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AIDŌS IN PLOTINUS: *ENNEADS* II.9.10

At one point in his treatise against the 'Gnostics' Plotinus treats his adversaries as men of flesh and blood, not merely as proponents of false books and false beliefs:

> For I feel a certain shame (*aidōs tis echei*) with regard to some of my friends (*philoi*), who, having chanced upon this doctrine before the beginning of our friendship, have continued to adhere to it for reasons that I cannot understand. Not that they themselves show any compunction in saying what they say: they may believe what they say to be true (*alēthē*), but perhaps they rather wish others to be persuaded of the truth of their own opinions. (*Enneads* II.9.10.3ff.)

The acknowledgement of a common debt to *aidōs* and to *philia* should remind us of the passage in Plato's *Republic*, where he deprecates the authority of his beloved Homer:

> It must be said, I replied, even though a certain friendly feeling (*philia tis*) and shame (*aidōs*), which has had possession of me (*echousa*) since childhood, deters me from speaking. For it seems that it is Homer who was the first teacher and preceptor of all these tragic authors. Yet a man must not be honoured above the truth (*alētheias*), so it must be said. (*Republic* 595b–c)

Much has already been said on the subject of tragedy in Books II and III of the *Republic*. All that causes deception is *goēteia* (413e), and it is the poets who deceive us most of all by portraying the gods themselves as masquers and magicians (380d and 381d), and by making them the exemplars of every passion that disgraces the worst of men. We are even told in the *Niobe* of Aeschylus (*Rep.* 380a) that the gods themselves are the cause of sin in those whom they wish to destroy. The argument is consonant with the statement in the *Gorgias* that the lofty and wonderful (*semnē kai thaumastē*) Muse of Tragedy is merely the rhetorician of the stage (*Gorgias* 502a–e), and rhetoric, as we learn from the *Phaedrus* (267d), is a tool of magic, for which the *Republic* at least appears to prefer the term *goēteia* (584a, 413b–e).

The passage quoted above is the preamble to an argument of greater scope, denouncing every exercise of the imitative arts. At best the craftsman produces only a copy of the heavenly original, the artist only the copy of a copy; his skills are worthless, first because they can but produce a shadow, second because the shadow is not even cast by anything real. The imitative art is thus an inferior coupled with an inferior to beget (*gennai*) inferior offspring (603b). At *Republic* 382a the characters of tragedy are disparaged as *phantasmata* or illusions. The myth of Er is a *muthos* of a different kind: far from conniving at the errors of the tragedians, it affirms that man alone, and not the Deity, is responsible for his sufferings (617e), and the figure who laments in tragic style a career that might have rivalled the enormities of Thyestes (619c) is treated as one who has no-one to blame but himself.[1]

Plotinus will have been acquainted, not only with the *Republic*, but with the imitation of 595c in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle inculcates the same principle – that men must not take precedence over truth – but directs it against his living contemporaries from the school of Plato himself:

[1] See S. Halliwell, 'Plato and Aristotle on the Denial of Tragedy' in *PCPS* 30 (1984), 49–71, at 50. At *Rep.* 599a8 Homer is called a *dēmiurgos eidōlou*; the phrase *eidōlon eidōlou* does not occur, but it must be to this passage that Plotinus was alluding when he said that a portrait of him would be just such an 'image of an image' (*VP* 1). The occurrence of the same phrase in *Enneads* II.9 is noted below.

It is better to investigate the whole question as to the definition of the good, even though such an inquiry entails a struggle, since certain friends of ours (*philous andras*) have introduced (*eisagagein*) the Forms. Even so it would seem to be better to proceed thus, to be necessary indeed for the preservation of the truth. Though both are dear the truth must be preferred. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6.1)

Aristotle here contrasts men with truth, awarding the higher honours to the latter, as Plato professes to do. The word *eisagagein* is used elsewhere in Aristotle to deplore the importing of novelties (cf. *De Caelo* 271b), and its cognate *eisagein* is a common word (employed by Plato himself at *Republic* 381d) to denote the introduction of a character in a play. Aristotle was willing to defend the art of tragedy, and may therefore have taken all the more pleasure in turning the criticisms of its Academic assailants upon themselves.

For Aristotle, no less than for his teacher, the defining characteristic of tragedy is imitation. It is, however, an imitation of nature, which can be copied with advantage, not of an inimitable realm of perfect Forms. Aristotle is therefore willing to intimate (*Metaphysics* 1090b) that the criterion of a well-constructed philosophy may be also that of a well-constructed tragedy: the fault of the Academic mathematicians (already reproved with the same word at 1076a, and refuted by a quotation from the *Iliad*) is that nature, according to them, acts 'episodically, like a second-rate play'. We shall see that Plotinus shows himself at one with Plato rather than Aristotle in his presumption that any philosophy which is tragic is *ipso facto* misconceived.

