CHAPTER FIVE

Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*: Interior Familiars of Myth

The question as to what is meaningful, or the question as to how (and in what way) things mean, or the question as to what the question is that we are asking when we ask what is meaningful—all this is just the question.[1]

These questions about the quest for meaning, posed here by a modern philosopher–scholar, reflect what was for Porphyry and other thinkers of his time a central concern: the riddling nature of reality and the difficulty of giving it verbal expression. So Plotinus had said, speaking about the recognition of God in the self, that "the vision baffles telling," since it is our inclination to make this supreme mystery into a "common story."[2] Porphyry's story about the meaning of Plotinus' life expresses the same sentiment in a poignant way. After recording one of Plotinus' oracular statements about his relation to the gods, Porphyry says, "What he meant by this exalted utterance we could not understand and did not dare to ask."[3] Such meaning resists direct questioning.

The idea that the oracular quality of life cannot be told as a common story, that true understanding is an initiation into a mystery,[4] had been offered long before by one of the Neoplatonists' presiding spirits, Socrates. In the *Euthydemus* 291b, Socrates makes a speech on the capturing of knowledge:

Find it, good heavens! No, you would have laughed at us—we were like children after larks, always thought we were going to catch each knowledge by the tail, and

1. Stanley Romaine Hopper, "'Le Cri de Merlin!' Or Interpretation and the Metalogical," in *Yearbook of Comparative Criticism*, vol. IV: *Anagogic Qualities of Literature*, ed. by Joseph P. Strelka (Univetsity Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), p. 14.
2. Plotinus *Enn.* 6.9.10–11. 3. Porphyry *Vita Plotini* 10.
4. Plotinus *Enn.* 6.9.11.

the knowledge always got away. . . . Then it seemed like falling into a labyrinth; we thought we were at the finish, but our way bent round and we found ourselves as it were back at the beginning, and just as far from that which we were seeking at first.

The issue here involves a contrast between practical knowledge and the art of knowing. Against what might be called the "scientific" method of generals and hunters, whose skill lies in the hunt that has capture as its goal, Socrates suggests that when knowing is an art, knowledge is like an animal—it can be tracked, but not captured. Further, the tracking involves one in a labyrinth that has no end. When the winding path of the art of knowing is followed, meaning cannot be stated propositionally or in direct statements that "catch" it.

Plotinus repeated this Socratic wisdom again and again in his warnings against equating language with the realities it attempts to evoke. "Everywhere we must read 'so to speak'," he once said.[5] And, in his own way, Porphyry echoed his teacher's conviction that the revelation of meaning is allusive rather than declarative, for in *On the Cave of the Nymphs* he remarked that what is "dark and obscure," or resistant to shaping, comes to expression as a "shadowing forth in form."[6]

For Porphyry as for so many others of his era, the art of knowing had as its climax knowledge of God, an evocation of divine fullness in the soul.[7] However, even though the presence of divinity could be described as a "shine" so radiant that adepts at the art of knowing were thought to be "like God" and "divine,"[8] the lives of such sages still remained enigmatic, neither transparent nor open to rational scrutiny. We have already seen Eusebius weaving Origen's lifelines—and tangling the skeins! Eusebius' play with patterns of images, which from an historical perspective obscures as much about character as it reveals, suggests that the repose in the soul might really be a "divine desolation,"[9] both for the sage and for his interpreter. As Porphyry suggested, the forms of things are shadows, shades of the mystery of divine presence whose meanings ghost our perception and mock straight-minded attempts to tell the story plainly.

5. Ibid., 6.8.13. 6. Porphyry *De antro nympharum* 5.
7. See chapter 2, pp. 17–19.
8. On the shining of soul in bodies, see Plotinus *Enn.* 1.1.8, 1.6.9. Porphyry remarks that Plotinus' intellect "visibly lit up his face" and that his gentleness "shone out from him." See *Vita Plotini* 13.
9. Numenius as quoted by Eusebius *Praeparatio evangelica* 11.22.

Porphyry's own odyssey with regard to the art of knowing speaks eloquently to this point. In one of his frequent reflections on his own life in the *Life of Plotinus*, Porphyry remembers his early days in Plotinus' circle. Accustomed as he had been to the compelling logic of rhetorical discourse, he objected to the meandering course of Plotinus' lectures, which were "like conversations." His response to these conversation-like lectures was a treatise directed against his teacher, in which he attempted to show "that the object of thought lies outside the mind."[10]

This is a curious passage, for it is not immediately obvious why an objection to style should call forth a treatise devoted to a philosophical issue. What does Porphyry mean by this connection? I suspect that Porphyry's memory of his early objection to Plotinus' style, and his consequent response, contains an implicit assumption about an intimate relation between one's style of presentation and the content of that presentation. That is, one's vision of reality, of *what* one knows, is inseparable from one's way of expressing that vision. Style and substance, method and content, thinker and thought, are one. If this is the awareness that had dawned on Porphyry, we can see his objection more clearly. For, as Armstrong has shown, he had learned from Longinus, his first teacher, that what we know is somehow distinct from the mind—a separation of thinker and thought. For the logician, the art of knowing is like the hunter's "science" described by Socrates; it "captures" thoughts and catalogs, classifies, orders them into a clear-cut system. What, then, had Porphyry seen in Plotinus that irritated (and finally unsettled) his logical convictions?

First, Plotinus was not systematic: "He treats the same subjects in different ways in different places," as his student Amelius said.[11] Plotinus himself recommended not logic but dialectic as the way to the "winged" contemplation of the philosopher. This method, which works by "weaving together" all that issues from "the plain of truth," "leaves what is called logical activity, about propositions and syllogisms, to another art."[12] Further, the art of dialectic, unlike logic, is not a mere tool: "It is not just bare theories and rules; it deals with things and has real beings as a kind of material for its activity. . . . It does not know about propositions—they are

10. Porphyry *Vita Plotini* 18. On the whole issue raised by the title of Porphyry's treatise, see A. H. Armstrong, "The Background of the Doctrine 'That the Intelligibles are not outside the Intellect'," in *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique* 5: *Les Sources de Plotin* (Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1960), pp. 391–425.

11. Porphyry *Vita Plotini* 17.

12. Plotinus *Enn.* 1.3.4.

just letters. . . ."[13] Finally, Plotinus suggests that the dialectic method, which is the interweaving activity of perfect mind, "knows the movements of soul."[14] It is just at this point that Plotinus' style, his way of knowing, becomes one with the matrix of thought itself—soul—whose movement is a labyrinthine dance of "real beings" within.[15] For Plotinus "every soul that knows its history" is aware that its true motion is a circling around its source; real knowing is a divine wandering within, not a straightforward march toward some external object. It is we who are contained within reality, we who think only insofar as we are in soul; and when we break away from that containing presence—for example, by supposing that our dualistic language, by separating thinker and thought, has captured reality—we break away not only from the source but from ourselves.[16]

This, then, was the new thinking with which Porphyry had to contend. And his contending was, as he says, an agony. For he had been trained to catch larks, but now found that that way of knowing leaves the hunter far away from that which he seeks, like "a distraught child who does not recognize his father."[17] Following his conversion to the Plotinian way,[18] Porphyry seems to have given up the effort "to tell the story plainly" to such an extent that he was once accused of madness after reading to his colleagues his own poem, a "mysterious and veiled" interpretation of sacred marriage. Plotinus, however, remarked that he had become "at once poet, philosopher, and hierophant."[19] Seized by the madness that is heaven-sent,[20] Porphyry now saw thinking as a *poiesis*, a poetic working that is an imaginative act, not a logical exercise. Perhaps he had come to see what Plotinus knew, that the "divine desolation," the dark mystery of being, manifests itself enigmatically, "like a face seen in many mirrors."[21] The faces are images, phantoms of the soul's interior, the "real beings" through which God is seen,[22]

13. Ibid., 1.3.5.

14. Ibid.

15. On the circling motion of soul, see *Enn.* 2.2. On dancing, see *Enn.* 1.8.2; 2.9.7.

16. On the soul and its history, see Plotinus *Enn.* 6.9.8; on being in soul, see *Enn.* 1.1.13; 1.1.9; on knowing and seeing within, see, for example, *Enn.* 5.8.2 and 10; 5.9.13; on breaking away from ourselves, see *Enn.* 6.9.7; on duality, *Enn.* 6.9.10; 2.9.1.

