially as a pretext for the elaboration of a vast amount of lore about the symbolism of stone, of caves, of bees, and so forth. But the important point is that Porphyry has a context of interpretation into which this use of the text fits, a context

which is developed only in the closing pages of his essay. At that point he makes it clear that he and the tradition he taps read the *Odyssey* as an allegory in the broadest sense, that not only the details of the text but the poem as a whole constitutes a screen of poetic fiction masking a general truth about human experience. It is only at this point that we learn that all the episodes of Odysseus' wanderings, the stories told by narrator and protagonist as events in the world, are in fact events contained within the spiritual life of Odysseus, who is himself "the symbol of man passing through the successive stages of γένεσις." The blinding of Polyphemus was an attempted suicide (a violent termination of the life of the senses, of the body) and the rest of Homer's story develops out of the expiation of that crime to project the ultimate goal of liberation from γένεσις, expressed in the form of Tiresias' prophecy of final ignorance (*Odysseus' ignorance, his forgetting*) of the sea (= matter). Beyond the use of Homer as a basis for the explanation of cultic symbolism, this broader allegory allows us insight into the scope of the meaning of the poem, not just for Porphyry, but for the tradition he represents. Other thinkers, other educators doubtless articulated their own allegories and these too contributed to the range of meanings available for the text. Indeed, we have many of these, preserved in ancient scholia or in the surviving parts of the collection of Homeric allegories assembled in the 1st or 2nd century after Christ by a man named Heraclitus.<sup>6</sup> Porphyry's essay is unique only in that it presents a coherent and complete reading of a single passage, spun out at some length (just, we may conjecture, as it might have been taught in a school), and that reading, that elaborated passage, is then situated within a reading of the entire poem, itself conceived as a coherent statement with a meaning *beyond* what it says.

Parallel to the development of the symbolism and the hidden meanings in the *Odyssey* passage, another theme surfaces periodically in Porphyry's essay: the idea of Homer as a cultural and intellectual primary source, of Homer as precedent and model for subsequent writers and thinkers. This idea finds its fullest expression in antiquity in a strange and awkward work usually given the title "On the Life and Poetry of Homer," and variously attributed to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, to Plutarch, and to Porphyry himself. Its author goes to great lengths to demonstrate (often in defiance of logic and history) that all the great ideas of mankind (read: of the Greeks) can be found in germ in

Homer. He evokes a long series of thoughts associated with various philosophical schools, in the manner of the doxographers, and for each he manages to pull out of his hat a line or a passage of Homer that can be stretched into a "source" for it. He does the same, rather more convincingly, for a long series of tropes of rhetoric in order to make a case for Homer as the source of that tradition as well. The idea, again, is hardly a new one with the anonymous author of the essay. It is parodied in Plato's *Ion* and seems to have been a mainstay of purveyors of Homer (and of wisdom) from the 5th century. Porphyry treats this idea with some care in the essay on the cave of the nymphs. The first evocation of it is ambiguous—Homer may well be simply one among many who knew "that doors are sacred" (section 27), and that the gates of the sky, entrusted to the Hours, determine which parts of the earth will be cloudy and which sunny at any given moment, but as Porphyry develops his argument in the same passage it becomes clear that Pythagoras has followed Homer, has made use of his imagery and explained his language (section 28). Plato in turn takes other Homeric images (specifically the two jars on Zeus' threshold and the "gates of the sun") and adapts them to his own use, conveying the same ideas through parallel imagery in the Myth of Er and in the *Gorgias* (sections 29-31).

Porphyry's claims for Homer, and specifically for Homer's *intention*, constitute one of the most interesting and paradoxical aspects of the essay. On the one hand, he evokes the familiar theme of Homer the sage and source of all wisdom, and expresses awe at his "vast intelligence," while on the other he shows a strange reluctance to commit himself on the question whether the symbolism of the cave is Homer's invention or simply his accurate description of some pre-Homeric shrine. He begs the question, asserting in effect that it makes no difference whether we are dealing here with the symbolism of literature or the symbolism of cult. Yet this sensitivity to the possibilities open to the poet sets Porphyry's vision of his subject in a more credible realm than that of the anonymous author of the essay "On the Life and Poetry of Homer." Porphyry addressed himself to problems of writing from multiple angles. Certainly his primary concerns here focus on the *use* of literature, but these do not prevent him from taking into consideration the paradox of the unknowable relationships of the text to the reality, whether in the realm of matter or in that of the imagination, which it pretends to represent.

The system of meaning then may be a very complex one, and this complexity as well is characteristic of the critical models of the Neoplatonists, culminating with Proclus in a vision of the work as a stratified universe of discourse on the pattern of the spiritual hierarchies expressed in man and in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Porphyry is clearly proud that he has gone one step beyond Cronius, that he has discovered that the geographers indeed *did* describe the cave and therefore it is not entirely a Homeric fiction.<sup>8</sup> More interesting, however, is his assertion that it does not matter, his mask of indifference to the problem of intention, his acceptance of the text as the problem, in isolation from the trope — particularly fascinating and seductive in the case of Homer — of the author.

Porphyry's ambivalence about the contribution of Homer to the description of the cave accounts for some of the strangeness of the essay, and in particular the analysis of the symbolism of the cave and its attributes. The analysis must be viable in either of two possible situations: whether Homer is a photographic realist or a visionary allegorist.

There is nevertheless no doubt that Porphyry considered Homer a visionary allegorist and the episodes of the *Odyssey* screens for a transcendent meaning. The most complete exposition of such meanings from Porphyry is in a long fragment of unknown provenance preserved by the doxographer Stobaeus:<sup>9</sup>

What Homer writes about Circe contains an amazing view of things that concern the soul. He says:

Their heads and voices, their bristles and their bodies were those of pigs, but their minds were solid, as before. [Od. 10. 239-240]

Clearly this myth is a riddle concealing what Pythagoras and Plato have said about the soul: that it is indestructible by nature and eternal, but not immune to experience and change, and that it undergoes change and transfer into other types of bodies when it goes through what we call "destruction" or "death." It then seeks out, in the pursuit of pleasure, that which is fitting and appropriate to it because it is similar and its way of life is similar in character. At this point, by virtue of what each of us gains through education and philosophy, the soul, remembering the good and repelled by shameful and illicit pleasures, is able to prevail and watch itself carefully and take care lest through inattention it be reborn as a beast and fall in love with a body badly suited for virtue and impure, nurturing an

uncultivated and irrational nature and encouraging the appetitive and passionate elements of the soul rather than the rational. Empedocles calls the fate and nature that preside over this transformation a *δαίμων*

Wrapping souls in an alien tunic of flesh [Fr. B 126 D-K]

and giving them new clothes.

Homer, for his part, calls the cyclical progress and rotation of metempsychosis "Circe," making her a child of the sun, which is constantly linking destruction with birth and birth back again with destruction and stringing them together. The island of Aiaia is both the fate that awaits the dead and a place in the upper air. When they have first fallen into it the souls wander about disoriented and wail and do not know where the West is

Or where the sun that lights mortal men goes beneath the earth  
[Od. 10. 191].

The urge for pleasure makes them long for their accustomed way of life in and through the flesh, and so they fall back into the witch's brew of *γένεσις*, which truly mixes and brews together the immortal and the mortal, the rational and the emotional, the Olympian and the terrestrial. The souls are bewitched and softened by the pleasures that lead them back again to *γένεσις* and at this point they have special need of great good fortune and self-restraint lest they follow and obey their worst parts and their emotions and take on an accursed and beastly life.

The "meeting of three roads" that is imagined as being among the shades in Hades is actually in this world, in the three divisions of the soul, the rational, the passionate, and the appetitive. Each path or division starts from the same source but leads to a life of a specific sort appropriate to it. We are no longer talking about a myth or a poem but about truth and a description of things as they are. The claim is that those who are taken over and dominated by the appetitive part of the soul, blossoming forth at the moment of transformation and rebirth, enter the bodies of asses and animals of that sort to lead turbulent lives made impure by love of pleasure and by gluttony. When a soul that has its passionate part made completely savage by hardening contentiousness and murderous brutality stemming from some disagreement or enmity comes to its second birth, gloomy and full of fresh bitterness, it casts itself into the body of a wolf or a lion, projecting this body as a defense for its ruling passion and fitting itself to it. Therefore where death is concerned purity is just as important as in an initiation, and you must keep all base emotion from the soul, put all painful desire to sleep, and keep

as far from the mind as possible all jealousy, ill will, and anger, as you leave the body.

