

## Taking the Shape of the Gods: A Theurgic Reading of Hermetic Rebirth

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To be immortal is commonplace; except for man, all creatures are immortal, for they are ignorant of death; what is divine, terrible, incomprehensible, is to know that one is immortal.

-Jorge Luis Borges<sup>1</sup>

The way of Hermes is the 'way of immortality'

-Garth Fowden<sup>2</sup>

In Iamblichus' well-known defense of theurgy, *On the Mysteries*, he invokes Hermes as his inspiration and guide. Iamblichus writes:

Hermes, the god who presides over learning has from ancient times been rightly considered the common patron of all priests; he who presides over true knowledge about the gods is one and the same, in all circumstances. It was to him indeed that our ancestors dedicated the fruits of their wisdom, by attributing all their own writings to Hermes.<sup>3</sup>

Through the pseudonym of Abamon, an Egyptian priest, Iamblichus asks that he might be inspired by Hermes in his answers to Porphyry's questions about theurgy. The practice of this hieratic art united theurgists with gods through rituals specifically coordinated with their conditions and capacities. It was a mystagogy strikingly similar to the mystagogy portrayed in Hermetic writings. The way of Hermes, Garth Fowden has succinctly put it, is a way of immortality;<sup>4</sup> theurgy, a hermetic art, is also a way of immortality. Hermes insists that rebirth into divinity "cannot be taught," and Iamblichus maintains that theurgy cannot even be *thought*. For Iamblichus "contact with the divine is not knowledge (*oude gnôsis*)."<sup>5</sup> True knowledge of the gods, he says, cannot be reached through dialectical discussion, for "what would prevent theoretical philosophers from achieving theurgic union with the gods? This," he states, "is simply not possible."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, edited and translated by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, (New York: New Directions 1962) "The Immortal" 114.

<sup>2</sup> Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 110-111.

<sup>3</sup> Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* E. Clarke, J. Dillon, and J. Hershbell (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2003). All references will follow the Parthey pagination preceded by *DM (de Mysteriis)*; *DM* 1.3-2.3. The attribution of wisdom literature to a scribal god was also the practice among Egyptian scribes who attributed their literature to Thoth, the deity identified with Hermes. He was reported by Manetho to be the author of 36,500 books; see Richard Jasnow, Karl-Th. Zauzich, *The Egyptian Book of Thoth: A Demotic Discourse on Knowledge and Pendant to the Classical Hermetica*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005) 2.

<sup>4</sup> Fowden, *op.cit.* 110-111.

<sup>5</sup> *DM* 8.2

<sup>6</sup> *DM* 96.13 – 97.1

The writings of theurgic Platonists and Hermetists share a common purpose: to make the soul immortal and divine. To us this seems impossible, irrational, fantastic; it is, as Borges put it, incomprehensible. Not surprisingly, theurgic Platonism and Hermetism have been misunderstood by scholars who found them lacking in the rational argumentation we value so highly among the ancient Greeks and in our own academic culture. Great scholars such as Andre-Jean Festugière and E. R. Dodds maintained that the *Hermetica* and *On the Mysteries* do not measure up to the standards of Hellenic philosophy. In fact, the core elements of theurgic and hermetic mystagogy were dismissed by these and other scholars as superstitions and banalities, the product of lesser minds and examples of the sad decline of Greek thought in the late antique world.<sup>7</sup>

Yet Festugière's scholarship, despite what J-P. Mahé calls its "excessively rationalistic approach,"<sup>8</sup> allowed Mahé and Fowden to deepen our understanding of the *Hermetica* and to correct earlier mischaracterizations prompted by Festugière's judgment of these texts as entirely Hellenic: its Egyptian elements an "*oriental mirage*."<sup>9</sup> The discovery of hermetic treatises among the Nag Hammadi codices refuted Festugière's contention that there was no hermetic community and that hermetism was simply a literary phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Finally, thanks to Mahé, J.G. Griffith, and Fowden it is clear that the *Hermetica* are not derivative Hellenic philosophy cast in Egyptian colors but are close to what Iamblichus himself had said:

The documents that circulate under the name of Hermes contain Hermetic doctrines, even if they often employ philosophical terminology. This is because they were translated from the Egyptian tongue by men not unacquainted with [Greek] philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

David Frankfurter recently has argued that the *Hermetica* were likely produced by Egyptian scribes translating their practices into the dominant language and philosophic concepts of the Hellenic world—very much what Iamblichus claimed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> That hermetic manuscripts, technical as well as philosophical, reflect the influence of genuine Egyptian

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<sup>7</sup> Even the eminent scholar, Pierre Hadot, who wrote brilliantly about philosophy as a "way of life" and not a mere conceptual discipline dismissed theurgy as "superstitious and puerile," "an unfortunate attempt to compete with Christianity," P. Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeanne Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, tr. M. Djaballah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009) 38. For misreadings of the *Hermetica*, see Peter Kingsley, "Poimandres: The Etymology of the name and the Origins of the Hermetica," in *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition*, edited by Roelof van den Broek and Cis vanHeertum (Amsterdam: Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica 2000) 66-69; see also R. van den Broek, "Religious Practices in the Hermetic 'Lodge': New Light from Nag Hammadi, *Ibid.*, 79-95.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Pierre Mahé, "Hermes Trismegistos," tr. Paul C. Duggan, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Lindsay Jones, Editor (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005) 3943.

<sup>9</sup> A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, Vol 1, (Paris : Gabalda, 1950-54) 20 ; cited by Algis Uzdavinys, *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth : From Ancient Egypt to Neoplatonism* (Wiltshire, UK : The Prometheus Trust, 2008) 15.

<sup>10</sup> See Roelof van den Broek, *op. cit.*, "80-84.

<sup>11</sup> *DM* 265.10 – 266.1

<sup>12</sup> David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 217-237; as per Edward Butler's suggestions in personal communication and his Hermetic "tweets": <http://lemon-cupcake.livejournal.colm/36741.html>. Jasnow suggests that the figure in dialogue with Thoth may have received his name: "one who seeks knowledge" from the Hellenic influence of the figure of the *philosophos*, *op.cit.*, 13.

prayers, texts, and modes of transmission is no longer in question.<sup>13</sup> Pre-Hellenic Egyptian materials are evident in the *Hermetica*; the question is to what degree.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Pythagoreanizing Platonists such as Iamblichus and Proclus turned to Egypt and Chaldea to communicate their mystagogy was precisely because these traditions employed a symbolic mode of expression and ritual practices they considered superior to discursive thinking, the kind of thinking that Iamblichus condescendingly describes as “syllogistic reasoning.”<sup>15</sup> The later Platonists were after more than a rational understanding of divinity. They wanted to recover an “innate *gnôsis* of gods ... superior to all judgment, choice, reasoning, and proof.”<sup>16</sup> To recover this *gnôsis* was to recover our divinity and Iamblichus maintained that the Greeks had lost touch with this sacred mystagogy.