17. Plotinus *Enn.* 6.9.7. On Porphyry's agony see *Vita Plotini* 18.

18. On Porphyry's conversion, see chapter 3, p. 64.

19. Porphyry *Vita Plotini* 15.

20. Plato *Phaedrus* 244a–b.

21. Plotinus *Enn.* 1.1.8.

22. In *Enn.* 2.9.2, Plotinus suggests that soul is "one nature in many powers." Elsewhere he says that the soul is filled with images that, if considered properly, are likenesses of archetypal realities in the divine realm. See *Enn.* 2.9.6 and 3.5.1. Finally, one must see not only

and our thinking—indeed, our very being—is likewise veiled with images, for "living things are all conformed to the complete pattern of the All."[23]

Porphyry's new vision of the "pattern of the All" may account for the change in his allegorical method that one scholar has detected. In his *On Images*, written before the sojourn with Plotinus, the figures in the text being interpreted do not bear multiple significations; whereas in *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, written after the encounter with Plotinus, the terms in the source text give rise to pleromatic meanings in the interpretation.[24] The change, it seems to me, is significant. Allegory, formerly a tool for the one-to-one correspondences of "plain telling," became for Porphyry part of the dialectic of the vision that baffles direct telling. Interpretation had itself become a winding path, a "pattern of the All," a labyrinthine tracing of the faces of a text's "dark and obscure" presence.

The idea of interpretation as the key to life's "Garden of Plenty"[25] might be seen as a response to one of our opening questions: "the question as to how (and in what way) things mean." What I am suggesting is that for Plotinus and for Porphyry, there is meaning in life when one is possessed by its metaphoric power, by the nuances and shadows of its riddling nature, by the plenty of its garden. It is a question of possession and identity. As Plotinus said, "Did 'we' investigate by having soul? No, but in so far as we *are* soul."[26] That "primal nature"—what we have been calling the mystery at the heart of life—is always present, and "we are always before it," and within it.[27]

Unfortunately, there is a tragic flaw in our investigations: "We do not always attend"; "we do not always look."[28] We forget "the question as to what the question is that we are asking when we ask what is meaningful." Our modern questioner, following C. G. Jung, has taken the mysterious cry of Merlin in the forest of Broceliande as a figure for this painful failure to attend: "Men still hear his cries, so the legend runs, but they cannot understand or interpret them. . . . This cry that no one could understand implies that he lives on in unredeemed form. His story is not yet finished, and he still walks abroad."[29] Only by placing ourselves within the "magnetic field" of that cry, within the echoes that the cry evokes, can we hope to redeem our interpretative looking.[30] Like Plotinus' primal nature, which is always present, Merlin's cry sounds; if only the hearer will attend, its echoes will compose "a choral song full of God."[31]

In the following pages, biography will be considered as a quest for meaning, an interpretative effort that resists making a "common story" out of the "vision which baffles telling." The text, in this case, is a life, the life of Plotinus, and the vision is the dark and obscure cry of the man's being that sounded through Porphyry and made of his interpretation a song full of echoes. The biographical telling is indeed baffling, for the echoes come forth as "real beings" like Odysseus and Socrates, who give shadowed form to the mystery we call Plotinus. Nature, we have said, is riddling; so too is the meaning of a man's life. In Porphyry's biography, the soulfulness of Plotinus shines like a face reflected in many mirrors. What we can know about a life is its veil of images; biographical interpretation is a labyrinthine tracing and a weaving together of the tracks of soul in life.[32]

Shadows of Life: Interior Familiars

"All things," said Plotinus, "are full of signs."[33] Visible things are linked by a "chain" of sympathy to the invisible, such that visible nature is the mask of God. In fact, the earth is itself a god, and the primal nature is expressed

the images, but the correspondences among them as well: "All things are full of signs, and it is a wise man who knows one thing out of (by way of) another" (*Enn.* 2.3.7).

23. Plotinus *Enn.* 2.3.13.

24. See Jean Pépin, "Porphyre, exégète d'Homère," in *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique* 12: *Porphyre* (Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1966), p. 247 and passim.

25. See Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.5.8–9. 26. Ibid., 1.1.13. 27. Ibid., 6.9.8.

28. Ibid.

29. Hopper, "'Le cri de Merlin!'," p. 10; the quotations are from C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 228, and *Psychology and Alchemy*, p. 228.

30. See Hopper, "'Le cri de Merlin!'," p. 26: "In the case of the poem, [I must] stand within the magnetic field of the elements in tension, and see as the poem sees. . . . What is miraculous here in the moment of recognition is the sudden sense of identification with that which is beyond conceptualization."

31. Plotinus *Enn.* 6.9.8.

32. A note on our way of proceeding: in Chapter 4, Eusebius' "Life of Origen" was read in context with other writings of Eusebius (especially his *Contra Hieroclem*) as well as works of Origen. So here, other writings of Porphyry, especially his *De antro nympharum*, as well as the *Enneads* of Plotinus, will be used to throw light (or cast shadows) on his *Vita Plotini*. I assume that biographies were not isolated phenomena but rather one face of the whole world of an author's thought.

33. Plotinus *Enn.* 2.3.7.

through it in signs. What is fundamentally whole shows itself here, to us, as a fullness of lucid images.[34] Even the human body, part, after all, of the earth, can function as such a soul sign: "We can come to conclusions about someone's character, and also about the dangers that beset him, and the precautions to be taken, by looking at his eyes or some other part of his body. Yes, they are parts, and so are we; so we can learn about one from the other."[35]

The idea that the whole might unfold and blossom in the part seems to have had a powerful effect on Porphyry. We can see it at work in a humorous way in the anecdote with which he opens his biography of Plotinus:

> Plotinus, the philosopher of our times, seemed ashamed of being in the body. As a result of this state of mind he could never bear to talk about his race or his parents or his native country. And he objected so strongly to sitting to a painter or sculptor that he said to Amelius, who was urging him to allow a portrait of himself to be made, "Why really, is it not enough to have to carry the image in which nature has encased us, without your requesting me to agree to leave behind me a longer-lasting image of the image, as if it was something genuinely worth looking at?" In view of his denial and refusal for this reason to sit, Amelius, who had a friend, Carterius, the best painter of the time, brought him in to attend the meetings of the school—they were open to anyone who wished to come, and accustomed him by progressive study to derive increasingly striking mental pictures from what he saw. Then Carterius drew a likeness of the impression which remained in his memory. Amelius helped him to improve his sketch to a closer resemblance, and so the talent of Carterius gave us an excellent portrait of Plotinus without his knowledge.[36]

Porphyry seems to relish the trick played on the master as much as the portrait itself! But what of this portrait, and Porphyry's obvious delight in its existence? Was he guilty of a literal appreciation of "an image of an image," thus depriving of its soul signs that part of earth fashioned as "Plotinus"? The words he uses to describe the portrait suggest otherwise. The artist Carterius is described as working with "striking fantasies" (*phantasias plēktikōteras*); what he drew is characterized as a "likeness of his mental impression" (*indalmatos to eikasma*; *indalma* can also mean "hallucination"!); what Amelius helps him improve "to a greater likeness" (*eis homoiotēta*) is his "sketch" (*to ichnos*: literally, "footprint," "track").

34. Ibid., 4.4.26. 35. Ibid., 2.3.7. 36. Porphyry *Vita Plotini* 1.

All of these terms suggest that for Porphyry the portrait was not an opaque image of the man, nor was it merely an imitation of his physical features. It might better be described as a creative mirroring, an act of the imagination more true to reality than direct perception. This kind of portrait could be described as a visual text full of signs, footprints of the man's deep self.

A passage from another of Porphyry's works provides a more discursive sense of the portrait art: "If a man makes an image of a friend, of course he does not suppose that the friend is in it or that the parts of his body are included in the various parts of the representation. Honor is shown toward the friend by means of the image."[37] Although it reads, curiously, like an apology for the biography's opening anecdote, this statement from *Against the Christians* comes in the context of a defense of images—statues—of the gods. As with the image of a friend, so with representations of the gods; one would not suppose "that the god is in the wood or stone or bronze from which the statue is manufactured."[38] Further, "even supposing that any one of the Greeks were so light-minded as to think that the gods dwell within the statues, his idea would be much purer than that of the man who believes that the divine entered into the womb of the virgin Mary and became an embryo before being born and swaddled in due course; for this is a place full of menstrual blood and gall and things even more unseemly."[39]

What Porphyry seems particularly adamant about here is the nature of the space framed by the image. We may not imagine that the statue becomes the place for the physical dwelling of the god, nor may we think that the portrait of the friend captures him in a tangible way. Rather, just as the image of the friend shows honor, so statues of the gods are for the sake of remembrance and knowledge; thus to honor the statue with sacrifices is actually to evoke one's own divine inclination.[40] In this regard, Porphyry's remarks about the birth of the Christian god demonstrate graphically what was, for him, the sacrilege of supposing that the presence or indwelling of the gods is in any way physical.

37. Porphyry *Contra Christianos* fr. 76 (Harnack).
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., fr. 77. This was, of course, an old argument between pagans and Christians. Porphyry is here following in the footsteps of Celsus: see, for example, Origen *Contra Celsum* 7.62 (Chadwick, pp. 446–47) and 8.17–24 (Chadwick, pp. 464–70). On the whole issue, see E. Bevan, *Holy Images* (London, 1940).
40. Porphyry *Contra Christianos* fr. 76 (Harnack).