Hérmes with his golden staff—in reality, reason (ὁ λόγος)—meets the soul and clearly points the way to the good. He either bars the soul's way and prevents its reaching the witch's brew or, if it drinks, watches over it and keeps it as long as possible in a human form.

Here again, Plato and Homer are conflated: the "meeting of three roads" belongs not to the *Odyssey's* vision of the abode of the dead, but to that in the *Gorgias* (524a). It is striking, though, that Porphyry's composite myth of the soul's choice of a new life is decidedly more attractive than the myth of Er in the *Republic*, where that choice is viewed as a clearheaded one, rather like the choice of a new suit, one which may or may not still seem pleasing to the customer when he is out in the street. Porphyry humanizes the story, with Homer's help. The beautiful description of the anguish of the recently disembodied souls whose needs have not yet adapted to their altered state is reinforced by a line from the beginning of the Circe episode evoking the helplessness of Odysseus and his men, faced with yet another unknown island. The entire episode, read as an allegory, becomes a substitute for the exhausted myth of the nekylia. It is a nekylia without punishments imposed by arbitrary and incomprehensible gods. The goal of Porphyry's elaboration from Homer is an understanding of the experience of the soul after death in terms of human truths that are verifiable in our own experience, our own motivations and weaknesses.

To return to the cave of the nymphs, the key to the existence of secondary, hidden meanings in this passage lies in its superficial contradictions, its lack of coherence, of credibility on the literal level. This attitude is one which is a mainstay of defensive allegory: an unacceptable surface was in fact a primary indicator that some deeper meaning was being expressed, behind the screen.<sup>10</sup> Porphyry seems to adopt the idea from Cronius here and to accept Cronius' conclusion that the passage *must* be allegorical specifically because a) it is geographically inaccurate (something Porphyry disproves) and b) it is filled with obscurities that make it implausible as a purely imaginative creation. One of the most striking of these suggestive obscurities is the tension between the adjectives "lovely" and "murky," an oxymoron which, Porphyry is prepared to argue, can only be a hint that something lurks beyond the superficial meaning.

The analysis of the symbols used in the description of the cave is carried out according to a system of correspondences which belongs to cult first and to literature only secondarily. The coincidence of systems of meaning between the physical, visual manifestations of cult and its verbal manifestations in hymns is stressed in one of the surviving fragments of Porphyry's work *On Statues*: the poet-theologians create images (εἰκόνας) of the gods, in words. Hymns, like statues, are to be "read" by deciphering the symbolism of the various elements or attributes in order to identify their referents. The analysis of the description of the cave of the nymphs proceeds in the same way, systematically exploring the traditions associated with each thing mentioned in the Homeric passage. There is no need to go through that discussion point by point here, though it may be helpful to distinguish among several layers of symbolism. Porphyry characteristically makes an initial appeal to history, to tradition, explaining the symbols of cult by analogy to Persian or Egyptian practice. Thus we are given a history of cave-shrines, a survey of the ritual uses of honey, and so forth. But these ritual precedents serve primarily to manifest the truth of the symbolic relationships which are central to Porphyry's hermeneutic effort. They place before us both terms of each equation, proving that caves are symbolic of the material universe (because they, like the universe, are inseparable from matter [rocks], yet constitute entities distinct from matter), that honey represents the pleasure that entices souls into the universe, and that water as well is a universal symbol for the "sea of matter."

If the precedents of cult are the primary clues that allow us to complete the equations and find the referents of Homer's symbols, we are left with the problem that there is no universal dictionary of such symbolic elements and so our hermeneutic efforts will be handicapped by the limitations of our own knowledge. Porphyry is one of the founders of that vast tradition of scholarship that has pursued the elusive goal of a universal encyclopedia of symbols, a tradition that has scored its most enduring successes, from Artemidorus of Daldis to Freud, in the study of dreams. As we read Porphyry, the more immediate voice of Freud will not keep silent — Freud who, in Robert Duncan's words, "thinks mythologically"<sup>11</sup> (much, I would argue, as Porphyry does), and whose goal is likewise to complete the equation, "to transform the manifest dream into the latent one" (though Porphyry will not accompany him in



the last stage of the task, "to explain how, in the dreamer's mind, the latter has become the former").<sup>12</sup> It should be no surprise that Freud rediscovered some of Porphyry's equations. As Porphyry's 20th-century scholiasts, we cannot fail to gloss his passage on the water-nymphs as souls descending into γένεσις (sections 10-12) with this: "Birth is regularly expressed in dreams by some connection with water: one falls into the water or one comes out of the water — one gives birth or one is born."<sup>13</sup> Or the passage on honey as a symbol having "the same meaning as the pleasure of intercourse" (section 16) with this: "*Sweets* frequently represent sexual enjoyment."<sup>14</sup> There are multiple coincidences, enough to convince us at the very least that Porphyry's equations are neither arbitrary nor tendentious, that they represent an attempt to explore relationships that go deep into the fabric of our lives and not simply a relentless quest to pound Homer's thought into the molds of the cosmology and psychology of dogmatic Platonism. Proclus, by way of contrast, rarely convinces his reader of his seriousness on this level: his hermeneutics is confined within the limitations of the petty task of reconciliation. He builds equations between systems, but Porphyry seeks out correspondences of greater complexity which, at their richest and most meaningful, involve terms which belong not to dogma but to experience.

Whatever arguments can be made for the value of Porphyry as a critic and for his superiority to the others in his tradition, the fact remains that his essay on the cave of the nymphs has long been read for its historical importance rather than its intrinsic value as criticism. At the same time, that historical importance is extremely difficult to define with any precision.

I have argued elsewhere<sup>15</sup> that the tradition to which Porphyry belongs — the tradition of the mystical allegorical reading of Homer, recoverable in antiquity from Numenius to Proclus — was transmitted to the Latin West and taken seriously at a time when Homer himself was not read. In other words, the Homer whom Dante shows us in limbo, the

...signor dell'altissimo canto  
che sovra li altri com'aquila vola [Inf. 4, 95-96],

whom Dante had never read, retained his prestige in isolation from the text specifically because the Latin Neoplatonists of late antiquity transmitted to the Middle Ages the idea that the author of the *Iliad* and

*Odyssey* was a visionary sage and that the poems themselves were allegorical representations of his wisdom. The evidence for this transmission must be recovered in bits and pieces from Macrobius, from Martianus Capella, from Boethius and even from Augustine (who takes the side of Plato and heartily approves of banishing Homer). In the dialogues of the *Consolation of Philosophy* it is consistently Philosophy, not Boethius, who quotes or echoes Homer: the epics constitute a touchstone of wisdom, and one which must be understood by means of the exegesis provided by philosophy. What survives the epics themselves is not so much a specific reading, a specific interpretation, as an idea of the scope of their meaning, one which must be understood if we are to perceive *how* Dante could feel he was working within an integral and continuous tradition of epic which connected him, by way of Virgil, to Homer. Although the tangible proofs are lacking, it seems inescapable that the Neoplatonic tradition of reading the epics as mystical allegories is the missing link: Dante belongs in the tradition of Virgil and Homer because *they all wrote about the same thing*, or so the surviving ancient traditions regarding Homer, and current at the beginning of the 14th century, would lead Dante and his contemporaries to believe. It was, of course, a considerable advantage in terms of the credibility of this traditional assessment of Homer that the poems themselves were unavailable and could not be held up to test the tradition.

This idea is not an original one and the probability of a connection between the Neoplatonist allegorists and Dante has been most recently explored by David Thompson, who assembles the evidence for a connection by way of the 12th-century Platonist Bernard Silvestris and his allegorical commentary on the *Aeneid*, which may have been known to Dante.<sup>16</sup> The process of absorption of Homer the sage into the tradition of commentary on Virgil the sage begins as early as Servius in the 4th century and it is this tradition which provides the only recoverable thread which is truly continuous. When the Middle Ages made Virgil into a sage and a sorcerer, it was inevitable that Homer, conceived as Virgil's master, should be elevated to the status of an even greater sage, a sorcerer of even greater powers.