The allusion to Plato comes aptly at this point in Plotinus' argument since Plotinus is about to relate the *muthos* which will prove that the 'Gnostics' are guilty of the same sins against philosophy as the 'tragic authors' whom Plato takes to task in the person of Homer. The imputation that the 'Gnostics' too have drawn their philosophy from the poets is made explicitly at *Enneads* II.9.13.7, where the 'Gnostics' are rebuked for turning astronomy into a 'tragedy of fears'. Here it is the content of the doctrine that is tragic: if the stars are malevolent influences which cannot be gainsaid, then the world is deprived of its beauty and man of his power to escape or to amend it. Elsewhere Plotinus mocks the affected *semnotes* (*Enneads* II.9.14.11 and 16) of his opponents, their cultivation of deceitful charms for that purpose (*goēteia* at II.9.14.4), their introduction of novelties (*epeisagoi* at II.9.1.55) and their generation of an *eidōlon logou* (II.9.1.63). Porphyry takes up the sport when he describes the 'Gnostics' (*VP* 16) as men who deceived others and were themselves no less deceived.[2]

It is, however, the myth of Sophia in *Enneads* II.9.10 which constitutes the most tragic element in the 'Gnostic' doctrine. This had already been mocked in similar terms (at least in its Valentinian version) by Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 1.11.4), Hippolytus (*Ref.* 6.42.2) and Tertullian (*Adv. Val.* 13.2), but Plotinus makes a richer use of Plato's vocabulary than we could hope to find in the Church.

[2] Cf. Augustine 'seducebamus et seducebamur' at *Confessiones* 4.1, where he describes himself as following with equal avidity the shows of the theatre and the cheats of the Manichaeans. The Manichaeans are guilty of obscuring the image of God (3.12) by 'corporalia phantasmata' (3.10); the theatre called forth the same affected tears (3.3) that he shed for Dido (1.21), tears to be expiated by the 'flumina oculorum' of his mother (5.15) and now by his own (3.3). Whether Aeneas came to Carthage is a matter of dispute (1.22); not so the miserable voyage of the young scholar along the 'flumen tartareum' (1.26; see also 1.25, 2.3, 2.18) which brought him at last to the same destination and the same temptation to sacrifice duty to love: 'Carthaginem veni et circumstrepebat me undique sartago flagitiosorum amorum' (3.1). Becoming a devotee of the theatre there he catches the tragic spirit in philosophy and is sustained in it by attachments to 'amici' which Plato, Plotinus and Aristotle advised the true philosopher to shun.

The phrase *eidōlon logou* is an ironic anticipation of *Enneads* II.9.10.27, where the Demiurge himself is said to be nothing but the 'image of an image'. This image the 'Gnostics' themselves bring into being (II.9.10.31: *gennōsi*); it is the false child which the human demiurge (II.9.10.27: *plasantes*) is bound to conceive. As the makers of their own Demiurge (*apostanta... poiēsantes* at II.9.10.31) they are seen to be at three removes from the Real.

Cosmogonies which attempt to search the unsearchable may be tragic because they are fabulous (see Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.49) and affect an unphilosophical pomposity (Proclus on Numenius, Fr. 21.6 Des Places), or because they make affliction, of divine origin, sit at the root and heart of life. The first two charges are those that are pressed by the Platonists Celsus and Proclus; they were pressed against Plato himself to the indignation of his admirers;[3] and Plotinus will have taken pleasure in noting that these charlatans who appropriate the very words of Plato (*Enneads* II.9.4.1 and II.9.6) are themselves the adherents of a 'wonderful' illusion (*thaumaston* at II.9.12.3). It is, however, the second accusation that the Christians seem to prefer against the Gnostics when they dwell on the myth of Sophia,[4] and the tragic character of the 'Gnostic' theology would seem to lie primarily in the bitterness with which its adherents rail against other philosophers (*phthonos* hinted at II.9.10.2) and the apparent inequalities of wealth, rank and felicity in the world (II.9.9).