Images, then, do not place gods or men in frames that define them in temporal or spatial dimension. The province of these visual images is not actual place, but a placing that leads inward, through the representation, to a "realm of inner space," an "interior geography" where meaning is gathered and from which it can flow.[41] There is a paradox here, perhaps even an absurdity. For it is the face, the image, that gives face to what is fundamentally faceless. Further, it is not meaning that is placed in the object, but rather we who are placed within the realm for which the image provides a frame. The portrait of Plotinus, for example, was an object, an image that gave face to the inward mystery of the man. Yet it was not Plotinus who delighted in this image, but Porphyry; through the image of his friend he was placed within a geography that expressed his own interior inclination. In honoring Plotinus in this way, he was at the same time honoring the memory, and evoking the knowledge, of a face of his own soul.

We might think of the portrait of Plotinus as a "shadowing forth in form," a visual image that, paradoxically, both masks the man's "inner realm" *and* takes us into it. But we no longer have this visual portrait; it has been transformed by Porphyry into a literary image so powerful for him that he chose it to begin the winding path of his biography. Not only the biography as a whole, but each anecdote, each image, serves as a face whereby Porphyry faced the "dark and obscure" meaning of Plotinus that lived on as part of his own "interior geography." By giving face to Plotinus in the biography, Porphyry has, like the artist Carterius, placed himself within the "striking fantasies" that impressed him as appropriate framings, or footprints, of his master's nature.

The biography, then, is the baffled telling of a vision, a "placing" of soul through image and type. As one of Porphyry's Gnostic contemporaries said, "Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images. One will not receive truth in any other way."[42] And Plutarch, a less rash voice and one more squarely in Porphyry's own tradition, said the same: naked truth wounds, and is too harsh; thus the Delphic oracle spoke in the "equivocations and circumlocutions" of metaphor.[43] Oddly enough, this

41. For these phrases I am indebted to David L. Miller, "Utopia, Trinity, and Tropical Topography," a lecture at the colloquium on "Utopia" sponsored by the Protestant Theological Faculty of the University of Human Sciences of Strasbourg and the Department of Religion, Syracuse University, 13–15 March 1980, Strasbourg, France, Manuscript, p. 6.
42. *Gospel of Philip*, in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 140.
43. Plutarch *De pyth. orac.* 26, 407e (and see the discussion of Plutarch's position on these issues by Jean Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Études Agustiniennes, 1976), p. 180.

"placing of truth under poetic form"[44] places the hearer within the very meaning that would evade him otherwise. We suggested above that a paradox surrounds "imaging truth" and the "placing which places." It is a paradox that characterizes the biographer's mythic art of weaving fact with fiction; as Plutarch said, it is the gesture that speaks worlds, not the obvious act, and it is precisely the gesture that the biographer must capture, for then, dissimulating, he tells the truth.

The paradox of poetic placing was not a stranger to Porphyry's thought, nor to that of his master. Plotinus once called *topos* ("place") "the source and spring of true soul and knowing."[45] Yet he also said that "the world of sense moves in soul—there is no other place for it than soul."[46] Taken together, these sentences read like a play on the word "place," for how can soul be both what places and what springs from place?

What sustains this paradox, and carries its meaning, is Plotinus' idea of double *energeia*. The idea of *energeia* is of course connected to Plotinus' famous theory of emanation, the procession of a chain of beings from a single, ultimate principle, the One. This chain, however, is not a series of flat links but rather appears as groups of trinities, with *energeia* as the focal point, the "third" between any two related links.[47] One feature of this procession that seems to have interested Plotinus in particular is the *double* nature of *energeia*: that what does the forming is itself informed by its activity—visions envisioning themselves! In *Ennead* 6.2.22, Plotinus turns to the double *energeia* of the embodied soul: soul fashions body, or "places" it within its containing embrace, and at the same time soul is given "place," or expression, by the body into which it shines. The body is placed by the energy of soul, and is a living expression, and expressing, of its activity.[48]

In his *Sentences*, Porphyry picked up and expanded upon these Plotinian thoughts. What is present in us, he says, are the *energeiai* of soul; body is in soul, and soul is "in" body not as *ousia*, as a substantive thing, but as activity.[49] Further, the relating of body and soul cannot be described in terms of actual place—only bodies can be "in a place"—but rather in terms of the energy of placing. The emphasis is on the *relation* between soul and body, a relation which is a dance of "living energies" like Plotinus' "real

44. Ibid. 45. Plotinus *Enn.* 2.5.3. 46. Ibid. 3.7.11.
47. See the discussion in Andrew Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 9–16.
48. On the outer and inner man, see *Enn.* 1.1.3, 3.6.5, 4.3.10, 6.4.14–15; on archetypes, see *Enn.* 6.7.4–5; see also Smith, *Porphyry's Place*, pp. 11, 23.
49. Smith, *Porphyry's Place*, p. 2.

beings" within.[50] The paradox of placing, then, is kept in tension by a relating, an energy of mutual illumination.

The matter goes farther, and deeper, than an ontology which is only cosmic, however. For the metaphor of "placing," which envisions a simultaneous juxtaposition of soul and body, idea and object, intellect and sense, such that each is seen through the other, also has psychological and literary implications. It is Plotinus who makes psychological sense of this metaphor, and because his ideas give sharper focus to Porphyry's more explicitly literary enterprise, it will be useful to consider them first.

In his reflections on the human psyche, Plotinus makes it clear that true knowing is a poetic knowing with "the inner sight."[51] It is a seeing that makes one "at home" (*endon*), like dwelling within the familial hearth. And when one looks deeply within the self, what is seen is *theoeidēs aglaia*,[52] literally the splendor or shining of divine form. The seeing is not single, however, but multiple, for in its weavings through body, soul leaves tracks, footprints of a shimmering presence. We are each a whole universe (for "soul is many things, and all things"[53]), and our task is to polish our way of looking, until the hearth shines with likenesses of the relating activity of soul in body.[54]

Plotinus had a striking metaphor for the way of looking that lets the hearth, the dark mystery of our being, shine with familial images: it is the "mirror of Dionysus."[55] Plotinus shared Porphyry's view of the evocative power of visual images, and it was a discussion of statues as receptacles for the presencing of soul that seems to have called forth this metaphor. After remarking that statues "serve like a mirror to catch an image of [the presence of] soul,"[56] Plotinus turns to another kind of statue, the human being. "Nothing, in fact, is far away from anything," and although our bodies, like statues, are in place and have a tangible reality, true self-hood, like the reflecting, receptive statue, "has nothing to do with spatial position."[57] Selfhood, rather, is a placing, a unity "in which there is distinction."[58] It is the metaphor of the "mirror of Dionysus" that itself mirrors the inner realm of self along with its variegated "distinctions."

Why this particular mirror? In the early Dionysus stories, the mirror was the favorite toy of the young god, and when he was ripped apart by the Titans, his mirror reflected his altered image. It was a trick or magic or even lying mirror that, showing an altered image, yet showed the real one—perhaps like Plutarch's "gesture," which tells the truth while lying.[59] In late Orphic-Neoplatonic interpretations, the mirror was symbolic of a way of looking in which heavenly truth was revealed: the mirror's images "caught in figures the transparence of heaven."[60] In a similar vein, Proclus says that the mirror symbolizes "the characteristic way in which the universe abounds with intelligence," for out of the image in the mirror flowed the particulars of creation.[61]

These reflections on the mirror are at work in Plotinus' use of the metaphor, too: "the souls of men, seeing their images in the mirror of Dionysus as it were, have entered into that realm in a leap from above; yet they are not cut off from their origin. . . ."[62] Mirrored images are creative, and it is through them that contact with the origin is maintained. Thus the mirror of Dionysus suggests that our truest way of looking at life is to look poetically, in figure and image, for it is through these "particulars" that the single hearth of self manifests its presence and becomes a home. Plotinus might well have agreed with one of his modern heirs, who has suggested that "the imaginal sense turns the world to trope, not so much in seeing images as in sensing all things imaginally. The place of image and its sense is a center in which everything is contained, as if center were circumference, the horizon a point pointing. If God [the hearth] is *topos*, the *topos* is trope."[63] Images are the tracings that give shape and contour to the relation, the "placing," between what is hidden within and plain without.

50. See the following fragment preserved in *Stobaeus* 1.354.4f. (text and translation in Smith, *Porphyry's Place*, p. 3 and n. 7): "The life-giving activities [*hai zōtikai energeiai*], by accepting the arrangement of the different activities into parts which is imposed upon them by their acceptance of the enharmonising power of soul, have added the 'possession of parts' even to the soul. And perhaps soul is to be thought of and to have life in two ways, its own life and life in relation; the 'parts' exist in the related life. . . . Thus in the sowing (embodiment) the parts exist, alongside soul which remains indivisible."