From the time when Homer again began to be read in the West, in the 14th century, scribes, then printers used such works as the essay, "On the Life and Poetry of Homer," the various other lives of Homer, and the

present essay as introductory explanatory material. The text emerges from the obscurity of the Middle Ages hand in hand with the allegorical commentaries which pretend to elucidate its meaning. The influence of the allegorists on Chapman has been noted and analyzed,<sup>17</sup> and it is fair to say that Homer enters the English Renaissance tradition an allegorical poet and that the *Odyssey* in particular has never been entirely divorced from the interpretive efforts of the ancient allegorists. Chapman could be paraphrasing the conclusion of the Porphyry essay in his first gloss:

The information or fashion of an absolute man and necessarie (or fatal) passage through many afflictions (according with the most sacred Letter) to his naturall haven and countrey, is the whole argument and scope of this inimitable and miraculous Poeme. And therefore is the epithete πολυτροπον given him in the first verse; πολυτροπος, signifying *Homo cuius ingenium velut per multas, et varias vias, vertitur in verum.*

One might have expected the 18th century to pare away much of this proliferation of commentary intruding on the text — the age that read Pope's *Iliad* clearly knew a different poem from the one current in the age that read Chapman's. Yet the man who perhaps took the allegorists more seriously than anyone else in the post-Renaissance world, Thomas Taylor, willingly cited Homer in "the elegant version of Mr. Pope,"<sup>18</sup> and Pope's *Iliad*, published in 1715, came only four years after the monumental edition of the Greek text by the English scholar Joshua Barnes, which presented as explanatory material a rich selection of allegorizing texts, including Porphyry's essay. Barnes' edition owed its very existence to a falsification and elevation of the sources of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: "Its publication in 1710-11 was only made possible by persuading his wife, who had inherited a small fortune from her first husband, that the author of the Homeric poems was Solomon."<sup>19</sup> Even if it is true that the Enlightenment saw the first serious attempts to divorce the ancient texts from the accretions of the ages, and the development of a methodology on historical principles for subsequent scholarship, Newton-Urizen had not applied his calipers effectively to Homer by the time of Taylor and Blake. It would be a mistake to assume that Blake's interest in Porphyry's essay went against the grain of his time and formed an integral part of his own anti-Enlightenment stance. The fate of the reading of Homer in the 18th century has recently been explored

by Kirsti Simonsuuri, who reminds us that "it is a feature of the Homeric tradition that it has included as its vital parts even those readings of the Greek epic which are clearly incorrect."<sup>20</sup>

If Porphyry's essay on the cave of the nymphs has attracted an exceptional amount of attention in the past decade, it is undoubtedly because of the evidence presented by Kathleen Raine that Blake knew the essay in Thomas Taylor's translation and that he integrated so much of its imagery into a painting of 1821 that he in effect illustrated it.<sup>21</sup> Her iconographical analysis is fascinating and compelling, no less so than her assertion that influence of the essay can be found in Blake's poetry as early as *The Book of Thel* (1789).<sup>22</sup> The dangers of searching for a single key to Blake's symbolism are clear to all Blake scholars, including Raine, and we may remain skeptical regarding some of the passages from Blake which she has been able to trace to Porphyry's influence. But we cannot deny the very real importance of her central discovery, which is the decisive impact of Neoplatonism, by way of Thomas Taylor, on the imagination of Blake — as she herself claims, she has demonstrated that Blake has a place, and a very special one, in the Greek Revival.<sup>23</sup>

What we do not yet know, and what would form the basis for a fascinating study, is what Blake may have thought of the relationship of his own epic to Homer's. Was Porphyry's essay for him simply a powerful spur to the imagination, a source of imagery feeding his growing reservoir of symbols? Or can we include Blake with Dante among those poets who may be thought to have taken their place self-consciously in the heritage of Homeric epic, influenced by the Neoplatonists' conception of the scope and thrust of the meaning of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*?

## Notes

1. See des Places' recent Budé edition of the fragments of Numenius and John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, for the available information.
2. The question is treated in more detail in my *Homer the Theologian*, pp. 154-193 and esp. 169 ff.
3. In his preface to Harold Bloom, et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, p. viii.
4. It is reasonable to conjecture that the sceptical Academy of Arcesilaus, Carneades and their followers may have developed to its fullest extent the subversion of meaning in the dialogues. We know nothing, however, of their use of Plato and can only assume that it organized the meaning of the text around the core of Socrates' claim to know nothing.
5. Rep. 2, 378d. For the Derveni papyrus, see the bibliography under Kapsomenos.
6. For a comprehensive study of the allegorists, see Félix Buffière, *Les Mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque*.
7. On these developments, see James A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm*.
8. The cave described in the fragment of the geographer Artemidorus preserved in this essay is surely the one excavated in the 1930's by Sylvia Benton (see bibliography), and I see no reason why it should not be the one described by Homer, as Porphyry claims it is.
9. Stob. Ecl. 1. 41. 60. Thomas Taylor included this passage, rearranged and somewhat elaborated, in a long footnote to his translation of Porphyry's essay on the cave of the nymphs, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist*, pp. 326-327.
10. For a collection of ancient passages in which this idea occurs, see Jean Pépin, "Porphyre, exégète d'Homère," pp. 252-256.
11. *The Truth & Life of Myth*, p. 62. Duncan here classifies the Neoplatonists — or more specifically Proclus — with the Jungians, the theosophists, characterized by the sort of critical mind that "avoids the lowness of the story and reads in high-minded symbols." That dogmatic Platonism in general is guilty of the arrogance here implied no one will deny, but I would make a plea for the evidence of a deeper and humbler humanity in Porphyry, one that comes through in the surviving letter to his wife Marcella and sporadically in his other works.
12. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Lecture 29, "Revision of Dream Theory," p. 38.
13. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Lecture 10, "Symbolism in Dreams," p. 194.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
15. *Homer The Theologian*, ch. 5 (pp. 442-494).
16. *Dante's Epic Journeys*, esp. pp. 4-11.
17. See George DeF. Lord, *Homeric Renaissance*.
18. "Concerning the cave of the nymphs," n. 13, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist*, p. 323.
19. J. E. Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship*, vol. 2, p. 357.
20. *Homer's Original Genius*, p. 152.

21. *Blake and Tradition*, esp. vol. 1, pp. 69-98.
22. It appears to be unproven that the translation was in print before 1789, though of course this would not preclude a knowledge of it on Blake's part. Cf. Raine and Harper's note on the Porphyry essay, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist*, p. 296
23. *Blake and Tradition*, p. 69.

## On The Cave of the Nymphs

This translation is based primarily on Nauck's Teubner text but incorporates some of the readings from the more recent text by "Classics Seminar 609" at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo, published with translation as an *Arethusa* Monograph. For bibliographical information on both editions, see "Literature Cited: Ancient Authors," p. 43. I have referred in footnotes to the editors of the more recent edition simply as "the Buffalo editors," since the format of their edition suggests that they wish the credit and responsibility for their work to be shared. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the scholarship and fine judgment of L.G. Westerink, who led the seminar, are everywhere apparent in that excellent edition. I have presumed to differ significantly with their conclusions at only a few of those points where the manuscripts are defective and the translator is forced to choose among a series of scholarly conjectures.

The numbers close to the left-hand margin refer to the traditional divisions of the text, indicated in both editions. The numbers in brackets refer to the pages of Nauck's edition.

The only version in English previous to that of the Buffalo editors was that of Thomas Taylor, originally published in 1789 or perhaps a year or two earlier,<sup>1</sup> and revised between that edition and the reprint of 1823. Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper reprint the earlier version of Taylor's translation in *Thomas Taylor the Platonist*, pp. 297-342. There have been a number of reeditions of Taylor's text in its various versions, and in spite of its shortcomings it is attractive and of obvious historical interest. In its defense it should be stressed that Taylor referred to it as a "paraphrase translation," apparently indicating by that phrase that he had felt free to elaborate on the text. I have also made use of the excellent French version of Félix Buffière (*Les Mythes d' Homère et la pensée grecque*, pp. 597-616).