The theurgy of Iamblichus has gone through a rehabilitation not unlike that of the *Hermetica*. His treatise, *On the Mysteries*, was initially dismissed as an alarming signal of the decline of Greek rationality. It was, as Dodds put it, “ill-written, philosophically worthless ... a manifesto of irrationalism.”<sup>17</sup> A more careful and nuanced study of theurgy by Jean Trouillard revealed that far from expressing a deficiency of rationality, the theurgy of the later Platonists followed Plotinian lines of reflection to the very roots of thought. Trouillard argued that theurgy ritually *enacts* a way to enter mysteries that discursive thinking, necessarily divided, cannot penetrate.<sup>18</sup> Theurgy is not opposed to philosophical thinking but is, according to Trouillard, its culmination.<sup>19</sup> My work on theurgy is indebted to Trouillard as well as to the scholarship of John Dillon, Polymnia Athanassiadi, and, more recently, Algis Uzdavinys.<sup>20</sup> They have shown Iamblichus to be a critically important philosopher who unified the teachings of Plato and Aristotle within a Pythagorean framework and integrated this philosophic synthesis with the oldest forms of traditional worship. The status he held among Platonists is reflected in Damascius’ praise of Iamblichus as “the best interpreter of divine realities.”<sup>21</sup> Despite some

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<sup>13</sup> The dialogue form seen in the *Hermetica* is found in the *Book of Thoth*; see J.-P. Mahé, “Preliminary Remarks on the Demotic *Book of Thoth* and the Greek *Hermetica*,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 50, 1996, 353-363.

<sup>14</sup> Poimandres, for example, is now understood to be the “mind of Ra” rather than the Hellenized “shepherd of men;” see Kingsley, op. cit., 46-51; see also Brian Copenhaver, *Hermetica* with notes and introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 95. Copenhaver agrees with Kingsley that F.L. Griffith initially proposed the Coptic *p-eime-n-re* = “the knowledge of Re,” which agrees with the content of *CH* I.2.

<sup>15</sup> On the symbolic mode of Egyptian theology, see *DM* 249.10 – 250.5; 37.6-11; on the inability of syllogistic reasoning to penetrate theurgic mysteries, see *DM* 9.11.

<sup>16</sup> *DM* 7.11-12.

<sup>17</sup> E.R. Dodds, “Iamblichus,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 538; \_\_\_\_\_, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) 287.

<sup>18</sup> *DM* 8.2-4: “Knowledge, after all, is separated (from its object) by some degree of otherness.”

<sup>19</sup> Jean Trouillard, *L’Un et L’âme selon Proclus* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1972) 174.

<sup>20</sup> John Dillon has been the pre-eminent scholar of Iamblican Platonism since his publication in 1978: *Iamblichus Chalcidensis.. In Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta*; translated and edited by John Dillon (Leiden: Brill 1978); Polymnia Athanassiadi has published numerous articles that address Iamblichus’ influence on his tradition. Most recently, see her study, *La lutte pour l’orthodoxie dans le platonisme tardif: de Numénius à Damascius* (L’âne d’or, Collection dirigée par Alain Segonds), Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006. Before his untimely death in 2011, Algis Uzdavinys was a Lithuanian meteorite who fired through a number of studies on Iamblican theurgy and its comparison to ancient Egyptian religion. His most notable: *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth* (Wiltshire, UK: The Prometheus Trust, 2008), and *Philosophy & Theurgy in Late Antiquity* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Damascius, *Traité des premières principes*, 3 volumes, text and translation, J. Combès and L.G. Westerink, vol. 3. 119.6-8 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres 1986-1991).

remaining reservation among scholars as regards theurgy—including some efforts to rationalize it into higher and lower forms—theurgical Platonism is no longer regarded as deficient Hellenic thinking but a respected development of late antique Platonism.

Despite this acceptance, some scholars continue to interpret theurgy and theurgists in a way that contradicts the radical non-dualism of their vision. For theurgical Platonists Plato was a “leader and hierophant of true mysteries”<sup>22</sup> and Platonic philosophy was mystagogy. Yet in our own “excessively rationalistic approach” to Plato, such characterizations—written by Platonists themselves—signal a decline of rationality or, in Gilbert Murray’s memorable characterization, a “failure of nerve.”<sup>23</sup> More accurately, they represent a failure to meet our standards of rationality, our habits of thought...we, who presume to understand Plato better than the Platonists themselves! Our initial mistake is to read Platonism as dualism, which leads us to assume that Platonists want to escape from the material realm to enter the noetic world of immaterial Forms (as if these were separable to begin with!). This, Trouillard argued, is a misreading of Plato based on a literalizing of his mythical language regarding the Forms;<sup>24</sup> it is certainly a misreading of theurgic Platonism. It is precisely this kind of dualism that Iamblichus criticizes in Porphyry who had suggested that gods are distant from the world and cannot be engaged in material rites, a position that Iamblichus lamented.

This doctrine [he says] spells the ruin of all holy ritual and theurgic communion between gods and men, since it places the presence of superior beings outside the earth. It amounts to saying that the divine is at a distance from the earth and cannot mingle with men, and that this lower region is a desert, without gods.<sup>25</sup>

As a Pythagorean, Iamblichus believed that the gods, like the *arithmoi*, are everywhere. Nature is the active manifestation of the supernatural (*hyperphûês*) and the cosmos is the revelation of gods and numbers. The theurgic world is theophany, a breathing *agalma* of the Demiurge,<sup>26</sup> and theurgists enter this activity, this breath, this *theourgia*, by performing rites that align them with its continual revelation. In sum, the goal of theurgy is nothing less than the unification of theurgist with the activity, the *energeia*, of the Demiurge: *In its deepest sense theurgy is demiurgy.*<sup>27</sup>

### *I. Dualism and Non-dualism in the Hermetica*

I want to see if this theurgic vision of Iamblichus and the later Platonists might profitably be applied to two hermetic treatises, CH XIII, *On Rebirth*, and NH VI.6 *On the Eighth and the*

<sup>22</sup> *Proclus Platonic Theology* Vol. I, I.1: 5.16-6.3 (Saffrey and Westerink 1968).

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Murray, *The Five Stages of Greek Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1951).

<sup>24</sup> Jean Trouillard, *La mystagogie de Proclus* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982) 135: “We constantly run the risk of slipping into a scholarly Platonism that would double the world of objects by taking for a definitive system the mythic presentation of the theory of the Ideas.”