51. *Enn.* 1.6.9.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 3.4.3; see also 2.2.2: each man is a "private universe" (*oikeion holon*: a "domestic whole"!).

54. On polishing, see *Enn.* 1.6.9; on likeness, *Enn.* 3.3.6: "Correspondence holds all things together" (especially when the things are "opposites" like form and matter, heaven and earth, body and soul); see further 2.9.6 and 2.3.13: "living things are all conformed to the complete pattern of the All."

55. *Enn.* 4.3.12.

56. *Enn.* 4.3.11. 57. Ibid. 58. Ibid.

59. Nonnus *Dionysiana* 6, quoted in Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie*, p. 202, n. 111.

60. John Lydus *Mens.* 4.51, quoted in Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie*, p. 202. n. 111.

61. Proclus *In Tim.* 33b, 163, quoted in Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie*, p. 202. n. 111.

62. *Enn.* 4.3.12.

63. David L. Miller, "'I know a place . . .'," a lecture at the Symposium, "Religion after

This imaginal sensing that reveals the true self through its tracings can be found in Porphyry's literary way of knowing, where text is hearth and interpretation its imaginal reflections. In the opening sections of his *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, Porphyry argues against two ways of interpreting Homer's description of the Cave of the Naiads in *Odyssey* 13. On the one hand, he says, it is not a mere fiction (*plasma*: "delusion"); nor is it geography, a literal history of a place (*historia topikē*). Both of these interpretative approaches are absurd, since the one accuses the poet of a poetic license run wild, while the other accuses the gods of an arbitrary act, "opening by a new art a path to gods and men in the region of Ithaca."[64] What Porphyry recommends is a third way, the way of unfolding the concealed meaning of the text by exploring its symbols and the meaning that shines through them. Porphyry sets out to seek the "wisdom" of the cave through its images.[65]

This interpretative perspective is reminiscent of a statement that Porphyry makes in his *Life of Plotinus*. Immediately after he quotes and explicates the Delphic oracle about Plotinus, he says, "This, then, is my account (*historētai*) of the life of Plotinus."[66] Here is a very different use of the word "history" from the one we saw above. For what kind of history speaks in the poetry of Pythian frenzy? Although the oracle is an obvious example, I would suggest that the entire biography is characterized by the kind of poetic thinking that allows for history a soulful depth, a hearth that shimmers forth in images. Porphyry's biography is a mirror of Dionysus!

Looking in the mirror of Dionysus is the making of a world in images. When the world is a human life, the images body forth the relation between the man's hidden soulfulness, the dark presence within, and the facts of his life, his "statue." The biographical mirror, then, reflects images of the activities of soul in life, creating what a modern literary thinker has called "the phantasmal real."[67]

What are the phantasms that, ghosting Porphyry's biography, make Plotinus real? One of them is Socrates. He is mentioned twice by name, at

Freud and Jung," sponsored by the Center for Twentieth-Century Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 15–16 April 1980, Manuscript, pp. 9–10.

64. Porphyry *De antro nympharum* 2–4.

65. Ibid., 4.

66. *Vita Plotini* 24; see above, chapter 3, pp. 63–64.

67. J. Hillis Miller, "Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976): 76.

the beginning and at the end of the biography, giving it a kind of Socratic "envelope." His first explicit appearance comes in the context of Plotinus' refusal (as in the case of the portrait) to celebrate himself: instead of honoring the date of his own birth, he celebrated Socrates' birthday, "receiving his friends at his hearth" (*hestiōn tous hetairous*).[68] His second appearance comes as the prologue to Apollo's oracle about Plotinus: "When Amelius asked where the soul of Plotinus had gone, Apollo, who said of Socrates, 'Socrates is the wisest of men,'—hear what a great and noble oracle he uttered about Plotinus."[69]

In both of these instances, the appearance of Socrates gives a sense of Plotinus' soulful identity. They are evocations of a daemonic "other" that most truly reveals the heart of the man himself. The first appearance of Socrates is an example of Porphyry's Plutarchian way of depicting character. It involves a gesture that speaks more faithfully than grand actions on the world stage. Here it is the context that is especially revealing, for instead of recording the celebration of Socrates' birthday as part of the normal Platonic academic practice,[70] Porphyry has made this gesture serve as a face of Plotinus' interior inclination. Thus it is not academic practice that we hear about, but a gathering of friends at Plotinus' own hearth, where Plotinus is host, not to himself, but to Socrates. The second appearance is a similar evocation of Plotinus' Socratic self; here the soul of Plotinus is directly linked with "Socrates the wisest of men," a placing that gives authority to "the immortal song" Apollo sings in honor of Plotinus.

These two explicit appearances of Socrates are not, however, the only shapes of the biography's Socratic ghost. If, as we have suggested, images are phantoms, reflections in the mirror of Dionysus, their epiphanies are likely to be varied, being sometimes obvious, as we have just seen, and sometimes more subtle. The changeable nature of these daemonic "others" seems to have been well known to Porphyry. His thinking on this matter has been summarized as follows: "*daimones* have misty (*aerōdes*) *pneuma*, which alters its form in response to their momentary imaginings, and thus causes them to appear to us in ever changing shapes, sometimes acting the parts of gods or higher spirits or the souls of the dead."[71] Taking Porphyry at

68. Porphyry *Vita Plotini* 2.

69. *Vita Plotini* 22.

70. See John Dillon, "The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period," *Dionysius* 3 (December 1979), p. 76.

71. Dodds., *Proclus*, App. II, p. 319.

his word, we can say that the appearance of Socrates by name is but one form of "momentary imagining"; other shapes of Plotinus' Socratic phantom will follow.

The opening chapters of the biography, with their suggestion that Plotinus disdained the frivolous pleasures of the world, announce another way in which Socrates gives figure to Plotinus. Behind what Porphyry reports about Plotinus' contempt for bodily things lies Socratic advice on freeing the soul from the shackles of body.[72] This is the way, for Socrates, to the contemplative life of the true philosopher, who "everywhere seeks the true nature of everything as a whole, never sinking to what lies close to hand."[73] That Plotinus lived the contemplative life where everything is seen as a whole is most strikingly suggested by Porphyry's account of Plotinus' four unions with "the God who is over all things."[74] But there are other indications as well.

Porphyry reports that when Plotinus was speaking, his intellect "visibly lit up his face." Further, he was so full of thought (abounding in ideas such that he did not even notice his own grammatical mistakes) that Porphyry was led to describe his presentations in terms of "rapt inspiration."[75] Like Alcibiades with Socrates, Porphyry had been "bitten in the heart" by Plotinus' philosophy *and* by his presence, and Socrates' "sacred rage" and "philosophic frenzy" ghost his account of his own teacher.[76]

The clearest picture of Plotinus' contemplative Socratic face comes in chapter eight of the biography. Here Porphyry says that his mentor "was wholly concerned with thought. . . . Even if he was talking to someone, engaged in continuous conversation, he kept to his train of thought. He could take his necessary part in the conversation to the full, and at the same time keep his mind fixed without a break on what he was considering." "Present at once to himself and to others," Plotinus "kept the connection." "Never, while awake," did Plotinus relax his "intent concentration upon the intellect." Again the Socrates of the *Symposium* comes to mind. Not only is there the picture of Socrates still "keeping the connection" at the end of

72. Plato *Phaedo* 67c; 83a.
73. Plato *Theaetetus* 173e; see also *Republic* VI.486a.
74. *Vita Plotini* 23.
75. Ibid., 13–14. Note that the rapture that failed to attend to grammar also had its humorous side. Porphyry reports, in *Vita Plotini* 7, Plotinus' play with the name of one of his students, reminiscent of Socrates' playfulness with words (especially names) in the *Cratylus*.
76. Plato *Symposium* 218a–b.

the banquet when everyone else has succumbed to wine and sleep; there is also Alcibiades' story of Socrates during the campaign at Potidaea.[77] There Socrates took care of what "lay close to hand," enduring hardships and fighting bravely, yet he did not lose his philosophical concern with contemplation of the whole, standing for a whole day "lost in thought, wrestling with some problem or other." This "absolutely unique"[78] Socrates, who kept the connection so faithfully, echoes poignantly as the contemplative melody in Porphyry's Plotinian song.

Yet another Socratic echo sounds in Porphyry's story about the visible manifestation of Plotinus' companion spirit (*oikeios daimōn*: his "familiar daemon").[79] The scene was a temple of Isis, and the ceremony of evocation was presided over by an Egyptian priest giving a "display of his occult wisdom." In Porphyry's words, "when the spirit was summoned to appear a god came" and not a "mere daemon." Thus the "companion [*ton sunonta*: 'the one with him'] was a daemon of the more godlike kind [*theioterōn daimonōn*], and he continually kept the divine eye of his soul fixed on this companion."