## Porphry on The Cave of the Nymphs in The Odyssey

- [55] 1 One is inclined to wonder what on earth the cave in Ithaca means for Homer, the one he describes in the following words:

*and at the head of the harbor is a slender-leaved olive  
and near by it a lovely and murky cave  
sacred to the nymphs called Naiads.  
Within are kraters and amphoras  
of stone, where bees lay up stores of honey.  
Inside, too, are massive stone looms and there the nymphs  
weave sea-purple cloth, a wonder to see.  
The water flows unceasingly. The cave has two gates,  
the one from the north, a path for men to descend,  
while the other, toward the south, is divine. Men do not  
enter by this one, but it is rather a path for immortals.*

[Od. 13, 102-112]<sup>2</sup>

αὐτὰρ ἐπὶ κρατὸς λιμένος τανύφυλλος ἐλαίη,  
ἀγχόθι δ' αὐτῆς ἀντρον ἐπήρατον ἡρωειδές,  
ἶρὸν νυμφῶων αἰ νηιάδες καλέονται.  
ἐν τῷ κρητῆρές τε καὶ ἀμφιφορῆς ἔασι  
λαίνοι. ἔνθα δ' ἔπειτα τιθαιβώσσοισι μέλισσαι·  
ἐν δ' ἱστοὶ λίθῃσι περιμήκεες, ἔνθα τε νύμφαι  
φάρε' ὑφαίνουσιν ἀλιπόρφυρα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι.  
ἐν δ' ὕδατ' ἀενάοντα. δῶω δέ τέ οἱ θύραι εἰσὶν,  
αἱ μὲν πρὸς βορέαο καταβαταὶ ἀνθρώποισιν,  
αἱ δ' αὖ πρὸς νότον εἰσὶ θεώτεραι· οὐδέ τι κείνη  
ἄνδρες ἐσέρχονται, ἀλλ' ἀθανάτων ὁδός ἐστιν.

- [56] 2 The geographical writers show that on the one hand he has not provided a description of actual things passed down by tradition, because they mention nothing of such a cave in the island—or so Cronius claims. It is clear on the other hand that he would hardly have been credible if he fabricated the cave out of poetic license and yet hoped to convince us that some person in the land of Ithaca had fashioned paths for gods and men—or if not a person, then that nature itself designated a path of descent for all men and then another path for all the gods. The entire universe is full of men and of gods, but the description of the Ithacan cave is far from persuading us that it contains a path of descent for men and one of ascent for gods.
- 3 Cronius, after he has called attention to these matters, asserts that it is clear not only to the scholar but to the layman as well, that the poet is in some way allegorizing here and hinting through these lines at some further meaning, forcing us to ask such questions as "What is a gate of men, or one of gods?" and "What is the meaning of this 'two-gated cave,' said to be sacred to the nymphs and at the same time both 'lovely' and 'murky'?" That which is dark and shadowy is by no means "lovely" but on the contrary terrible. We must further ask why the cave is said not simply to be sacred to the nymphs, but for greater precision the expression "called Naiads" has been added. And then, why does he include the kraters and amphoras, when we hear nothing of what is kept in them but rather are told that bees "lay up stores of honey" in them, as in beehives? The "massive looms," we may say, were set up as dedications to the nymphs. But why not of wood or some other material? No, they too are made of stone, like the kraters and amphoras. And all this is still the less obscure part of the description—but that on these stone looms the nymphs should "weave sea-purple cloth" is a "wonder"
- [57] not only "to see" but to hear! Who could remain credulous when told that goddesses go around weaving sea-purple cloaks on stone looms in murky caves, and then that these weavings by the goddesses are *visible* and moreover of the specific color "sea-purple"? On top of this, it is amazing that

the cave should be "two-gated," the one gate made "as a path for men to descend," the other for gods — and that the path men may travel is said to extend in the direction of the North Wind and that for gods toward the South. It is no small mystery why he parcels out the northerly regions to men and the southerly ones to gods, and has not rather chosen to use east and west in this context, since nearly all temples have the statues and the entrances turned toward the East, so that those who enter face the West when they stand face to face with the statues, bringing their prayers and worship to the gods.

Given that the description is full of such obscurities, Cronius concludes that it is not, in fact, a casual fiction created for our amusement, but neither is it a geographically accurate description, and so the poet must be saying something beyond the obvious here. Likewise, he has placed the olive tree nearby for some mysterious reason. Even the ancients, he says, considered it a major task to track down and develop all of these things, and now we must attempt to understand them with the help of those who have gone before us and of our own perceptions.

First, then, as far as the description of the place is concerned, those who have written about it and concluded that the cave and the account of it are fictions of the poet seem to have been rather careless, since those who have written the best and most accurate geographical accounts do mention it, and specifically Artemidorus of Ephesus. In the fifth book of his work in eleven books he writes as follows:

*Twelve stadia [2.2 km.] east of Cephallenia, going from the harbor of Panormus, lies the island of Ithaca, 85 stadia [15.7 km.] in length, narrow and conspicuous, with a harbor called the harbor of Phorcys. There is also in this harbor a beach where the sacred cave of the nymphs is located, where it is said Odysseus was put ashore by the Phaeacians.*

It seems, then, that it is not entirely a Homeric fiction. Whether Homer described it as it was or added something

[58]

himself, however, the aforementioned problems persist for anyone trying to track down the intention either of those who established the shrine or of the poet who made the additions. The ancients who founded shrines would not have done so without incorporating mysterious symbols nor would Homer have described it in any random manner. To the extent that one undertakes to show that the business of the cave is *not* a Homeric creation but rather that of those, before Homer's time, who consecrated the place to the gods, one will be establishing that the dedication is full of the wisdom of the ancients and on this account that it deserves investigation and its cult symbolism should be interpreted.

- [59] 5 Now, the ancients quite appropriately made caves and caverns sacred to the cosmos, taken as a whole as well as in its parts, and passed down the tradition that earth is a symbol of the matter out of which the cosmos emerged. For this reason, some even took earth simply to be that matter itself. The ancients likewise found in caves symbols of the cosmos generated out of matter since, broadly speaking, caves have their own separate nature and identity, but one which is inseparable from that of the earth, surrounded as they are by homogeneous rock, hollow within, but on the outside extending to the infinity of the earth. The cosmos likewise has its own separate nature and identity, and one which is inseparable from matter, for which they found a symbol in rocks and stones because these are inert and resist the imposition of form upon them. That is, they took matter to be "infinite" in the sense that it is formless. Since matter itself is in a state of flux and in itself is deprived of that form through which it takes shape and is made manifest, they took the dampness and humidity of caves, their darkness and, as the poet says, "murkiness," as an appropriate symbol of the properties the
- 6 cosmos owes to matter. It is on account of matter that the cosmos is misty and dark and it is on account of the intermingling in it of form and the resultant order (*διακόσμησις*, whence the name "cosmos" itself) that the cosmos is beautiful and lovely. So, moreover, a cave might appropriately be called

"lovely" seen from the point of view of one who chances upon it and perceives in it the participation of the forms — and, on the contrary, it might be called "murky" seen from the point of view of one who sees more deeply into it and penetrates it by the use of mind. Thus, as far as its exterior is concerned, and viewed superficially, it is "lovely," but as far as its interior is concerned, and viewed in depth, "murky."

[60]

Likewise the Persian mystagogues initiate their candidate by explaining to him the downward journey of souls and their subsequent return, and they call the place where this occurs a "cave."<sup>3</sup> First of all, according to Eubulus, Zoroaster consecrated a natural cave in the mountains near Persia, a flowery cave with springs, to the honor of Mithras, the creator and father of the universe, since the cave was for him an image of the cosmos that Mithras created. The objects arranged symmetrically within the cave were symbols of the elements and regions of the cosmos. Later, he continues, after Zoroaster, the custom of performing the mysteries in caves and grottoes, whether natural or artificial, caught on among others as well. Just as they founded temples, shrines, and altars for the Olympian gods, hearths for burnt offerings for chthonic deities and heroes, and pits and underground sanctuaries for the hypochthonic deities, in the same way they consecrated caves and grottoes to the cosmos and likewise to the nymphs on account of the waters that pour down into caves and come up out of them. The Naiads, as we shall soon explain, are the nymphs that preside over these waters.

Not only did they make the cave a symbol of the generated and perceptible cosmos, but likewise the ancients took it as a symbol of all the unseen powers, since caves are dark and it is the nature of these powers to be invisible. Thus Kronos makes a cave for himself in the ocean and it is there that he hides his children. Demeter likewise raises Kore in a cave among nymphs, and you will find many other examples of this sort if you go over the works of the theologians.