<sup>25</sup> *DM* 28.6-11, translated by Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978) 101. I have modified his translation.

<sup>26</sup> *Timaeus* 37c6, where the cosmos is described as an *agalma* of the ever-lasting gods. An *agalma* is a shrine or cult object through which a god becomes present. Iamblichus refers to the cosmos as a visible *agalma* of the gods (*DM* 32.7).

<sup>27</sup> As Iamblichus put it, the goal of theurgy is to “establish the soul in the demiurgic god in his entirety” *DM* 292.12-13. The distinction between rites of theurgy and sorcery, according to Iamblichus, is that the former are in *analogia* with divine creation; the latter are not (*DM* 168.12). Theurgy is demiurgy.

*Ninth*, both of which describe the rebirth and immortalization of the soul. I begin with a distinction raised by Mahé who divides the *Hermetica* “according to two tendencies” as regards the material cosmos: optimistic and pessimistic;<sup>28</sup> the same distinction is characterized in metaphysical terms by Brian Copenhaver as “monist or dualist.”<sup>29</sup> Some treatises profess an acosmicism (and dualism) that aims to escape from the world while others see immortalization through our homologization to the cosmos: not escape but transformation. When applied to the hermetic treatises, this distinction is not entirely straightforward and Fowden’s careful reading of the *Hermetica* shows that the monism and dualism regarding the cosmos are not contradictory themes but reflect different degrees of spiritual awakening in aspirants.<sup>30</sup> According to Fowden, in the earlier stages of hermetic *paideia* (for the notion of initiation and learning are combined) the initiate embraces his body, the world, and even his sexuality as expressions of the divine.<sup>31</sup> But in the more advanced degrees of initiation—outlined in CH 13 and NH 6.6—the initiate leaves his body and materiality behind. For Fowden the monism evident in some hermetic texts—affirming the powers of the divine *in* the world—is superseded by the dualism of escaping from the cosmos in the attainment of *gnôsis*.<sup>32</sup> Copenhaver summarizes Fowden’s interpretation as follows:

Scholars have taken pains to analyze and schematize parts of the *Corpus* as monist or dualist, optimist or pessimist, but Fowden proposes to see such variations as sequential rather than contradictory. Thus, a positive view of the cosmos as good and worth understanding would suit *an earlier stage* of the initiate’s labors and, hence, a treatise focusing on a time when the body’s needs were still great while *a negative treatment of the world as evil and unworthy of thought might befit a farther station in the spirits journey ... closer to the culmination of gnôsis, which entailed liberation from the body.*<sup>33</sup>

Mahé agrees with Fowden and says that dualism also underlies the rebirth treatise of NH 6.6, where it is implicit rather than explicit.<sup>34</sup> For both these scholars hermetic rebirth and the immortalization of the soul take place within a dualist and acosmic framework.

I entirely agree with Fowden that the apparent contradictions of monist and dualist themes in the *Corpus* reflect sequential stages of progress in initiates, but I disagree with his privileging of the dualist stage.<sup>35</sup> Fowden shows how intimately the principles of Iamblican theurgy are tied to the *Hermetica*, but I believe a theurgical reading of rebirth will show that the final stage of hermetic spiritual progress is not dualistic; in fact, the sequences are quite the opposite. From a theurgic perspective, dualism and acosmicism mark a preliminary stage of the initiate’s experience followed by a monist or non-dualist embrace of the entire cosmos, one that marks the culmination of rebirth and immortalization. The reversal of sequence that I propose reflects a reversal of orientation: when the initiate’s particular and mortal perspective is replaced

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<sup>28</sup> Mahe, “Hermes Trismegistos,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, op.cit., 3940.

<sup>29</sup> Copenhaver, op. cit., xxxix.

<sup>30</sup> Fowden, *op. cit.*, 102.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>33</sup> Copenhaver, *op.cit.*, xxxix; my emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> J.-P. Mahé, *Hermes en haute Egypte*, vol 1 (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1978-1982) 53.

<sup>35</sup> Fowden also seems to nuance his judgment, noting that Hermetic deification occurs while one is in the body and in the world (99-100; 109-110); he also addresses the overlapping monist and dualist strands in the *Hermetica* (142-148) yet he maintains that Hermetic *gnôsis* is dualist.

by the universal perspective of a god. I would argue that this is the goal of both theurgy and Hermetism. To assume that dualism marks the final stage of illumination or that hermetic *gnôsis* is world-denying strikes me as a misreading—even an aborting—of the rebirth desired by Hermetists. Nevertheless, pessimism about the body and material world are clearly evident in CH 13, so let us first explore the passages that support the dualist interpretation.

In CH 13.1 Tat reminds Hermes that after having asked for the teaching on rebirth, he replied: “When you are ready to become a stranger to the world I will give it to you.”<sup>36</sup> After an exchange in which Hermes tells Tat that the experience of rebirth cannot be taught in an ordinary manner, he reveals his divine status:

I have nothing to say but this: seeing within me a formless vision that came from the mercy of god, I went out of myself into an immortal body, and now I am not what I was before. I have been born in *Nous*. This thing cannot be taught, nor can it be seen by the physical body . . . . Now you see me with your eyes, my child, but by gazing with bodily sight you do not see what I am. I am not seen with such eyes, my child.<sup>37</sup>

The immortal body of Hermes is not physical, even if he speaks through a physical form. Then Hermes tells Tat that the “birth of divinity will begin” when he quiets his senses: “Cleanse yourself,” he continues, “of the irrational torments of matter,”<sup>38</sup> which he describes as 12 vices ranging from ignorance to malice. “These,” he says, “use the prison of the body to torture the inner person with the sufferings of the senses.”<sup>39</sup> Liberation from the prison of the body and its 12 tormenters—associated with the 12 zodiacal signs—frees the divine inner self from its prison<sup>40</sup> and gives the initiate rebirth in an immortal body.

In light of these passages, Fowden quite reasonably interprets hermetic rebirth as an escape from the body and the physical cosmos. To support his interpretation, he compares the *Hermetica* that encourage worship of terrestrial gods to the “material” sacrifices discussed by Iamblichus in *On the Mysteries*, and the hermetic passages that worship the hyper-cosmic god to Iamblichus’ “immaterial” sacrifices.<sup>41</sup> Fowden acknowledges that for theurgist and Hermetist the differentiation of material and immaterial sacrifices are “graded rather than absolute;”<sup>42</sup> yet he nevertheless asserts that the material cult by virtue of its materiality is “inferior.”<sup>43</sup> Fowden’s dualist approach assumes a kind of opposition between material and immaterial worlds, as if the presence of one would negate the other. It is precisely this kind of thinking that Iamblichus says cannot be applied to theurgical matters.<sup>44</sup> It is all too easy for us to see a symmetric shift—from material to immaterial or from multiple to unified—as if these were distinct and conceptually equivalent categories, but they are not, and to think so overlooks the asymmetry and subtlety of the Pythagorean cosmos shared by theurgists and Hermetists. One cannot move from material to immaterial as if they were separate orders, for the immaterial gods are not separate from matter;

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<sup>36</sup> CH 13.1; I have used Copenhagen’s translation throughout this essay, occasionally modifying it.