The idea of the personal daemon, occupying the peak of a hierarchy of invisible "real beings" within the self, was, of course, a popular one. One scholar has remarked that "the invisible world was as real as the visible," and the daemonic companion "lodged contact with the divine in the structure of the personality itself."[80] As Porphyry notes in this section of the biography, Plotinus wrote a whole treatise on the companions after his experience, remarking about these daemons that "what works in a man leads him."[81]

The specifically Socratic character of Plotinus' invisible familiar is suggested by its divinity, its godlikeness. Socrates' famous voice, his "constant companion,"[82] is described as a "divine or supernatural experience," a "prophetic voice," "my familiar divine sign."[83] Further, as Socrates notes often,

77. Plato *Symposium* 220a–221b. 78. Ibid., 221c. 79. *Vita Plotini* 10.
80. Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 10, 69; cf. pp. 63–75. On p. 121, n. 64, Brown remarks that in Christian thinking on this topic, the guardian angel came to be seen as "the principle of a person's identity," such that *angelus* came to be used as a "courtesy phrase" for a person instead of his name!
81. *Enn.*3.4.3.
82. Plato *Apology* 40a.
83. *Apology* 31c; 40a; *Phaedrus* 242c. See also *Republic* VI.496c.

his companion was truly a guardian: it warned him of danger, thus protecting him from it. This is exactly the kind of role that Porphyry ascribes to Plotinus' daemon, for he introduces the story of the summons in the temple with an anecdote about the great power of Plotinus' soul in repulsing a magical attack, remarking wryly that "Plotinus certainly possessed by birth something more than other men." Plotinus' familiar daemon, then, lived on in Porphyry in such a way that in the ceremony of his biography, he summoned it through an image of Socrates.

Like Porphyry, Alcibiades said about *his* mentor, Socrates, that he was "godlike,"[84] and in Alcibiades' touching words about his love for Socrates, a final face of the Socratic ghost who embodies Plotinus in the biography comes forth. In chapter 15, Porphyry is relating the events of one year's feast of Plato in the school. After telling about the reading of his own poem, "The Sacred Marriage," and Plotinus' approval of it ("You have shown yourself at once poet, philosopher, and hierophant"), he reports what followed:

> The rhetorician Diophanes read a defence of Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* in which he asserted that a pupil for the sake of advancing in the study of virtue should submit himself to carnal intercourse with his master if the master desired it. Plotinus repeatedly started up to leave the meeting, but restrained himself, and after the end of the lecture gave me, Porphyry, the task of writing a refutation. Diophanes refused to lend me his manuscript, and I depended in writing my refutation on my memory of his arguments. When I read it before the same assembled hearers I pleased Plotinus so much that he kept on quoting during the meeting, "So strike and be a light to men."

What Diophanes read to the school was a defense of sexual love between teacher and student, based on a misreading of Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium*.[85] Alcibiades had not actually suggested that Socrates had desired to be his lover and that he as the student had submitted willingly, but rather that he had been so deeply moved by Socrates' philosophy, "which clings like an adder to any young and gifted mind it can get hold of," that he desired his body as well, confusing inner beauty with its exterior appearance. As Socrates himself says to Alcibiades, "You're trying to exchange the semblance of beauty for the thing itself."

Presumably Plotinus shared this Socratic sentiment, and it was his dismay at hearing Diophanes' gross misreading, which must, after all, have been aimed directly at him, that prompted his repeated inclination to leave the meeting. Porphyry, who had just finished reading an inspired poem on sacred marriage, also disagreed, and wrote such a dazzling refutation that Plotinus called him "a light to men."

84. *Symposium* 219c; *Vita Plotini* 23 and 10.
85. *Symposium* 222a.

What was Porphyry's refutation like? It is tempting to imagine that he extended his thoughts on sacred (as opposed to profane) marriage to Alcibiades' speech. For, in his conclusion, Alcibiades says about Socrates that "if you open up his arguments, and really get into the skin of them, you'll find that they're the only arguments in the world that have any sense at all, and that nobody else's are so godlike, so rich in images of virtue. . . ."[86] Here "getting into the skin" involves a soulful connection, an interior seeing in images that is most truly expressive of the relationship's beauty. It is a marriage of teacher and student that is figured by the "bite in the heart" of "sacred rage,"[87] not by physical frenzy.

Alcibiades' reference here to godlike images within is a play on the image with which he opens his eulogy. There he had compared Socrates to a statue of Silenus: "they're modeled with pipes or flutes in their hands, and when you open them down the middle there are little figures of the gods inside." It is, says Alcibiades, an apt comparison: "I don't know whether anybody else has ever opened him up when he's been being serious, and seen the little images inside, but I saw them once, and they looked so godlike, so golden, so beautiful, and so utterly amazing that there was nothing for it but to do exactly what he told me."[88]

Because Porphyry's refutation is lost to us, we will never know whether he countered Diophanes' view of the profane marriage between teacher and student with Alcibiades' Silenic perspective. We do know, however, that in the biography Porphyry calls himself "one of Plotinus' closest friends," and that, while he calls attention again and again to Plotinus' care for him, he makes it clear that what Plotinus really "loved with all his soul" was the God "who has neither shape nor any intelligible form, but is throned above intellect and all the intelligible."[89] What the Diophanes anecdote suggests in the context of such statements is that the relation between Porphyry and Plotinus was like that between Alcibiades and Socrates. Again the Socratic phantom has given shadowed form to the mystery of Plotinus, this time as a

86. *Symposium* 222a. 87. Ibid., 218a–b. 88. Ibid., 215b and 217a.
89. *Vita Plotini* 7 and 23. For instances of Plotinus' care for Porphyry, see 7: editing of treatises; 13 and 18: solving intellectual difficulties; 11: preventing suicide.

figure for Plotinus the teacher. And the Silenic figure within which golden images shimmer lives on also, for Porphyry had "seen the little images" inside Plotinus, and has in his biography let one of those images come forth as the Socratic face of Plotinus.

As we saw earlier, Porphyry believed that each daemon can appear in "ever changing shapes in response to their momentary imaginings." Thus the various Socratic shadings of Plotinus that we have just seen might suggest that what one scholar has called "the sense of the multiplicity of the self"[90] can be evoked by a single image, an interior familiar with several faces. In Porphyry's biography, however, there is another important familiar, who figures the hearth of Plotinus in equally powerful fashion. It is Odysseus, whose wanderings through the biography we will follow shortly, tracing first his appearance in Plotinus' own thinking.

Reflecting on his conviction that the primal nature, when it shines into beings, does not get "stuck" in their matter, Plotinus says that the true nature of Being is "to work [*poiein*] on beings."[91] The primal nature is the "poetry" of our being, and it is our task to discern the working of that nature in us. The path to this discerning is described by Plotinus often as a turning (*epistrophē*),[92] a looking within that is a return to our true selves: "To real Being we go back, all that we have and are; to that we return as from that we came."[93] The turning is a journey within, a homecoming that, recognizing as it does the *poiesis* of Being, Plotinus can only describe poetically.[94]

90. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, p. 68.

91. *Enn.* 3.6.14.

92. See, for example, *Enn.* 3.7.12; 4.7.10; 4.8.4; 5.1.1.; 5.5.11.

93. *Enn.* 6.5.7. On the return to the true self, see 1.6.9: when you see ultimate beauty, then you are "wholly yourself, nothing but true light," which in 5.8.11 Plotinus calls "perfect self-identity." See also *Enn.* 5.8.10: "All that one sees as a spectacle is still external; one must bring the vision within and see no longer in that mode of separation but as we know ourselves; thus a man filled with a god . . . need no longer look outside for his vision of the divine being; it is but finding the strength to see divinity within."

94. Consider the poetic ecstasy of the following passage, which describes the vision of those who have "turned." *Enn.* 5.8.10: "This vision Zeus takes, and it is for such of us also, as share his love and appropriate our part in the Beauty there, the final object of all seeing, the entire beauty upon all things; for all there sheds radiance, and floods those that have found their way thither so that they too become beautiful; thus it will often happen that men climbing heights where the soil has taken a yellow glow will themselves appear so, borrowing color from the place on which they were. The color flowering on that other height we speak of is Beauty; or rather all there is light and beauty, through and through, for the beauty is no mere bloom upon the surface. . . ." Those who truly see are here described as "drunken with this wine, filled with the nectar."