[61]

The following hymn to Apollo makes it clear that they have likewise habitually dedicated caves to the nymphs, and

specifically the Naiads who preside over springs and who are called "Naiads" from the waters out of which streams "flow" (νάουσι):<sup>4</sup>

*They who live in caves in the earth,  
nursed to divine utterance by the inspiration of the Muse,  
have made springs of the water of wisdom flow for you  
and break through the earth in all the glens,  
bringing to men the unceasing flow of their sweet streams.*

I believe that this is where the Pythagoreans and Plato after them got the idea of calling the cosmos a cave or a grotto. In Empedocles, the powers that guide souls say:

*We have come here within this roofed cave*  
[fr. B 120 D-K],

and Plato in the seventh book of the *Republic* [514a-515b] says,

[62] *Picture mankind living in a subterranean dwelling in a cave, with an entrance open to the light and a long path extending the entire length of the cave.*

The other speaker says, "This is a bizarre image," and [Socrates]<sup>5</sup> continues,

*Dear Glaucon, this image is to be applied to everything that has been said up to this point, comparing the place we live, as we experience it with our eyes, to the underground prison, and the light of the fire [that is in the cave] to the power of the sun.*

- 9 That the theologians made caves symbols of the cosmos and of the encosmic powers has thus been demonstrated, but it has also been asserted above that they made them symbols of the noetic substance, though they reach this conclusion starting from concepts which are quite different. They made them symbols of the sensible cosmos because they are dark and rocky and damp, and the cosmos likewise has these properties because of the matter from which it is sprung, and it resists form and is unstable. They made caves symbols of the noetic universe, on the other hand, because they are not easily grasped by the senses and at the same time they are essentially solid and enduring. For the very same reason they made

caves symbols of the obscure, fragmentary powers, and most of all those participating in matter. They created these symbols because caves are natural and nocturnal and shadowy and rocky — not at all, as some have suspected, because of their shape, since not all caves are spherical. When a cave is double, like the one with two entrances that Homer describes,<sup>6</sup> they used to consider it symbolic not of the noetic but rather of the sensible cosmos, and likewise the cave under consideration, because its "water flows incessantly," would not be a symbol of the noetic hypostasis, but rather of material existence. For this reason also it is a temple of the Naiad Nymphs, whose name comes from these flowing streams, and not of the Oreiades (Mountain Nymphs), or the Akraides (Summit Nymphs), or some such creatures.

10 [63]

We likewise use the term "Naiad Nymphs" specifically for those powers set over the waters, and the ancients used to use the term to designate the general class of souls descending into γένοις.<sup>7</sup> They believed that souls settled upon the water, which was "god-inspired" as Numenius says, adding that it is for this reason that the prophet said, "The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters,"<sup>8</sup> and that the Egyptians depicted all their gods standing not on dry land but rather in a boat — the sun along with the rest of them — and these are to be thought of as the souls coming down into γένοις, and hovering over the water. He goes on to say that this is why Heraclitus says, "It is a delight, not a death, for souls to become wet" [Fr. B 77, D-K], for it is a pleasure for them to fall into matter, and elsewhere, "We live their deaths while they live our deaths" [cf. Fr. B 62, D-K]. Moreover, he says, the poet calls those in γένοις "wet" [διερός, *Od.* 6. 201] because they have damp souls. They are in love with blood and semen, just as the souls of plants are nourished by water.

Some maintain strongly that the bodies in the upper air and in the heavens are nourished by exhalations from streams and rivers and by other rising vapors, and the Stoics believed that the sun was nourished by the vapors rising from the sea, the moon by the waters of springs and rivers, and the stars by

11 [64]

vapors rising from the earth. Thus the sun was for them a fiery noetic mass fed by the sea, the moon another fed by the river waters, and the stars still others fed by the exhalations of the earth.

There is a compulsion for souls, whether they are embodied or disembodied but still dragging along some corporeal material — and most of all for those souls that are just about to be bound to blood and moist bodies — to descend to moisture and, once they have been moistened, to become embodied. This explains, moreover, why the souls of those who have died are attracted by pouring out bile and blood and why souls in love with the body drag along with them a damp spirit that condenses like a cloud — for moisture in the air when condensed becomes cloud — and when the spirit in them condenses they become visible because of the excess of moisture. From souls of this sort come the apparitions that sometimes confront people, tinting and manifesting their spirits according to their fantasies. But pure souls avoid γένεσις.

Heraclitus himself says, "A dry soul is wisest" [cf. fr. B 118 D-K]. That is, right here in this world the spirit becomes damp or saturated, as a function of its sexual desire,<sup>9</sup> and the soul drags a damp vapor along with it from its descent toward γένεσις.

[65] 12 Thus souls coming into γένεσις are Naiad Nymphs and so it is the custom to call brides "nymphs" [νύμφαι] as well, since they are being married for childbearing [γένεσις], and to pour over them water drawn from springs or streams or everflowing fountains. For souls that have been initiated into the material world and for the deities that preside over γένεσις, the cosmos is both holy and pleasing, though by nature it is shadowy and "murky": that is why these beings are considered to be misty and to have the substance of mist or air. For the same reason an appropriate temple for them on earth would be a "pleasant grotto," a "murky" one, in the image of the cosmos in which souls dwell as in the greatest of temples. The cave is likewise appropriate for nymphs that preside over the waters since it contains water which "flows unceasingly."



Thus let us say that the cave in question is dedicated to souls 13  
and to the nymphs of the realm of the more fragmented  
powers that preside over flowing streams and springs and are  
called Pegaeon Nymphs (Spring Nymphs) and Naiads for that  
reason.

Now, what different symbols can we distinguish, referring  
respectively to souls and to the powers in the waters, in order  
to be able to maintain that the cave was dedicated in common  
to both? We may say that the stone kraters and amphoras are  
symbols of the water nymphs. When these things are made of  
pottery — that is, of baked clay — they are symbols of  
Dionysus and are closely associated with the vine, which is  
the gift of that god, since its fruit is ripened by the fire of  
heaven.<sup>10</sup> Kraters and amphoras of stone are thus quite appro- 14 [66]  
priate to nymphs presiding over water which flows from  
rocks. For souls coming down into γένεσις, and the making of  
bodies, on the other hand, what could be a better symbol than  
the stone looms? This is why the poet presumed to say that on  
these they

weave sea-purple cloth, a wonder to see.

Flesh comes into being by means of bones and wrapped  
around bones, and stone represents these bones, because  
within living creatures they resemble stone. This is why the  
looms were said to be made of stone rather than some other  
material. The sea-purple cloth would clearly be the flesh,  
woven of blood: the sea-purple wool, the fiber itself, is  
ultimately the product of blood and the wool is even dyed  
with a product derived from living creatures. Likewise, the  
production of flesh is accomplished both by blood and out of  
blood. Moreover, the body surely is a cloak for the soul  
around which it is wrapped, "a wonder to see" whether you  
consider it from the point of view of the composition of the  
composite entity or from that of the soul's bondage to the  
body. Thus, according to Orpheus, Kore, the overseer of all  
things sown in the earth, is depicted as a weaver, and the  
ancients called heaven a "robe,"<sup>11</sup> as if it were a garment cast  
around the heavenly gods.

- 15 Why, then, are the amphoras filled not with water but with honeycomb? For he says, "bees lay up stores" in them and τῆλαιώσσειν means "put away" [τιθέναι] "food" [βόσιν] and the food and nourishment of bees is honey.

[67] The theologians have used honey to symbolize many different things since it combines multiple powers, and is both cathartic and preservative in its effects. Many things are kept from rotting by honey and it clears up persistent wounds. It is sweet to the taste and is gathered from flowers by bees, which incidentally are born from cattle. When they pour honey instead of water on the initiates in the Lion Mysteries,<sup>12</sup> they call upon them to keep their hands pure of all that which is painful, harmful, or dirty, and since it is an initiate of cathartic fire whose hands are being washed, they use an appropriate substance and avoid water because it is inimical to fire. They

16 also purify the tongue of all sin by means of honey. On the other hand, when they offer honey to the Persian<sup>13</sup> as "preserver of the fruit," it is the preservative qualities that they evoke through the symbol. This is the basis on which some have taken it that honey is to be equated with nectar and ambrosia, which the poet talks of pouring into the nostrils to prevent the dead from rotting. Thus honey would be the food of the gods. For this reason, Homer also refers somewhere to "tawny nectar" [Il. 19.38, Od. 5.93] since this is the color of honey. However, we can determine more precisely by comparing passages from other sources whether honey and nectar are to be equated. According to Orpheus, Zeus used honey to trap Kronos, for full of honey he became blind drunk, as if with wine, and fell asleep, just as did Poros in Plato, full of nectar — "for wine did not yet exist."<sup>14</sup> In Orpheus, Night,

[68] suggesting the honey trick to Zeus, says,

*"When you see him laid out under the tall oaks  
drunk with the labors of the buzzing bees,  
tie him up"*

(Orph. fr. 154, Kern).