<sup>37</sup> CH 13.3

<sup>38</sup> 13.7

<sup>39</sup> 13.7

<sup>40</sup> From CH 1, the archetypal man who falls into embodiment; the 12 signs of the zodiac are identified as constraining the Hermetist at CH 13.12.

<sup>41</sup> Fowden, op.cit., f.n. #2, 143.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 144.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 148.

<sup>44</sup> DM 8.2-5.

they are, Iamblichus says, already present to it immaterially, just as simpler numbers are present in their complex derivatives.<sup>45</sup> The gods are wholes, and as wholes, they cannot be opposed to parts; parts are of a different order entirely: they are *in* wholes. Thus, although divine beings may be distinguished from their creations conceptually, in *reality* they can never be separated or their creations would not exist. As Iamblichus put it:

It is true of superior beings in the cosmos that, even as they are not contained by anything, so they contain everything within themselves; and earthly things [possess] their existence by virtue of the *pleroma* of the gods....<sup>46</sup>

To oppose the divinity of the immaterial realm to the inferiority of the material realm misses their deeper continuity.<sup>47</sup> Metaphysically this continuity is rooted in the mystery of the One and the Many and the recognition by Platonists that the One *exists* only by virtue of the Many. Paradoxically, it is only when the One is revealed and simultaneously veiled as the Many that it comes into being. Put starkly, the One of Plato's *Parmenides* *is* only by becoming not one but many: to reveal itself it must be disguised and inverted into what it *is not*. This principle of inversion is fundamental to Pythagorean metaphysics and is reflected at every level of the cosmos. In this metaphysics of inversion shared by both Hermetists and theurgists, material reality is not deficient but is the organ through which immaterial powers are revealed even as they are simultaneously veiled.<sup>48</sup> Hermetism is well named to transmit a metaphysics of inversion.<sup>49</sup> The Greek Hermes and the Egyptian Thoth are both gods of paradox, trickery, and deception.<sup>50</sup> Hermes, the god who reveals the divine will to man, is also the god who lies: his very revelation is deception. Hermes' transmission of divine will is an enactment of the metaphysics of inversion; he simultaneously veils and reveals the One.<sup>51</sup> Such a transmission cannot be "taught" discursively. It requires a *living* hermeneutics of the kind seen in the encounter between Hermes and Tat, where things are not as they appear to be. Tat's comments make this plain: "You tell me a riddle, father .... Father, what you tell me is impossible .... You have driven me quite mad, father; you have driven me out of my mind so that I now no longer

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<sup>45</sup> *DM* 218.10-13.

<sup>46</sup> *DM* 28.12-29.1;

<sup>47</sup> Fowden acknowledges this but seems to remain fixed on a dualist interpretation in which the Hermetist and, I assume, theurgist seeks to escape from matter and the body; *op.cit.*, 142.

<sup>48</sup> Iamblichus explains the nature of the cosmogony and its metaphysics of inversion by quoting Heraclitus: "neither speaking nor concealing but *signifying* (*sêmainontes*)," to explain both how the gods perform demiurgy and provide the means for divination through their creation (*DM* 136.1-4). In his critique of Porphyry's dualist conception of the gods, believing that their transcendence separates them from the material realm, Iamblichus says: "Indeed, what is it that prevents the gods from proceeding in any direction, and hinders their power from going further than the vault of heaven?" (*DM* 27.7-9). As regards Porphyry's contention that the gods cannot be found in matter Iamblichus replies: "In fact, the truly real, and that which is essentially incorporeal, is everywhere that it wishes to be .... As for me, I do not see in what way the things of this realm are fashioned and given form, if the divine creative force and participation in divine forms does not extend throughout the whole of the cosmos" (*DM* 27.10-28.3; Clarke, Dillon, Hershbell modified slightly).

<sup>49</sup> Describing Hermes as an archetypal trickster, Lewis Hyde writes: "Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox"; Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes the World* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010; 1998) 7.

<sup>50</sup> Fowden discusses the reputation of the Egyptian Thoth and Greek Hermes for trickery; 23-24.

<sup>51</sup> According to Plato Hermes is the god of speech and father of all things (*Pan*); he makes them circulate and "is twofold, true and false" (*Cratylus* 408C 1-4).

see myself.” To which Hermes replies: “My child, I wish that were so.”<sup>52</sup> Peter Kingsley captures the intimacy of their exchange and the initiative Hermes takes to penetrate appearances. He writes:

The disciple desperately wants to understand: to find consistency, theoretical understanding. But his intellect is frustrated, flattened, evoked only to be pushed to the edge of extinction—until the understanding starts to come from an entirely different level. That other level is what the disciple was after all along.<sup>53</sup>

As contemporary interpreters of the *Hermetica*, we face a similar dilemma. We too want to find consistency, some kind of theoretical understanding of the Hermetic treatises. Yet the contradictions we encounter are striking. On the one hand, we read passages where Hermes tells Tat:

Unless you first hate your body you cannot love yourself, but when you have loved yourself you will possess Divine Mind.... My child, it is impossible to be engaged in both realms: the mortal and the divine. Since there are two kinds of entities: corporeal and incorporeal, corresponding to mortal and divine, one is left to choose one or the other .... One cannot have both together.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, on the other hand Hermes tells Asclepius:

God is not without sensation and understanding, though some would have it so, committing blasphemy in an excess of piety. For all things that exist are in god, Asclepius. They have come to be by god’s agency, and they depend on him, some of them acting through bodies, others moving through psychic substance ... [G]od does not [merely] contain these things. *He is all of them*....<sup>55</sup>

And to Tat’s question: “Is god in matter, then, father?” Hermes replies:

Yes, for if matter is not energized by god, my son, do you think it could be anything but a formless heap? But who energizes it if it is energized? We have said that the energies/activities (*energeias*) are parts of god. By whom, then, are all living things made alive? By whom are immortals made immortal? Things subject to change—by whom are they changed? If you say matter or body or essence, know that these are also energies/activities (*energeias*) of god and materiality is the activity (*energeian*) of matter, corporeality the activity (*energeian*) of bodies and essentiality the activity of essence. And this is god, the All .... *There is nothing that he is not*.<sup>56</sup>