One of the most striking of Plotinus' figures for this journey home is Odysseus at sea. In the work of the Neoplatonists, as well as that of many other thinkers in Late Antiquity,[95] Odysseus had been subjected to another odyssey, envisioned as the journey of the soul to its inner home. Odysseus lived on as an image of the soul longing for divine vision. The context of Plotinus' use of this image is particularly engaging, not only because it shows clearly Odysseus' transformation into a figure for soulful wandering, but also because it lays the ground for Porphyry's use of the image. The text is as follows:

> When [a man] sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows, and hurry away to that which they image. For if a man runs to the image and wants to seize it as if it was the reality . . . then this man who clings to beautiful bodies and will not let them go, will . . . sink down into the dark depths where intellect has no delight, and stay blind in Hades, consorting with shadows there and here. This would be truer advice: 'Let us fly to our dear country.' What then is our way of escape, and how are we to find it? We shall put out to sea, as Odysseus did, from the witch Circe or Calypso—as the poet says (I think with a hidden meaning)—and was not content to stay though he had delights of the eyes and lived among much beauty of sense. Our country from which we came is there, our Father is there. How shall we travel to it, where is our way of escape? We cannot get there on foot . . . You must not get ready a carriage, either, or a boat. Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes, and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.[96]

Plotinus has called forth Odysseus the wanderer, the one who "turned in many ways" (*polūtropos*),[97] as an image for *epistrophē*, the turn within which is the turn toward home, here described as the "country" that is our "Father."[98] There is a very close connection between the "way of escape" (the "putting out to sea") and the "dear country," a connection that can be

95. For references to the appearance of Odysseus in many other writers of the period, see Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, trans. Brian Battershaw (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), Chapter VII: "Odysseus at the Mast." See also F. Buffière, *Les mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque* (Paris, 1956).

96. *Enn.* 1.6.8.

97. So Odysseus is described in the first line of his epic.

98. Note that this passage in Plotinus is a play on Book Five of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus, tossed by the sea, thinks of land as life and as father.

explained by the "much-turned" character of Odysseus. As Plotinus points out in this passage, the error of the man who sees the beauty in an image is not that he sees the image, but that he clings to it, deluding himself with the thought that the image has captured beauty itself. What must be done, rather, is to "let all these things go," *as things*, or, as he says elsewhere, to cease being "intent upon the fragment."[99] Then we wake another way of seeing, a return through a multiplicity of "images, traces, shadows" to that which they reflect. And all of this happens within. We cannot get there on foot or in an actual boat, Plotinus says. As one scholar has remarked, the Neoplatonic "turn" is an "introversion" and "the 'self' which is thus known is not an isolated individual, but contains *in potentia* the whole range of reality."[100]

Now transformed into one who was not captured by images of the primal nature, but rather put out in its sea on an imaginal journey, Odysseus serves as an image of the soul's wakeful wandering within, a wandering through which the return home is accomplished. In his *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, Porphyry turns to the same image.[101] Porphyry's rendition of it, however, is less eirenic than Plotinus', since he sees the sea as the rough water of life within which the soul's *pathos*, its passionate attractions, can become "treacheries" (*epiboula*). Where Plotinus saw a kind of blind sinking into Hades, Porphyry sees an active plotting on the part of the soul, a willing embrace of sensuous form.

However, though he seems to have a more pessimistic sense of the difficulty of the sea journey, Porphyry uses the Odysseus image to the same end as Plotinus had: the journey is an exploration of the true self; the entire sea of images must be traversed; and one must learn to see through life's images to what they image so thoroughly that, as Porphyry remarks, one "puts together an oar with a fan" (that is, mistakes one for the other), so deep is the concentration on what is imaged rather than on the image itself—truly a Plotinian "letting go"! Finally, again as with Plotinus, the journey takes one home. What Plotinus called "Father" and "dear country," Porphyry calls "the domestic seat" (*kathedra oikeia*). Odysseus comes home to his familial "sitting," the "posture" of his hearth.[102]

In the biography, the Odysseus who found his hearth comes forth as one of the familiars of Plotinus' hearth. Again it is Odysseus as sea-wanderer

99. *Enn.* 4.8.6. 100. Dodds, *Proclus*, p. 203. 101. *De antro nympharum* 34–35.
102. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, give the following possible meanings for "*kathedra*": seat, chair, sitting part, posterior, base, sitting, posture, session, throne.

who appears. Odysseus, originally summoned by Apollo's oracle on Plotinus' behalf, is summoned again by Porphyry's inclusion of the oracle in his biography. The pertinent passages of the oracle are as follows:

> 'Spirit, man once, but now nearing the diviner lot of a spirit, as the bond of human necessity has been loosed for you, and strong in heart, you swam swiftly from the crowd of the wicked, there to set your steps firm in the easy path of the pure soul, where the splendor of God shines round you and the divine law abides in purity far from lawless wickedness.
>
> 'Then too, when you were struggling to escape from the bitter wave of this blood-drinking life, from its sickening whirlpools, in the midst of its billows and sudden surges, often the Blessed Ones showed you the goal ever near. Often when your mind was thrusting out by its own impulse along crooked paths the Immortals raised you by a straight path to the heavenly circuits, the divine way, sending down a solid shaft of light so that your eyes could see out of the mournful darkness. Sweet sleep never held your eyes, but scattering the heavy cloud that would have kept them closed, borne in the whirl you saw many fair sights which are hard for human seekers after wisdom to see.'[103]

This oracular evocation of Plotinus' soulful nature is an allegorical play on the *Odyssey* 5.307–493.[104] Odysseus has just left Calypso, and Poseidon has sent great waves to crush his ship. Left with only a "poor planking" to hold to, Odysseus is heaved to and fro in the tempestuous sea, finally loses even the raft, and is forced to swim and drift "in the solid deep-sea swell" for three days. Four times during this ocean odyssey he is aided and instructed by divine figures, with whose help, along with his own "self-possession," he at last reaches "the soil of earth," and kisses it.

The oracle's description of the odyssey of Plotinus' soul is much the same. Like Odysseus, Plotinus is pictured "in the midst of billows and sudden surges"; his Odyssean life was a journey through "sickening whirlpools" and "bitter waves." Also, the gods often intervened, making his "crooked paths" into "heavenly circuits," the tumultuous sea into a divine "whirl," reminiscent of Plotinus' own thoughts about the circling whirl of the wise soul around its source. Finally, both swim free—Odysseus to land, Plotinus to wisdom, the "fair sights" that are truly home.

While this is the most ecstatic appearance of Plotinus' Odyssean wan-

103. *Vita Plotini* 22.
104. For the *Odyssey* passage, I have used *The Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1963).

derer, there are yet other ways in which the "turning" of Odysseus moves Porphyry's account of Plotinus. One is Plotinus' death scene, which comes at the beginning of the biography.[105] It seems odd that Porphyry has chosen to begin the story of his teacher's life with the story of his death, until one notices that here it is not Porphyry the historian, but Porphyry the hierophant who is speaking. For the death-bed scene has become, in Porphyry's telling, the setting for a remarkable statement by Plotinus on how to live: "Try to bring back the god in you to the divine in the All!" In his death, Plotinus was truly alive, still engaged in the inward turning toward the sacred home. There is a similar shock to our normal expectations in the oracle with which Porphyry has chosen to close the biography: in the context of a story about Plotinus' birth into the "company of heaven," what is emphasized is a certain kind of death, the death of Plotinus to a false way of looking that drowns the spectator in life's crooked paths. Just as Plotinus' death at the beginning of the biography shows how to live, so his birth at the biography's end shows how to die. The life-in-death, death-in-life paradox serves as an Odyssean frame for the biography's own journey through Plotinus' story. Porphyry the narrative poet has "turned" his history to suit the Odyssean character of his hero.

At another point in the biography, Porphyry notes as an example of Plotinus' philosophical asceticism, standard fare for any holy man,[106] that "even sleep he reduced by taking very little food, often not even a piece of bread, and by his continuous turning [*diarkēs epistrophē*] in contemplation to his intellect."[107] The locus of Plotinus' discipline, his *askēsis*, is placed by Porphyry in his turning, his contemplative wandering within. Interestingly, it is not only Plotinus who is ghosted by this Odyssean metaphor of turning, but Porphyry and his biography as well.

In chapter twenty of the biography, Porphyry includes a long quotation from a book by his old teacher Longinus, which evaluates Plotinus and other philosophers of his era. In the course of his critical assessment, Longinus makes an implicit comparison between the two outstanding students of Plotinus', Amelius and Porphyry himself, and it is this comparison which Porphyry picks up and explains in his comments on Longinus' remarks. That passage reads as follows:

> He (Longinus) said of Amelius that 'he walked in Plotinus' footsteps [*kat' ichnē*], but was diffuse in exposition and in his roundabout method of interpretation [*tē tēs hermēneias peribolē*] was led by an inclination opposed to that of Plotinus'; and at the same time, in referring to me, Porphyry . . . he says, 'my friend and theirs, Basileus of Tyre, who has himself written a good deal in the manner of Plotinus.' He put it in this way because he really recognized that I altogether avoided the unphilosophical circuitousness [*tēs peribolēs to aphilosophon*] of Amelius and looked to the style [*pros zēlon*] of Plotinus as my standard in writing.[108]

105. *Vita Plotini* 2. 106. See above, chapter 2, pp. 25–30. 107. *Vita Plotini* 8.