This is what happened to Kronos, and when he was bound he was castrated, like Ouranos, and the theologian is hinting

that divine beings are ensnared by pleasure and drawn down into γένεσις, and that they discharge their powers like semen when they are made feeble by pleasure. This is why Kronos castrates Ouranos as he is settling down on Earth, driven by his desire to have intercourse with her, and for the ancients the pleasure of the honey that deludes Kronos and brings about his castration had exactly the same meaning as the pleasure of intercourse. Likewise, Saturn [Κρόνος]<sup>15</sup> is the outermost of the planets and his sphere lies just below heaven [Οὐρανός]. Powers descend from heaven and from the planets, but Saturn receives those that come directly from heaven and Jupiter [Ζεύς] receives them from Saturn.

In view of its relationship to purification, to the prevention of decay and to the pleasure of descent into the flesh, honey is an appropriate symbol as applied to the Water Nymphs, standing for the purity of the waters over which they preside and their cleansing powers and their cooperation in γένεσις — for water does play a part in γένεσις. This is the reason why bees store honey in the kraters and the amphoras. [69]

The kraters symbolize springs — just as a krater is set beside Mithras to stand for a spring — as do the amphoras, which we use to draw water up from springs. Springs and running streams are appropriate to Water Nymphs and even more so to those nymphs that are souls, whom the ancients specifically called “bees,” because of their diligence in the pursuit of pleasure. This is why Sophocles said with great appropriateness, referring to souls,

*The swarm of the dead buzzes and rises up*

[Fr. 795, Nauck],

and the ancients used to call the priestesses of Demeter “bees,” as initiates of the chthonic goddess, and to call Kore herself “Melitodes” or “honey-like” and the moon, which presides over γένεσις, they also called “the bee,” among other reasons because the moon is also called a bull and Taurus is its exaltation, and bees are born from cattle. Souls coming into γένεσις, are likewise “born from cattle,” and the god who secretly impedes γένεσις is “the cattle-thief.”<sup>16</sup>

Honey also has been made a symbol of death and thus they used to pour libations of honey to the chthonic deities. In the same way, they made bile a symbol of life, hinting that the life of the soul expires through pleasure but is revived through bitterness. They also poured sacrifices of bile for the gods, either for this same reason or because death is a release from pain and life here is full of suffering and bitterness.

- 19 They did not simply call all the souls entering into γένοις "bees," but specifically those that were to live just lives and return after performing acts pleasing to the gods, for bees love to return to their source and are remarkably even-tempered and sober.<sup>17</sup> Thus libations of honey are "sober" libations. Moreover, bees do not light on the flowers of fava beans, which the ancients used to take as a symbol of the direct and unswerving path of γένοις, since fava beans are virtually unique among seed-bearing plants in having stems that are continuously hollow and not interrupted by cross-membranes at the nodes. Thus honeycombs and bees would constitute appropriate symbols both for Water Nymphs and for souls becoming "brides" as they enter γένοις.<sup>18</sup>

- 20 Before they invented temples for the gods, the earliest men consecrated caves and grottoes to them. The Couretes in Crete consecrated a cave to Zeus as did people in Arcadia to Selene and to Lycaean Pan, and in Naxos to Dionysus. Likewise, wherever they recognized Mithras they propitiated the god with a cave.

Homer was not content to point out that the Ithacan cave had two entrances, but went on to specify that one was toward the North and one toward the South and that the northern one was for descent, though he did not mention whether the southern one was for descent, only that

*men do not  
enter by this one, but rather it is a path for immortals.*

- 21 We must now explore the intention of those who consecrated the cave (if the poet is reporting historical fact), or his own riddle, if the description is his own fabrication. Numenius and his companion Cronius say the cave is the image and symbol

of the cosmos and that there are two extremities in heaven, represented by the summer and winter tropics.<sup>19</sup> The summer tropic is in Cancer, the winter one in Capricorn. Since Cancer is very close to us, this constellation is appropriately associated with the moon, which is the closest of the heavenly bodies to the earth. Since the South Pole remains invisible, Capricorn is associated with the farthest and highest of these bodies, i.e. Saturn.

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The signs of the Zodiac extend in order from Cancer to Capricorn: first, Leo, the house of the sun; second, Virgo, the house of Mercury; then, Libra, the house of Venus; Scorpio, the house of Mars; Sagittarius, the house of Jupiter; and Capricorn, the house of Saturn. Working back from Capricorn, Aquarius belongs to Saturn, Pisces to Jupiter, Aries to Mars, Taurus to Venus, Gemini to Mercury, and finally Cancer to the moon.

22

The usage of referring to these two tropics in Cancer and Capricorn as "gates" goes back to the theologians, while Plato speaks of two "mouths."<sup>20</sup> Numenius and Cronius say further that the gate of Cancer is the one through which souls descend and that of Capricorn the one through which they ascend. Note that Cancer is northerly and appropriate for descent while Capricorn is southerly and suited for ascent. The northern regions belong to souls descending into γένοις, and the northern "gate" of the cave is precisely the one that is "a path for men to descend." The southern regions belong not to the gods but more properly to those ascending to the gods. For this same reason, Homer did not say the other was a path for "gods" but rather for "immortals," a term which applies equally to souls, on the basis that they are immortal either in themselves or by their nature. Numenius and Cronius say that Parmenides in his *Physics* mentions the two gates, and that the Romans and Egyptians were acquainted with them. They point out that the Romans celebrate the Saturnalia when the sun is in Capricorn and that in the festival slaves play the part of free men and all goods are considered common property. In this the founder of the rite has hinted at the fact that it is through this gate of heaven and through the festival

23

[72]

of Saturn and the house of Saturn [that is, Capricorn] that those who are now enslaved by γένοις, are set free, coming to live again and receiving, as it were, another birth. The Romans thus think of the path of Capricorn as one of ascent,<sup>21</sup> and so they call a gate *ianus* and the "gate month" January, during which the sun is making its ascent from Capricorn, where it reversed its course, and its rising-point on the eastern horizon is moving steadily toward the North. The Egyptian year does not begin in Aquarius, like the Roman year, but in Cancer. This is because Sothis, which the Greeks call the Dog Star [or Sirius], is near Cancer. The first day of their year is the rising of Sothis, leading γένοις into the cosmos.

24

[73]

This explains why Homer has placed the entrances of the cave neither to the East and to the West nor at the equinoxes, under Aries and Libra, but rather in the South and North and at the southernmost and northernmost gates of the heavens, because the cave is consecrated to souls and to Water Nymphs and these regions are appropriate to the birth and rebirth (or departure) of souls. The ancients also located the seat of Mithras by means of the equinoxes. This is why he carried a sword, emblematic of Aries which is the house of Mars, and why he rides the bull of Venus [who governs Libra]. Mithras is both a creator, like the bull, and lord of γένοις. Thus he is oriented along the celestial equator with the North on his right and the South on his left. They place [his torchbearer] Cautes to the south because it is hot and the other one, Cautopates, to the north on account of the coldness of the North Wind.<sup>22</sup>

25

Likewise, they assigned the appropriate winds to souls entering γένοις, and departing from it, because some believed that the souls themselves drew spirit [πνεῦμα] with them and that they had a similar substance. In any case, the North Wind is appropriate to those souls entering γένοις. Thus, for those about to die, the North Wind

*breathes upon them and revives them, though at the point  
of death*

[Il.5. 698],

while the South Wind destroys them. The one is colder and tends to freeze them and hold them in the frigid grip of earthly γένεσις, while the other is warmer and so melts them and sends them back up to the warmth of the divine. Moreover, since the area of the world which is inhabited is concentrated in the northern part, it is necessary for those who are conceived here to have to do with the North Wind and those who are departing with the South Wind. This is also the reason why, where we live, the North Wind is very violent at its onset but the South Wind becomes more violent before it ceases, for the one falls immediately on us since we live far to the North, while the other starts further away and takes longer to reach us from its source, and it is only when it has cumulatively gathered its forces that it reaches its full strength.

[74]

Since souls enter into γένεσις through the northern gate, this wind has been called erotic. Take for example: 26

*In the form of a dark-maned stallion [Boreas] covered  
them  
and they were impregnated and bore twelve foals  
[Il. 20. 224-225].*

Likewise they say he raped Oreithyia and fathered Zetes and Calais.

On the other hand, it is because they associate the South Wind with the gods that men draw the screens in their temples at noon, following the injunction given by Homer in the passage under consideration, since it is not right for men to enter the temples of the gods by the "southern inclination,"<sup>23</sup> "but it is rather a path for immortals." Moreover, when the god is "at his noon," they place the symbol of midday and the South on the door. Of course, it was not permissible to speak at any gates, at whatever time, since a gate is a holy thing, and for this reason the Pythagoreans and the Egyptian wise men forbade talking while walking through a gate or a door, paying respect by silence to god, who holds the beginning of all things. Homer, too, knows that doors are sacred as can be seen in his description of Oineus, who, instead of shaking 27

[75]

before him emblems of supplication, is depicted

*shaking the solid doorflaps, supplicating his son*

[Il. 9. 583].