## II. Rebirth as Giving Birth: the Demiurgic Mystery

These contradictions of the *Hermetica* caused Fowden to develop a psychologically nuanced interpretation: the contradictions are not evidence of incoherence among the hermetic authors but reflect the progressive stages of initiates as they move from a world-affirming

<sup>52</sup> CH 13.3-4. See Peter Kingsley’s translation of this passage in “Knowing Beyond Knowing: The Heart of Hermetic Tradition,” *Parabola*, Spring, 1997, 22-23

<sup>53</sup> Peter Kingsley, *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> CH IV 6

<sup>55</sup> CH IX 9

<sup>56</sup> CH XII 22



monism to a world-denying dualism. Plotinus was faced with a similar dilemma in trying to make sense of Plato's view of matter and embodiment. In his treatise *On the Descent of the Soul* he said: "[Plato] ... does not always speak consistently, so that his meaning might easily be grasped."<sup>57</sup> Dodds pointed out that the task for Platonists was to reconcile the positive view of matter and embodiment portrayed in the cosmology of the *Timaeus* with the negative view seen in the psychology of the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*; Dodds notes, rightly, that Plotinus was not successful in his reconciliation since he favored the pessimistic view of matter seen in the *Phaedo*.<sup>58</sup> It is precisely in this context that Iamblichus presents a workable reconciliation by distinguishing more clearly than Plotinus the experience of the universal soul from that of the particular soul. It is only for the particular soul, the embodied mortal person, to whom matter is an obstacle and detriment. His solution can be applied to the hermetic writings as well. Iamblichus explains:

The conflict of views in this issue may easily be solved by demonstrating the transcendence of wholes with respect to parts and by recalling the transcendent superiority of gods to men. For example, I mean that the entire body of the cosmos is ruled by the World Soul and celestial bodies are governed by the celestial gods, and there is no passionate contamination in their reception nor is there any impediment to their noetic activity; but for the individual soul in communion with a body both these detriments are experienced.<sup>59</sup>

Iamblichus' understanding of the difference between the human soul, whom he calls "the lowest divinity,"<sup>60</sup> and the celestial gods, has to do with our respective vehicles. Participation in the metaphysics of inversion requires that our vehicles both reveal and veil our essences. Drawing largely from the Pythagorean imagery of the *Timaeus*, Iamblichus held that all divine beings share in the creation of the cosmos. The souls of the heavenly gods are complete in themselves (*autoteleis*),<sup>61</sup> and their vehicles (*ochêmata*) reveal their powers immediately in the heavenly round. Iamblichus says the Demiurge provides each human soul with an *ochêma* "produced from the entire ether (*pantos tou aitheros*) ... which has a creative power,"<sup>62</sup> but unlike the heavenly gods, in the exercise of this power, we become self-alienated (*allotriôthen*).<sup>63</sup> In geometric terms, the existence of gods is circular: their essence inseparable from their activity, their beginning identical with their end. In human souls this circle is broken: having entered generated life, we fall into rectilinear existence and become creatures whose beginnings are separate from our end. When we animate bodies we lose our original spherical vehicle and become trapped in oppositions: the divisions, collisions, impacts, reactions, growths and breakdowns that Iamblichus says are the unavoidable consequences of material life.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Ennead* IV.8.2.27-28.

<sup>58</sup> Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Norton, 1965) 25.

<sup>59</sup> *DM* 200.1-7

<sup>60</sup> *DM* 34.6.

<sup>61</sup> *Stob.* I, 373.11; see *Iamblichus De anima*, text, translation and commentary by John F. Finamore and John M. Dillon (Leiden: Brill 2000) 130.

<sup>62</sup> *Iamblichus Chalcidensis.. In Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta*; translated and edited by John Dillon, Leiden: Brill 1978) Frag. 84.4-5; 196.

<sup>63</sup> Simplicius = Priscianus *De Anima [DA]*, ed. M. Hayduck, Berlin: B. Reimeri. Simplicius ed. M. Hayduck (1882) 223.26; he also says that according to Iamblichus the embodied soul is also "made other to itself" (*heteroiousthai pros heautên*), 223.31.

<sup>64</sup> These are experiences in the material realm according to Iamblichus; *DM* 217.

Theurgic divinization and hermetic rebirth allow initiates to recover their immortal bodies and participate in demiurgy. Rebirth is realized as giving birth, not escaping from the world but creating it. To read hermetic rebirth as an escape from the material world is to miss the demiurgic dimension of the soul's immortalization; this is certainly important for theurgists and, I would argue, for Hermetists as well. Although Fowden rightly looks to the progressive stages of immortalization to explain the contradictions of the *Hermetica*, his privileging of dualism as the final stage denies to the soul the theurgic culmination of its immortalization: its participation in the creation of the cosmos. According to Iamblichus this mistake is rooted in a misunderstanding of catharsis where the cleansing of the soul, the Lesser Mysteries, is taken as an end in itself, rather than as a means to receive the transformative vision, the Greater Mysteries. The purpose of catharsis is not to escape from the body but to overcome the confusions of embodiment to allow the divine to take its seat in one's own body. The cleansing of the soul from its bodily fixations is merely a preliminary stage to be followed by an active and demiurgic cooperation with the gods. Iamblichus explains:

[T]he most useful goals of catharsis are: (1) withdrawal from foreign elements; (2) restoration of one's own essence; (3) perfection; (4) fullness; (5) independence; (6) ascent to the creative cause; (7) conjunction of parts to wholes; and (8) the contribution of power, life, and activity from the wholes to the parts.<sup>65</sup>

Iamblichus says this is the *ancient* teaching, which he contrasts with the view of some modern Platonists who see catharsis as simple withdrawal from the body and separation from the material world. These, he maintains, are the "lesser goals" (*smikra telê*) of catharsis,<sup>66</sup> and although Iamblichus recognizes their value, they merely prepare the soul for the greater goal of shared demiurgy.<sup>67</sup> In fact, to give priority to the lesser goals leads to the kind of dualism seen in Porphyry's desire to escape from the material realm.<sup>68</sup> Deified theurgists do not escape from their bodies or from nature; they embrace both from a divine perspective. The deeper goals of catharsis include the demiurgic activity of uniting with the creative cause, joining parts to wholes, and sewing the power and activity of gods into all parts of the cosmos.<sup>69</sup>

It is easy to read Hermes' injunction to discard the physical body and the senses as dualist. In Iamblichean theurgy and the *Hermetica* there is a *provisional* dualism in the initial cleansing of the soul from embodied confusion, but this dualism occurs within a larger non-dual context. Consider, for example, Hermes' hymn of rebirth given at the culmination of CH 13. In typical hermetic style he says "it cannot be taught; it is a secret kept in silence," and then he sings it. It is a hymn of praise directed toward the physical sun, the shining Eye of the *Nous*.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *Iamblichus De Anima*, Finamore and Dillon, op. cit., 70.1-5, (my translation).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.5-10.