What is intriguing here is the connection between Plotinus' footsteps, his "tracks," and the roundabout method of interpretation. Porphyry does *not* seem to be implying that Plotinus' method of interpreting was not roundabout; he has already quoted sympathetically from a letter in which Amelius says that Plotinus "treats the same subjects in different ways in different places."[109] He wants, rather, to distinguish his own roundabout Plotinian style from the *unphilosophical* (hence un-Plotinian) wandering of Amelius' style.

This distinction between two different kinds of *peribolē*—a word that refers to various kinds of "turning"[110]—does not appear in Longinus' remarks. It is Porphyry's own construction on the reality of the comparison between Amelius and himself. What is he saying? I would suggest that in this passage Porphyry has become part of the Odysseus complex himself. The footprints of Plotinus show themselves in the roundabout nature of his own literary style. Consider, for example, the journeys through Plotinus' works that open and close the biography. In chapters 4 through 6, we are given a chronological listing of Plotinus' treatises, while in chapters 24 through 26 a systematic grouping of the treatises is given. First there is the procession of the works through time, then there is their constellation by likeness. This is another Odyssean frame: two journeys, and two ways of wandering, through contemplative images that express Plotinus' literary voyage in the sea. So the biography is itself a literary voyage, and its anecdotal footprints trace a turning path through the life whose soulfulness it attempts to express.

Thus, as with Plotinus himself, so with Porphyry's biography. In its turning is its home. As the discussion in an earlier chapter on the "extended

108. *Vita Plotini* 21. Note that in literary criticism, *zēlos* is used to mean "style," especially in the sense of the spirit, taste, or interest of a thing. See Liddell, Scott, Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *zēlos*.
109. *Vita Plotini* 17.
110. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *peribolē*.

akmē" of holy man biographies showed,[111] there is in these works no true beginning or end but only the "latent mysteries and intermittent radiances"[112] of their extended middle. Every turn in the biography's journey—another anecdote, another letter, another speech, and so on—discloses what Plotinus called "real beings," real presences that make familiar the mysterious hearth of the biography's own hearth, the holy man to whom its journey is devoted.

There is a final Odyssean footprint in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* that has directly to do with the hearth. We have already seen that the main vehicle for Plotinus' Odyssean self, the Pythian oracle, is an allegory on the final scene in the *Odyssey*, Book Five. There, reaching land is understood in terms of Odysseus' struggles in the sea, just as, in the oracle, the "dance of immortal love," "kinship with most blessed daemons," "being crowned with mighty life"—all homecoming metaphors—are seen in context with Plotinus' "many contests."[113] It is as though the struggling journey of life is inextricably linked with the hearth, and it is only the man who truly wanders whose home can be described as a hearth.

The identity between the wandering man and the hearth is given striking expression at the close of the Odyssey passage upon which the oracle plays. The Homeric poet shows Odysseus, now out of the angry waters, groping his way up a slope to a grove. Here Odysseus rakes together a bed of leaves, and, with laughing heart, buries himself completely in this leaf-bed. The text continues:

> A man in a distant field, no hearth fires near, will hide a fresh brand in his bed of embers to keep a spark alive for the next day; so in the leaves Odysseus hid himself while over him Athena showered sleep that his distress should end, and soon, soon. In quiet sleep she sealed his cherished eyes.[114]

Odysseus is his own hearth! He has within himself the spark alive for the next day's wandering, the brand which gives life to the bed of embers.

Like Odysseus, Plotinus is also figured by the hearth image. The context in Porphyry's biography is a letter from Amelius, which sets forth one

111. See chapter 3, pp. 56–57.
112. I owe this phrase to Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 122.
113. *Vita Plotini* 22.
114. Fitzgerald, trans., *The Odyssey*, p. 95.

aspect of both Amelius' and Porphyry's work on Plotinus' behalf: to explain how the journey through Plotinus' thought must be undertaken, especially to those who misconceive its character. In the course of his letter, Amelius says that finding the right path through Plotinus' thought is not always easy, because "he treats the same subjects in different ways in different places." Plotinus, as we have seen, followed the winding way. Yet, in practically the same breath, Amelius characterizes this wanderer, his teacher, with a phrase which, from an Odyssean perspective, we might have expected: he calls Plotinus *tēs oikeias hestias*, "our familiar hearth," "our domestic Hestia."[115]

Porphyry has used the word *hestia* twice to characterize Plotinus: once when Plotinus is host to his friends on Socrates' birthday, and now again when he speaks through his quotation of Amelius' direct naming of Plotinus by this term. In the midst of his biographical calling forth of "daemonic others" who figure the essential mystery of the man, Porphyry has also given the mystery a divine name. Appropriately, this mystery, the hearth, is presided over by a goddess, not by daemonic images (for it is their function to show the traces of the mysterious hearth in an individual life). It is Hestia who figures the matrix of Plotinus' being and provides the foundation for the biography's wandering daemonic evocations of the man's soulfulness.

When a Greek thinker said *hestia*, "hearth," he petitioned at the same time Hestia, the goddess.[116] Who was she? One of Socrates' playful etymologies in the *Cratylus* gives serious voice to the significance of this goddess:

> That which we term *ousia* is by some called *essia*, and by others again *ōsia*. Now that the essence of things should be called *hestia*, which is akin to the first of these (*essia* = *hestia*), is rational enough. And there is reason in the Athenians' calling that *hestia* which participates in *ousia*. For in ancient times we too seem to have said *essia* for *ousia*, and this you may note to have been the idea of those who appointed that sacrifices should be first offered to *hestia*, which was natural enough if they meant that *hestia* was the essence of things.[117]

In this passage, it is clear that for Plato, Hestia names the essence of things, and that which we consecrate first with our sacrifices is life's *ousia*, the

115. *Vita Plotini* 17.
116. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *hestia*.
117. Plato *Cratylus* 401c–d.

"primary real" that underlies that which is our own.[118] Further, not only is Hestia our underlying reality, she is a dwelling place. Plato remarks elsewhere that "Hestia abides alone in the gods' dwelling place," while the rest, the "host of gods and daemons," proceed outward, "ordering all things and caring therefore."[119] As one interpreter has said, Hestia is "the center that sustains the place of return."[120] She is the archetypal home of the gods themselves. Thus when a human being is called by her name, she figures a realm of inner space, the divine hearth within, that both embraces and unleashes a procession of divinities, the "daemonic others" that give familial expression to the deep self.

The Platonic Hestia lived on in Plotinus' thoughts about the heart of our reality. In *Ennead* 5.5, Plotinus is trying to explain what "the One" is, and how we (and everything else that exists) are related to it. It is, he suggests, a difficult task, and he finds himself "in agony for a true expression," since he is "talking of the untellable."[121] Yet, in spite of the agony, we must make the attempt to name ultimate realities anyway, "for our own use." It is in this context that he discusses *hestia*. He begins by saying that "the trace [*ichnos*] of the One gives birth to reality [*ousia*]: existence [*einai*] is a trace of the One." He then goes on to point out, as Socrates had, that there are relationships among such words that are not merely etymological. Rather, the etymologies suggest the power of language to take us into the reality it attempts to express:

> What we call primary being advanced a little outward from the One, so to speak, then chose to go no further, turned inward again and comes to rest and is now the reality and hearth [*ousia* and *hestia*] of all things. Pressing (with the rough breathing) on the word for being [*on*] we have the word "one" [*hen*], an indication that in our very form of speech we tell, as far as may be, that being is that which proceeds from the One. Thus both the thing that comes to be and being itself are images, since they flowed out from the power of the One; and language, under the influence of this sight, tries to represent what it sees and breaks into sound: existence [*on*, *einai*], essence [*ousia*], hearth [*hestia*]. These words try to express the

118. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *ousia*.
119. Plato *Phaedrus* 247a.
120. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, "Hestia, Goddess of the Hearth," *Spring 1979*, p. 61. Demetrakopoulos remarks on p. 74, n. 37, that "Hestia becomes the 'spatial archetype' of home for the Gods themselves."
121. *Enn.* 5.5.6.

> essential nature of what the One produces, and they try to represent, as far as they can, the origin of reality.[122]

What our agonized telling tells us, according to Plotinus' meditation, is that our hearth, the inner reality of ourselves (and our language), images in us the primal nature that underlies everything. Further, the reality that comes to life within that hearth traces the flow of Being in living things. Our Hestia-nature might be described as both hidden (resting in its inwardness) and revealed (the outflowing of traces that "break into sound"). Like the paradox of poetic placing by soul in soul, Hestia at rest is moved by what breaks forth from her silence.