He also knows of the gates of the sky, which are entrusted to the Hours and determine which places are cloudy. They are opened and closed by clouds —

*to shut the thick cloud and close the gate*

[Il. 5. 751 = 8. 395]

and the reason why they "groan" is that thunder as well comes from clouds:

*the self-moving gates of heaven, over which the Hours  
preside, groaned*

[Il. 5. 749 = 8. 393].

- 28 He somewhere talks of "gates of the sun" [Od. 24. 12] by which he means Cancer and Capricorn, for these are the limits of its travel as it descends from the home of the North Wind into the South and then returns back up to the North. Capricorn and Cancer mark the extremities of the Milky Way and lie near it, Cancer in the North and Capricorn in the South.<sup>24</sup> According to Pythagoras, the souls are the "people of dreams" [Od. 24. 12] who, as he says, are assembled in the Milky Way [γαλαξία] which derives its name from "milk" [γάλα] because they are nourished with milk when they first fall into γένεσις. For this reason also, he says, those who call forth souls pour libations of milk and honey to them, since they are accustomed to enter γένεσις, because of the lure of pleasure. Also, milk is produced from the time of birth.

[76] Furthermore, the southern regions produce bodies which are naturally smaller because the heat exerts an exceptional shriveling force upon them and so for the same reason makes them both smaller and drier. In northern regions, on the other hand, bodies are always large: Celts, Thracians, and Scyths provide ample illustration of this and their soil is rich and moist and provides abundant pasture. Even the name of the North Wind, Boreas, comes from "nourishment" [βορέα] since "nourishment" is food and the wind that blows from



that part of the earth that is bursting with food, because it is "nourishing," is called Boreas. Thus the northern regions are appropriate to the swarm of mortal beings that have fallen under the power of γένεσις, and the southern regions to the more divine class, just as the east belongs to the gods and the west to the lesser divinities [δαίμονες]. 29

Since the natural world has its source in dichotomy or otherness [ἑτερότης], things with two entrances have everywhere been made to symbolize it. The journey is either through the noetic or through the sensible, and within the sensible universe, it is either through the fixed stars or through the planets, and again either along the path of immortality or that of mortality. Likewise, there is a center or node above the earth, one below, one in the East and one in the West. Then there are opposites such as right and left, night and day — thus the structure of the natural world is drawn into harmony, strung between the opposites.

Plato speaks of two "mouths,"<sup>25</sup> one for those going up into heaven and one for those going down into the earth, while the theologians make the "gates" of souls the sun and moon, the ascent taking place through the sun and the descent through the moon.

Homer likewise mentions two "pithoi,"

*of gifts he gives, one full of evils, the other of benefits*

[Il. 24. 528].

[77]

and the soul is likewise thought of as a pithos in Plato's *Gorgias*, where it has two aspects, one being beneficial and the other maleficent, one rational and the other irrational. The image of the pithos is chosen because souls are containers of actions and conditions of various sorts. In Hesiod, the one pithos is envisioned as closed but the other is opened by pleasure and its contents dispersed in the universe, leaving only hope behind, for in all those individuals in whom the bad soul has utterly failed and become disordered, scattered through matter, the soul sustains itself on good hopes. 30

In general, then, that which has two gates is symbolic of 31

nature and the natural world and the cave in question is endowed not with one entrance but with two, which are differentiated from one another in accordance with the nature of things: the one is appropriate to gods and to the good, the other to mortals and to the less good. Starting from this, Plato himself envisions his bowls and substitutes pithoi for the amphoras and, as we have said, two "mouths" for the two "gates." Pherecydes of Syros talks of holes and pits, of caves and gates and doors, using these images to hint at the births and rebirths of souls. Rather than unnecessarily increase the bulk of the discussion by drawing in more of the opinions of the ancient philosophers and theologians, we shall take it that the entire meaning of the description has been adequately displayed in those already discussed.

- 32 There remains, though, as we are all aware, the problem of explaining the mystery contained in the symbol of the planted olive tree, for surely this expresses something further since it is not simply said to be planted nearby, but "at the head":

*and at the head of the harbor is a slender-leaved olive  
and near by it a...cave,*

and it is not, as one might think, growing there that way by chance, but rather it embraces the riddle of the cave.

Since the cosmos did not come into existence in vain or randomly, but exists as the result of the thoughtfulness and intention of god and of noetic nature, the olive, a symbol of god's thoughtfulness, grows next to the image of the world, which is the cave. The olive tree belongs to Athena and Athena is thoughtfulness. In view of the fact that the goddess was born from the head [of Zeus], the theologian<sup>26</sup> found an appropriate place when he enshrined the tree at the "head" of the harbor and he indicated through this tree the fact that the universe did not come to be spontaneously nor was it the work of irrational chance, but rather that it is the result of noetic nature and of wisdom. At the same time, the tree is something separate from the cave [as divine wisdom is something separate from the world], but set nearby at the head of the entire harbor.

The olive is evergreen and this is a property that is extremely appropriate to the comings and goings in the cosmos of the souls to whom the cave is consecrated. In summer, its leaves turn their whitish sides upward and then during winter they turn them the other way. For this reason in prayers and supplications men hold out olive branches, auguring the transformation of the gloom of their troubles into brightness. The naturally evergreen olive likewise serves as a helper in heavy labor, by the fruit that it bears. It is dedicated to Athena and a wreath from it is given to victorious athletes and likewise it is the material of the boughs carried by suppliants. The cosmos, on the other hand, is governed by noetic nature, according to a providence which acts eternally and, so to speak, as if "evergreen"; from that providence come as well both the emblems of victory for the athletes of life and release from heavy labor, and he who draws the pitiful and the suppliants to him is the creator who holds the cosmos together.

[79]

Homer says that all outward possessions must be deposited in this cave and that one must be stripped naked and take on the persona of a beggar and, having withered the body away,<sup>27</sup> and cast aside all that is superfluous, and turned away from the senses, take counsel with Athena, sitting with her beneath the olive, to learn how he might cut away all the destructive passions of his soul. No, I do not think Numenius and his friends were off the track in thinking that, for Homer, Odysseus in the *Odyssey* was the symbol of man passing through the successive stages of γένεσις and so being restored to his place among those beyond all wavecrash and "ignorant of the sea:"

*until you reach men who do not know the sea  
and put no salt on their food*

[Od. 11. 122-123].

"Open sea" and "sea" and "wavecrash" are expressions which likewise in Plato refer to the material universe.

[80]

I believe that he called the harbor "the harbor of Phorcys"

35

for the following reason. Homer provided us from the beginning of the *Odyssey* with the information that Phorcys' daughter Thoosa was the mother of the cyclops whose eye Odysseus puts out, and he did so in order that there might be some hint of a memory of Odysseus' sins right up to his arrival home. Thus the seat beneath the olive is appropriate since Odysseus is a suppliant of the god, appeasing the δαίμων presiding over γένεσις from beneath his suppliant's branch. It was not in the nature of things for Odysseus to cast off this life of the senses simply by blinding it — an attempt to put an end to it abruptly — and the wrath of the gods of the sea and of matter came upon him as a result of his presumption in trying to do so.<sup>28</sup> These gods must first be appeased by sacrifice and by the hard labor of the poor and by patience. He must at one moment confront and conquer the passions, then bewitch and trick them and so totally free himself from them that, stripped of his rags, he may destroy them all — and even so, he will not be freed from his labors until he has become completely free of the sea and wiped away his very experience of the sea and of matter, so that he thinks that an oar is a winnowing fan in utter ignorance of the business of seafaring.<sup>29</sup>

[81]

- 36 This sort of exegesis should not be considered forced, nor should it be equated with the sort of thing fanciful interpreters try to render plausible. When one takes into consideration the ancient wisdom and the vast intelligence of Homer, along with his perfection in every virtue, one cannot reject the idea that he has hinted at images of more divine things in molding his little story.<sup>30</sup> It is impossible that he should have successfully created the entire basis of the story without shaping that creation after some sort of truth. Let us postpone writing on this, however, and leave it for treatment at some time in the future. This is the end of the explanation of the cave we we have been discussing.