<sup>67</sup> On this point and Iamblichus' discussion of the lesser goals of catharsis in his *Protepticos*, see the study by Hans Feichtinger, *Mediatorem Ergo Quaerunt: A Comparative Study of Iamblichus and Augustine on the Human Need for Mediation* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Master's Thesis at Dalhousie University, 2003).

<sup>68</sup> For references to Porphyry's position see G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1995) 13-15.

<sup>69</sup> In his *De Anima* Iamblichus says: "According to the Ancients, souls freed from generation co-administer the cosmos with the gods ... [these] liberated souls create the cosmos with the angels..." *Stob.* I 458.17-21.

<sup>70</sup> The role of the sun as the *agalma* of the *Nous* and of the One itself was part of the later Platonic tradition. See, for example, Proclus' practice of theurgic communion with Helios in his *Platonic Theology* 2.11, cited by Fowden, op.cit., 127-128. His prayer is remarkably similar to that of Hermes in CH 13.

Here, the theurgical elements of Hermes' teaching become evident for it is not Hermes who sings but the divine Powers that sing through him. Hermes invokes them:

O Powers within me, sing to the One and to the All. Sing together, all you Powers within me, as I wish it. O Holy *Gnôsis*, you have bathed me in light; through you I am singing the noetic light. I take joy in the joy of *Nous*. All you Powers sing the hymn with me.<sup>71</sup>

After identifying the Powers that liberate the soul from its confusion, Hermes, who has become united with the will of the Demiurge, continues:

The Powers that are in me sing these things; they chant the universe [into existence]. They complete your Will, your plan, as it proceeds from you and returns to you as [perfected] universe.<sup>72</sup>

Hermes performs this theurgic hymn to demonstrate to Tat the culmination of rebirth: becoming united with the will of the Demiurge, participating in cosmogenesis, chanting the universe into being. To enter this state is to shift one's orientation from part to whole, from mortal to immortal. Any aversion the initiate may have felt toward the body to achieve the lesser goals of catharsis would have been overcome through this rebirth and experience of the whole. Iamblichus says that from this divine and noetic perspective the soul "contains otherness and multiplicity."<sup>73</sup> One's physical body is no longer a prison but becomes the nexus through which divinity is hermetically revealed and concealed. To see the body or material reality as an obstacle would indicate that the soul was still in a preliminary stage of catharsis. Having united with the creative cause the soul bestows demiurgic generosity to all things, including its own body. According to theurgists, this shift of orientation is marked by the recovery of our spherical *ochêma* that moves circularly with the *Nous*.<sup>74</sup> The initiate then exists in a particular mortal body but at the same time, as Hermes reports, "I went out of myself into an immortal body;" he enters the spherical *ochêma* of theurgists that is co-extensive with the cosmos.<sup>75</sup> In this state the mortal body becomes the living *agalma*—as the cosmos is an *agalma*—encircled by the Demiurgic *Nous*. This Hermes describes his experience in this body as follows:

I imagine no longer with the sight of my eyes but with the noetic activity of the [divine] powers. I am in heaven, in earth, in water, in air; I am in animals, in plants, in the womb, before the womb, after the womb ... everywhere.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> CH 13.18

<sup>72</sup> CH 13.19

<sup>73</sup> Iamblichus says "the more we raise ourselves from parts to wholes, the more we discover the eternal union that exists there ... contains otherness and multiplicity" *DM* 59.7-11.

<sup>74</sup> In his *Timaeus* commentary Iamblichus says: "the *noêsis* of the soul and the circular motion of [celestial] bodies imitate the activity of the *Nous*" *In Tim.* Frag. 49.15-16. Dillon, op. cit., 152-153.

<sup>75</sup> CH 13.3. The *ochêma* for Iamblichus is an immortal body through which we receive and express the *Nous* and become homologous to the entire cosmos. Praising the sphere, Iamblichus says: "it takes in all the shapes in the cosmos by reason of its spherical shape; the sphere is the only shape that can include all the elements. Therefore, as by its singleness it reflects its similarity to the noetic Universe, so by its spherical shape it imitates that Universe's containing of wholes" Frag. 49, *In Tim.* Dillon, op. cit.,

<sup>76</sup> CH 13.11. Current research on the brain and states of consciousness provides evidence to suggest that the initiation into an immortal body may be associated with the activation of the right hemisphere of the brain. Neurologist Jill Bolte-Taylor reports her experience in which she suffered a stroke in her left hemisphere, leaving her "reality" defined by the right. She describes her experience as follows: "I felt enormous and expansive, like a genie just liberated from her body, and my spirit soared free like a great whale gliding through a sea of silent euphoria." Speaking from this state she says: "I am the life-force of the universe. I am the life-force power of the

He has become divine in the purified etheric body that theurgists call *Augoeides*, the body of light, and yet he remains a man and speaks to Tat.<sup>77</sup> This dual orientation is intrinsic to all of theurgy, as Iamblichus explains:

The whole of theurgy presents a double aspect. One is that it is conducted by men, which preserves our natural rank in the universe; the other is that, being empowered by divine symbols, it is raised up through them to be united with the gods and is led harmoniously into their order. This can rightly be called taking the shape of the gods.<sup>78</sup>

For theurgists matter was an obstacle to the soul only if it had not yet been purified. Once purified, the soul's material obstacles become divine icons. Theurgists remain human; they preserve "our rank" in the universe, yet at the same time are united with the gods and "take on their shape." That Iamblichus' understanding of the soul's divinization is non-dual is clear in the following statement:

The benevolent and gracious gods shine their light generously on theurgists, calling their souls up to themselves, giving them unification, and accustoming them, *while they are still in their bodies*, to be detached from their bodies and turned to their eternal and noetic principle.<sup>79</sup>

When Hermes says to Tat that "you see me with your eyes, my child, but by gazing with bodily sight you do not understand what I am; I am not seen with such eyes," he is speaking from the theurgic place of two realms: human and divine.<sup>80</sup> Tat sees Hermes in his natural rank in the universe, not in his etheric and immortal body that has taken the shape of the gods. Yet, to negate the human and visible body, following a dualist orientation, would negate the demiurgic activity that characterizes the divine. From Iamblichus's perspective, it would cut oneself off from the gods. For the later Platonists, divinity is not a state; it is as an activity, an *energeia*, the emanating procession from the One unfolded and inverted demiurgically by the *Nous*. The culmination of rebirth in this perspective *must include the physical body or it would not be genuine rebirth*. Like Hermes, the purified soul receives the *energeias* of the *Nous* in their continual creation of the world; the initiate shares in demiurgy. Hermetic rebirth is giving birth to the cosmos.