In his paradoxical statement about the hearth, Plotinus has given deeper resonance to Socrates' musings about Hestia and the essence of things. The philosophical depths of this paradox can also be found in images from Hestia's mythology. As we have seen, for Plato, Hestia is the dwelling from which the divine host proceeds and to which it returns, and for Plotinus too the hearth is established as a presence in connection with outward and inward turning. So also in the mythic accounts: Hestia is Rhea's firstborn, and the first to be swallowed by Cronos; she is the one to whom "Cronos in his craftiness first gave birth (and also last—thanks to Zeus)."[123] Yet in the face of, or because of, these comings and goings, her place is described as "in the center," and the symbol most frequently associated with her is the circle, a roundness in which beginning and end are common, as Heraclitus said.[124] Further, the round hearth is in the center of a house, and its presence confers Hestia's blessing on that dwelling. It is as though a building is "only a building until it receives its Hestian soul,"[125] and as though the comings and goings in that dwelling have no inward reality without her divine presence.

Hestia is not, however, merely a symbolic presence, although part of her mystery, and her meaning, lies in her hiddenness and in her virginal secrecy.[126] She is a circle, but there is a fire in that center. Her virginal emptiness is full of the warmth that turns raw nature into a human feast.[127] Again

122. *Enn.* 5.5.5.
123. *Homeric Hymns*, "Hymn to Aphrodite (I)," discussed by Demetrakopoulos, "Hestia," p. 56.
124. Ibid., pp. 56, 71. 125. Ibid., p. 58. 126. Ibid., pp. 60–68.
127. Ibid., p. 58.

Heraclitus comes to mind: when visitors found him warming himself by the hearth fire, he is reported to have said, "Here too are gods."[128] In this respect Hestia is a figure for "the silent pondering of the soul, that sits and prods the fire." She gives expression to the "central and ever-abiding origins of the self" out of which we proceed, and to which we return.[129] It is her fire that gives our comings and goings their divine shadows.

In Porphyry's biography, Plotinus is called *hestia*. We have taken time to "prod the fire" of philosophical and mythological thinking about Hestia and the hearth in order to suggest the significance of that designation. For what might be taken as a "mere" image or metaphor in fact carries within itself a whole world of associations whose wandering path leads to deeper insight about what is so imaged. By naming Plotinus *hestia*, Porphyry has named the underlying reality, the divine fire, of the man. As we remarked at the beginning of this chapter, that underlying reality is an obscure cry that resists direct telling, and its evocation involves one in enigma and mystery. We could say, paraphrasing Heraclitus, that the sacred hearth, like the Lord at Delphi, neither speaks nor conceals, but gives signs.[130] Thus when Porphyry calls Plotinus *hestia*, what we sense is the mystery of his inwardness, the silent soul prodding its fire, forever turning toward the "divine in the All." For Hestia's only frame of reference is herself; she is the dwelling that turns on its own center. Yet she is also the home of "interior familiars," that daemonic host through whom the hearth comes to expression in life.

The daemonic figures that come forth as Plotinus' interior familiars, Socrates and Odysseus, are thus ways of looking, faces that give face to a vision that is, finally, baffling. It is these shadowy phantoms, whose comings and goings trace the round path of the hearth, that turn the "raw nature" of Plotinus' mystery into a "human feast." But it is not a mundane feast. The Hestian perspective is a release from that false way of looking that drowns the one looking in a sea of opaque images. For the biographer, it is a release from the history that chronicles into the history that "sounds soul to the depths."[131] Hence the particularities of a life become images, thresholds upon which meaning turns, human gestures that bear the imprint of a life's

128. Philip Wheelwright, ed., *The Presocratics* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), p. 75, fr. 74 (from Aristotle *De part. animalium* I.5:645a,17).
129. Demetrakopoulos, "Hestia," pp. 59–60.
130. Heraclitus fr. 14, Marcovich (93 Diels-Kranz): "The Lord at Delphi neither conceals nor reveals, but gives signs."
131. Plotinus *Enn.* 6.9.5.

soulfulness. Odysseus and Socrates, then, give shadowed form to those gestures in Plotinus' life that most truly reflected the glow of his hearth. In the poetic working of the biography, these "daemonic others" are the signs that carry the concealed hearth in the life's speaking.

Myth and History

The discovery of "Hestia" in Porphyry's text became the occasion for considering not only the depth of Plotinus' character but also the biographical enterprise itself. The word became a figure for, and took us into, the depths of the text within which it appears. This dynamic has been described by one interpreter in the following way: "The metaphors we believe we choose for describing archetypal processes and ideas . . . are inherently part of those very processes and ideas themselves. It is as if the archetypal material chooses its own descriptive terms as one aspect of its self-expression. This would mean that 'naming' is not a nominalistic activity, but realistic indeed, because the name takes us into its reality."[132] This perspective suggests that the metaphoric power of Hestia, which we thought we chose, has in some sense chosen us and has taken us into the very reality of which it is a part.

What is that reality? That is, how are we to understand the procession and return of the biography's Plotinian phantoms if the reality of the biography is Hestia's silent hearth? Plotinus' name for this kind of understanding is myth. In his treatise "On Love," he asserts that "myths, if they are really going to be myths, must separate in time the things of which they tell, and set apart from each other many realities which are together. . . . The myths, when they have taught us as well as they can, allow the man who has understood them to put together again that which they have separated."[133] Thus myth works initially by focusing on—even isolating—particular images, distinct faces of the reality it wishes to express. Yet finally what it wants to show is the oneness—"the One"—of that reality.

For Plotinus, myth seems to work by a simultaneous placing together of fullness and unity. As Pépin remarks, myth respects the mystery by evoking

132. James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 25.
133. *Enn.* 3.5.9.

its riches.[134] Myth flowers in the heart of obscurity and, as Plutarch said, protects those who would know that heart from the heart's fatal darkness, its "naked truth," by speaking with an equivocal voice. The mythic vision, then, is tropical; it gives rise to constellations of tropes, the imaginal ways of seeing whose turnings upon the hearth of meaning constitute the embrace of the hearth itself.

In earlier chapters, we have spoken about the "creative license" of the biographer, and the "air of truth" that such an imaginative approach presents.[135] Biography has been viewed throughout as a mythologizing of a man's life that works by drawing poetic truth out of historical fact. Presiding over this perspective was Aelius Theon's definition of myth: "*logos pseudēs eikonizōn alētheian.*"[136] Myth is the false word, the dissimulating gesture, that images the truth. In the preceding chapters, moreover, we have imagined the false words of the biographer's mythic voice speaking mainly through the holy man model, and this model named our understanding of the expression of the real through the ideal, which gives the biography's sense of a life's meaning. Now, however, with the tropical phantoms of Hestia ghosting our perspective, we can offer another name for understanding the reality of biography: "daemonic history."

I have suggested in this chapter that Porphyry's biographical method can be understood as an evocation of Plotinus' interior familiars; it is a poetic placing that calls forth the daemonic faces of the man's soulful presence. From this perspective, method is really a style. It is what one author has called "a metaphorical style where consciousness is one of innuendo, reflection, echo, tone, and elusive movements."[137] Porphyry's method—indeed, the method of any ancient biographer—does not, after all, entail telling a story with a plot; there is no narrative movement from beginning to middle to end. Instead, events are recorded to lay bare a structure, and what sounds within the elements of this structure are echoes of the hero's divine nature. When method does not tell a story but exposes a structure of images that underlie a life, it "slows the parade of history."[138] Daemonic history is monumental history, which enhances by its selectivity, by its very refusal to attempt "the whole story."

134. *Mythe et allégorie*, p. 482. 135. See above, pp. 61–62 and 74.
136. See chapter 1, n. 15.
137. James Hillman, "The Fiction of Case History," in James B. Wiggins, ed., *Religion as Story* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 145.
138. Hillman, "The Fiction of Case History," p. 150.

Recently myth has been defined as the "boundary line where fantasy and reality meet," a "mixture of the magical and the banal." Further, "the actual starting point" of this mixing is "arbitrary," for "the point of enlightenment is the transition, the motion across the threshold in either direction."[139] These remarks capture succinctly the biographical dynamic sketched in this chapter. Porphyry's daemonic history is poised on a boundary, the boundary between the facts of Plotinus' life, his history, and the model of holiness which Porphyry used, his fantasy. Across that boundary, back and forth, Porphyry traced Plotinus' footprints, the tracks of his sacred inner mystery in life. The boundary is the biography's hearth, and seeing the daemonic others that dwell there plunged us into a turning path, a tracing of the movements of Plotinus' interior familiars in the biography. As in Socrates' labyrinth, we ended up where we began (where we already were). Traveling the full circle of the biography, we can find no "actual starting point," either for Porphyry's writing or our own, but the turning has given deeper perspective, more nuanced vision. Hestia now presides, along with Merlin, over the "question as to what the question is that we are asking when we ask what is meaningful," and daemonic history as a style of consciousness suggests an answer to "the question as to how (and in what way) things mean."

139. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "Inside and Outside the Mouth of God: The Boundary between Myth and Reality," *Daedalus* 109 (Spring, 1980), pp. 95, 99, 96.

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