## Notes

1. See p. 16 and n. 22 above.
2. The tenth verse (Od. 13. 111) contains the only significant deviation of Porphyry's text from the received text of the passage. In nearly all versions, with the exception of the present one and the text as quoted by Strabo, the two gates are located with reference to the cave itself by the expressions *πρὸς βορέαο* and *πρὸς νότον*, but the latter is replaced here by the expression *πρὸς νότον*. Porphyry will go on to argue that the two sets of gates are, respectively, an entrance *from* the north and an exit *toward* the south. This interpretation becomes marginally more difficult to support if both genitives are retained, as they are in the received text. There is absolutely nothing, in any case, in the received text to suggest that one gate is exclusively an entrance and the other an exit: the implication is rather that men may come and go through one gate, while gods come and go through the other.
3. Porphyry leaves doubt as to precisely what is called a "cave" in this context, the place of initiation (so the Buffalo editors), or the place occupied temporarily by the souls (so Taylor and Buffière).
4. On the poem which Bergk called a *carmen popolare*, see Bergk, *Poet. lyr. gr.*, vol. 3, p. 684.
5. Porphyry does not mention Socrates and reports the passage as if Plato himself were the speaker. It seems to have been customary among the ancient Neoplatonists to take the words of certain privileged speakers in the dialogues — notably Socrates, Timaeus, and Parmenides — to express "the opinions of Plato" (Proclus, *In Rep.*, I. 110.15-17).
6. The translation at this point follows the word order and punctuation of the Buffalo editors.
7. I have retained this Greek term for lack of a convenient alternative and avoided the Latinization *genesis* because it seems to me to retain little but the sound of the original and to be misleading. "Coming into being" would be an appropriate translation for the term in some instances, whereas in others (e.g. section 12 below) the term refers specifically to giving birth. On the whole, however, it refers in the Neoplatonists to the entire cycle of coming to be and passing away which is the life of this world — Blake's "Eternal Death." At this point, Taylor translates with characteristic explanatory expansion, "the humid and flowing condition of a generative nature."
8. The Greek follows closely the wording of the Septuagint.
9. *κατὰ τὴν τῆς μίξεως ἐπιθυμίαν* — the *μῆξις* in question may well be that of soul and body and the desired liberating faculty may be the freedom from attraction to the flesh, but both the vocabulary and the image remain unavoidably sexual.
10. It is the firing, analogous to the ripening of the grapes at the very hottest time of the year, that links pottery to the vine and to Dionysus.
11. Nauck reads here a term meaning "threshold" which does not seem to make sense. The Buffalo editors adopt the reading in Kern, *Orph. Frag.*, fr. 192, and I have followed them.
12. The fourth stage of initiation in the mysteries of Mithras brought the initiates to the grade of Lion.

13. Buffière (*Mythes d'Homère*, p. 605, n. 17) identifies the Persian as Mithras. Joshua Barnes, on the other hand, emended the text to read "Persephone." The latter is tempting but difficult to defend.
14. Pl. Symp. 203b 5; cf. Plotinus Enn. 6. 7. 30.
15. Here and elsewhere I have used Roman names in place of Greek whenever the references are clearly to planets and constellations. This may do violence to the astral religion which is the basis of Porphyry's remarks, but the Greek names for the planets are unfamiliar and add to the difficulty of following Porphyry's reasoning.
16. The sentence is corrupt and the translation reflects one conjecture among many.
17. I am puzzled by the description of bees as *νηφοντικά ζῶα* but I suspect that they are "wineless" or "sober" ultimately because — as beekeepers know — they are sensitive to the fumes of alcohol, and it is a mistake to tend hives with wine on one's breath.
18. See above, section 12, on nymphs and brides.
19. We might say "solstices." The "tropics" to which Porphyry refers are the "turning points" of the sun, limiting its apparent progress north and south of the celestial equator.
20. In the Myth of Er, Rep. 10. 615d 5.
21. The text is rather puzzling here: Porphyry seems to be saying in fact that the Romans think of the "path of Capricorn" as one of *descent*, which does not make sense. Taylor, in a note to the 1823 edition of his translation, suggested simply making a bold emendation to resolve the problem.
22. The translation follows the emendations of the Buffalo editors at this point, though they have a somewhat different understanding of the symbolism of the sword and bull of Mithras, just above.
23. The expression seems to be intended to refer simultaneously to the southern entrance of Homer's cave and to the movement of the sun after midday.
24. The points of intersection of the Zodiac and the Milky Way are in fact in Gemini and Sagittarius.
25. Again, in the Myth of Er.
26. The reference is, of course, to Homer.
27. The translation follows the reading of the Buffalo editors.
28. This fascinating internalization of the Polyphemus episode, transforming the crude and sensual cyclops into a symbol of Odysseus' own physical existence, his life in the body, may conceivably be Porphyry's own contribution to this eclectic reading of the *Odyssey*. It reflects in any case a personal concern: we know from his *Life of Plotinus* (11) that Porphyry himself came close to suicide and was dissuaded by his master. His account of Odysseus' failed suicide and its consequences is in harmony with the ideas of Plotinus' short essay on suicide (Enn. 1. 9). See my translation of this essay in the Appendix.
29. The Buffalo editors emend this corrupt passage to give a substantially different sense, but I have followed Nauck's conjectures which I believe to be preferable because they depend on the idea that Porphyry here continues to internalize the episodes of the *Odyssey* narrative.
30. The translation here follows the reading of the Buffalo editors.

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In general, ancient works are referred to in the text and notes by standard abbreviations and numbers of sections, pages, or lines, which should be self-explanatory and usable with any edition of the text and with translations where divisions are indicated or lines numbered. Listed here are a few editions of special relevance and one abbreviation which might be unfamiliar.

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My own translation (*Homer the Theologian*, vol. 2, pp. 4-125) is the only complete one in English known to me.

D-K = *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Greek and German, by Hermann Diels, 10th edition edited by Walther Kranz. Berlin: Weidmann, 1960-61.

Numenius: Numénius, *Fragments*, edited and translated by E. des Places. Paris: Les Belles Lettres (Budé), 1973.

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# Appendix

*The subject of the eleventh chapter of Porphyry's Life of Plotinus is the philosopher's remarkable capacity to penetrate the character of those around him and even to predict their futures.*

Once he sensed that I, Porphyry, was intending to commit suicide. He appeared suddenly at my house, where I had been staying in seclusion, and told me that this anxiousness to die stemmed not from the calm of the rational mind but from some pathological depression, and he advised me to leave Rome. I did as he said and went off to Sicily, since I had heard that there was a remarkable man named Probus living near Lilybaeum. Thus I lost my anxiousness to die, but at the same time I was prevented from being with Plotinus up to the time of his own death.

*The shortest of the essays in the Enneads, "On Suicide" (Enn. 1. 9), perhaps incomplete, throws some light on Plotinus' thought on this subject. There has been debate on just what motives for suicide (if any) Plotinus approved. Elias (6th c.) tells us he rejected all five of the motives postulated as acceptable by the Stoics, and the same commentator preserves a short text which he claims to be by Plotinus and which is compatible with the rigorous rejection of suicide (though it does not itself explicitly reject all possible motives). Even the Greek of the present essay is somewhat ambiguous, though recent scholarship (Harder, Armstrong) favors the opinion that Plotinus is here advocating suicide in certain extreme and unlikely situations. My translation reflects that opinion and removes the ambiguity.*

## On Suicide

Do not release your soul from the body, lest it depart and in its impulse to get out take along something that is corporeal, for the departure of the soul is a journey to another place. Rather, in the usual course of events, the soul simply waits while the body departs completely from it, and then the soul does not have to move, but is left entirely outside.

How, then, does the body depart? It goes when no portion of soul is bound up with it, because the body is no longer capable of keeping it bound, once that harmony is gone by virtue of which it likewise held the soul.

But what if someone deliberately destroys his body? Then he has committed violence, and *he* is the one who has departed, but the body has not released the soul. And when he destroys the body, he is not without emotion — there is revulsion, or grief, or anger.

And if he has perceived the first signs of madness? This is unlikely for a man of wisdom, but if it should nevertheless occur, he would classify suicide among those things which are necessary and to be chosen given the existing situation, though not in themselves desirable.

The application of drugs to make the soul leave the body is unlikely to be a good thing for the soul, and if each man has his time set, you will not do well to die sooner unless, as we say, it is necessary. And if the rank of each individual *there* is determined by his condition when he departs from *here*, one must not commit suicide while the possibility of progress exists.



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