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50 trillion beautiful molecular geniuses that make up my form, at one with all that is" Jill-Bolte Taylor, TED Talk: [http://www.ted.com/talks/jill\\_bolte\\_taylor\\_s\\_powerful\\_stroke\\_of\\_insight.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_s_powerful_stroke_of_insight.html). This is remarkably close to the language of the *Hermetica*. She might well have said with Hermes: "I am in heaven, in earth, in water, in air; I am in animals, in plants, in the womb, before the womb, after the womb ... everywhere;" See also Jill-Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight*, 69.

<sup>77</sup> Iamblichus designates a genre of theurgic divination as *phôtagogia*, by which theurgists draw divine light into their etheric bodies. He says: "[*Phôtagogia*] somehow illuminates the ethereal and luminous vehicle (*augoeides ochêma*) surrounding the soul with divine light, and through this vehicle divine appearances ... take possession of our imagination" (*DM* 132.9-12). It is through this "luminous spirit" (*augoeides pneuma*) that theurgists provide a place (*chorein*) to receive the gods" (*DM* 125.5-6).

<sup>78</sup> *DM* 184.1-6

<sup>79</sup> *DM* 41.4-11.

<sup>80</sup> *CH* 13.3

### III. Conclusion: the Womb of Silence, the Chôra of the Cosmos

According to Iamblichus, the curriculum for reading of Platonic dialogues begins with the study of the *Alcibiades I* and *Phaedo* that portray the material body as a prison and culminates with the study of the *Timaeus* where material bodies reveal the powers of the Demiurge.<sup>81</sup> The portrayal of matter in this curriculum is alchemically transformed as it reflects the soul's gradual alignment with the "eternal measures" (*metra aidia*)<sup>82</sup> of the Demiurge.<sup>83</sup> The Platonists' view of the material cosmos shifts from pessimism to optimism, from dualism to non-dualism. In the theurgic culmination of this *paideia* the soul ritually receives the demiurgic *energeias* and the body becomes, as Iamblichus puts it, "an organ of the gods"<sup>84</sup> just as Hermes becomes a vehicle for divine powers. Hermetic *paideia* follows the same process as theurgic *paideia*. Although the way of Hermes cannot be taught, he reveals an essential condition that must be met to experience rebirth. Rebirth comes from the "womb of silence."<sup>85</sup> Before Hermes sings the hymn of rebirth he declares that it is "hid in silence." In NH 6.6, at the initiation into the eighth and ninth spheres, Hermes says to his son that "language is not able to reveal this ... the souls that are in it and the angels sing a hymn in silence;" he then tells his son to "sing it" while remaining silent.<sup>86</sup> Hermes transmits this mystery after having reached the "beginning of the Power that is above all powers, the one that has no beginning .... a fountain bubbling with life."<sup>87</sup> Here the intimacy touched on by Kingsley is evident, for between father and son a spiritual transmission occurs not seen even in Platonic texts.<sup>88</sup> The father says: "It is your business to understand; it is my job to be successful at speaking the words that spring from the source that flows inside me."<sup>89</sup> Not only must the student be receptive, the teacher also must be in a state of receptivity to the flow of the primal fountain. It is not information that is transmitted but noetic activity: the fountain flows *through* the father and the son as they enter its noetic *energeia*. As Mahé observes, "what is most important is not what Hermes and the disciple say but what they do and *what they experience while saying it*."<sup>90</sup> This is the insight behind the theurgic turn among later Platonists. What cannot be thought can, nevertheless, be received and enacted.

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<sup>81</sup> Dillon, *op. cit.*, 15; see the Platonic source for attributing this curriculum to Iamblichus: *The Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, chapter 26. The culminating dialogues are the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*, which Iamblichus designated as "perfect" (*teleious*; 26.34), the former covering everything addressed in the "physical" and the latter everything in the "theological" dialogues (26.15-16). L.G. Westerink, translator, *The Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Wiltshire, UK: The Prometheus Trust, 2011; North-Holland Publishing, 1962).

<sup>82</sup> *DM* 65.6

<sup>83</sup> See this *paideia* laid out in the *Timaeus* 43b – 44c where the soul's proportions, disturbed in the experience of birth, can be recovered through right education; also see *Timaeus* 90c-d where the embodied soul learns to realign itself with the measures of the Demiurge revealed in the heavens.

<sup>84</sup> *DM* 115.4-5.

<sup>85</sup> *CH* 13.2

<sup>86</sup> *NH* 6.6

<sup>87</sup> 6.6.58

<sup>88</sup> Kingsley, "Knowing Beyond Knowing," *op. cit.*, 23-24

<sup>89</sup> *NH* 6.6.55

<sup>90</sup> Mahé, "La voie d'immortalité à la lumière des *Hermetica* de Nag Hammadi et de découvertes plus récentes," *Vigiliae Christianae* 45, 1991, 365; my translation and emphasis.

The trigger for this transmission is silence, when the mind becomes still, when we become utterly receptive. In his discussion of Egyptian deities in *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus reiterates this point in his discussion of Hermetic theology. He says:

Hermes gives first rank to Kmeph, the leader of celestial gods whom he declares to be *Nous* thinking himself ... but prior to him he places the Indivisible One and “first act of magic” that he calls Heikton. It is in him that rests the primal noetic element and is the primal object of *noësis*, which, it must be specified, is worshipped by means of silence alone.<sup>91</sup>

Iamblichus identifies the Indivisible One of Platonism with the Egyptian Heka, the god of magic who, according to the *Coffin Texts*, exists before all other gods, before duality, and plays an essential role in cosmogenesis.<sup>92</sup> The synthesis of magic and cosmogony in Abamon’s defense of theurgy seems fitting, for upon receiving this divine power, the theurgist shares in the demiurgy of the cosmos.<sup>93</sup> But to worship this god and receive his power one must be silent. The initiate must become, as Hermes tells Tat, a pure receptacle, a womb that understands in silence.<sup>94</sup>

According to Iamblichus the One cannot be known, yet we are “enveloped in its divine presence.”<sup>95</sup> Prior to our discursive awareness, we possess an innate *gnôsis* of the gods that is co-existent with our nature. Accessing this *gnôsis* is possible only through theurgic receptacles and Iamblichus provides an extensive taxonomy of appropriate ritual objects that correspond to the capacities of theurgists.<sup>96</sup> In proportion to one’s receptive capacity (*epitedeiotês*), these ritual objects (*synthêmata*) unite the theurgist with the deity either by habit, communion or complete union.<sup>97</sup> Ultimately, by virtue of catharsis and gradual filiation with the divine, theurgists regain their spherical *ochêmata* and can offer the divine a receptacle that Iamblichus says is like the “pure and divine matter” that receives the gods in cosmogony.<sup>98</sup> For the later Platonists, Plato revealed this unknowable matrix of revelation in the *Timaeus*: it is the mysterious maternal receptacle (*hupodochê*) and space (*chôra*) that allows the Forms to come into existence.<sup>99</sup> This

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<sup>91</sup> DM 263.1-5. I am convinced by the argument of Dennis Clark and before him, Elsa Oréal, that the inexplicable *Eikton* of the Greek text should receive a rough breath and indicate the Egyptian god of magic, Heka. This explains the otherwise puzzling *maieuma* of 263.4 that, according to one manuscript tradition, is *mageuma*, changing the “first product” of the Dillon, Clark, Hershbell translation to “first act of magic,” which would be appropriate for the god of magic, Heka. See Dennis Clark, “Iamblichus’ Egyptian Neoplatonic Theology in *De Mysteriis*,” *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2 (2008) 164-205.

<sup>92</sup> Clark and other sources

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 175-176.

<sup>94</sup> CH 13.2

<sup>95</sup> DM 8.8

<sup>96</sup> Iamblichus spells this out in *On the Mysteries*. There are three kinds of theurgy that correspond generally to embodied souls as well as specifically to the needs of any soul depending on what divine energy it needs to receive. See my discussion of these theurgies and soul in Shaw, op. cit., 162-216.

<sup>97</sup> Iamblichus says that prayer “greatly enlarges the soul’s receptacle (*hupodochê*) of the gods” (DM 238.13-14). It has three stages: (1) the soul is collected and becomes conscious of the presence of the gods; (2) we are conjoined to the gods and experience their gifts; and (3) the soul experiences a complete union (*henôsis*) with the divine (DM V.26). In his discussion of the soul’s possession by the gods, Iamblichus also makes a three-fold distinction: “sometimes there is mere participation, sometimes a communion, and sometimes even union (*henôsis*). . . .” DM 111.10-13).

<sup>98</sup> DM 232.17

<sup>99</sup> *Timaeus* 51a; 52b.

cosmogonic *chôra*, which Plato says *cannot be thought*,<sup>100</sup> has—according to Iamblichus—its correlate within us and is the receptacle for every act of theurgy.<sup>101</sup> This womb of creation that Plato calls nurse and mother is utterly empty: it is semantically vacant, silent, and ungraspable.<sup>102</sup> This *chôra* is the womb of Hermetic rebirth through which the initiate is reborn by giving birth to the world. The silence of the *Hermetica* and theurgists is not the negation of sound or speech—as if silence were the conceptual alternative to language; it is, rather, its root and source, the *fons et origo* from which all sounds arise.<sup>103</sup> This original silence is the functional equivalent of the whole to its parts; for just as the whole contains and remains hidden in its parts, so silence remains hidden in language, and it is the presence of this noetic silence that is awakened and transmitted in the discourse between Hermetic father and son: simultaneously revealing and concealing the mystery.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, Hermes sings the cosmogonic hymn only by remaining silent, which is to say, by remaining utterly receptive, as the cosmogonic *chôra* of the *Timaeus* is receptive to the Forms and births them from her womb. The theurgist and Hermetist reach the primal silence of the One only by receiving and uniting with its creative *energeias*: chanting out the sounds that cosmogonically proceed from it. Hermetic initiates are revealed as lords of cosmogenesis, the “lords of citizens in every place,”<sup>105</sup> yet they remain hidden. They take on “the shape of the gods,” yet remain mortal, “holding our natural place in the cosmos.”<sup>106</sup> Hermes tells his son “sing while you are silent.”<sup>107</sup> The secret remains hidden by being revealed. The way of Hermes is the way of immortality concealed *and* revealed in our mortal existence.

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<sup>100</sup> *Timaeus* 52b

<sup>101</sup> The role of the receptacle spelled out in *DM* 232.11 – 233.6; *DM* 238.13-239.10.

<sup>102</sup> The *chôra* is the “Nurse of Becoming” (*geneseôs tithênê*; 52d), Mother and Receptacle (*mêter kai hupocochê*; 51a), completely void of all forms (50e) and scarcely an object of belief (*mogis piston*), i.e., unthinkable (52b). In the *Chaldean Oracles* the theurgist is told to approach the undivided noetic source as follows: “You must not perceive it intently, but—bringing back the sacred eye of your soul—extend an *empty* mind (*keneon nous*) into that Intelligible to know it, for it exists outside your mind;’ *Chaldean Oracles*, frag. 1, text, translation and commentary by Ruth Majercik (Leiden: Brill, 1989). I have used Majercik’s translation as well as Rappe’s; see *Reading Neoplatonism*, op. cit., 224; also see *Damascius’ Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles*, translated with introduction by Sara Abhel-Rappe, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 237-238. In his *Commentary on the Timaeus* Proclus maintains that this unthinkable receptacle, known only through a “bastard kind of thinking” (*nothos logismos* 52b), is the highest state possible to the soul. He puts it bluntly: “The bastard (*nothon*) is better than the *nous*.” See *Proclus Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus* Vol. 2, edited by David T. Runia and Michael Share (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 103.

<sup>103</sup> This hermetic silence is, I would argue, primarily a “discursive silence” in the sense that it releases us from our continual “interpretation” of experience. David Abram has written evocatively about the history of this internal discourse: “... our visual focus, even as it roamed across the visible landscape, began to release a steady flood of verbal commentary that often had little, or nothing, to do with that terrain. Such is the unending interior monologue that confounds so many contemporary persons—the ‘internal tape loop,’ or the incessant ‘roof-brain chatter,’ that Buddhist meditation seeks to dissolve back into the silence of present-moment awareness” David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010) 269-270.

<sup>104</sup> This is the “unsayable” experience to which Mahé alludes in the verbal exchange between Hermes and his son in *NH* 6.6 (see fn. 89). It is what Kingsley describes as “knowing beyond knowing,” op. cit.

<sup>105</sup> *NH* 6.6.59.

<sup>106</sup> *DM* 184.1-6.

<sup>107</sup> *NH* 6.6.59.