Are these pretenders worthy of *aidōs*? Socrates often finds himself at odds with some opinion whose chief title to authority is the fact that it has long been known and quoted. For philosophers of Plotinus' generation, antiquity was the touchstone, and against the *kainotomia* (II.9.6.11) of his adversaries, Platonic *aidōs* would seem to be out of place. That Socrates should shrink from contradicting such an *aidoios* as Parmenides (*Theaetetus* 184a), or that Proclus should apologise for discounting the hypothesis of the *aidoios* Theodorus[5] (*Comm. in Rem Pub.* II p. 110 Kroll), is proper enough; but if Plotinus exhibits more compunction towards his undistinguished contemporaries than Aristotle exhibits towards his Academic 'friends', we might guess that there is more rhetoric here than sentiment. The allusion to Plato might be understood partly as an appeal to an authoritative tradition (Plotinus associates himself with the great philosopher against the spurious Platonism of others) and partly as an ironic reflection upon the *authadeia* for which Plotinus is about to upbraid the 'Gnostics' (II.9.10.11); it is he who feels vicariously the *aidōs* which they ought to feel but do not:

There is another way, by following which one could rebut those men who dare to disparage what

[3] See Proclus, *Comm. in Rem Pub.*, ii.105.23ff. (Kroll), where Colotes is reported to attack Plato's myth of Er on the grounds that: (1) it is a fabrication unworthy of philosophy; (2) such compositions are denounced by Plato himself; (3) myths are useless to those who do not understand them and superfluous for the philosophers who do.

The question of the correct interpretation of the *Timaeus* divided Platonists, and Proclus' scorn for the 'tragic' style of Numenius (Fr. 21.6) may be inspired by his contempt for a cosmogony which seems to give the present world an origin in time. The terms which Proclus criticises seem to be a pedantic extrapolation from the description of the Demiurge as *patēr* in the *Timaeus*.

[4] Irenaeus' tragic ebullitions at *Adv. Haer.* 1.11.4. suggest that the myth of Sophia was felt to be eminently pathetic. Sophia suffers from *phobos*, *lupē* and *ekplēxis* (1.2.3), all emotions associated with tragedy (see *Phaedrus* 268c, *Poetics* 1456b and 1455a).

[5] The use of *aidoios* (*Comm. in Tim.* ii.110.18) is almost certainly an allusion to Plato. *Thaumastos* is a more common epithet for Theodorus (see *Comm. in Tim.* i.322.7, ii.215.29–30, ii.173.24). The tone is not easy to guess, since, though most of these citations are unfavourable, the use of such epithets as *megas* at iii.265 does not appear to be ironic.

men of old have said so excellently and with such close adherence to truth (*Enneads* II.9.10.11–14).

Yet it is not perhaps impossible to conceive of men with whom Plotinus disagreed but whom he might still have considered worthy of his respect. He follows Plato in most things, but the occasion savours more of the passage in Aristotle's *Ethics*. To call the 'Gnostics' *philoi* should imply, according to Aristotelian precedent, that they had once been colleagues. May we postulate that the adversaries were contemporary Platonists who had studied with Plotinus in the school of Ammonius Saccas, but had both entered and left it as 'Gnostics'?

At least one man who left the school of Ammonius hated Plotinus and availed himself of arts that the philosopher despised: we hear at *VP* 10 of one Olympius, a magician who attempted unsuccessfully to injure him 'through the influence of the stars'. That others, though less malicious, should differ in doctrine, would therefore be not surprising.[6] On the other hand, there were at least a few of his former colleagues whose presence at his seminars could inspire a form of *aidōs*, for when the pagan Neoplatonist Origen attended one of his lectures Plotinus (*VP* 14.20ff.) 'blushed and refused to go on'.

Origen is reported to have been as faithful to Ammonius' teaching as Plotinus, though he violated the pact to keep it a secret (*VP* 3.24f.); Plotinus' blush, moreover, was occasioned, not by his having to contradict his fellow-student, but by his having nothing to say that the latter had not already heard. Origen's visit may nonetheless afford an illustration of the diffidence that Plotinus felt when addressing other members of the Alexandrian school.

Porphyry names one man who may have been both a 'Gnostic' teacher and a pupil of the Alexandrian school. The 'Gnostics' are said at *VP* 16 to be 'those around Adelphius and Aquilinus'; the latter name appears again in the life of Porphyry by Eunapius, where the bearer is mentioned with Amelius and Origen as one of Porphyry's fellow-students in Rome (*Vitae Sophistarum* p. 457 Boissonade). Since Origen did not study under Plotinus, but under his teacher, the passage is one of many in this life that requires correction: if we suppose that Aquilinus was, like Origen, a former colleague rather than a pupil of Plotinus, we have a man who was worthy both of reverence and of the courtesy due to a friend.[7]

That Eunapius should speak highly of one whom Porphyry regarded as no philosopher should not surprise us when we recall that he was an admirer of Iamblichus, who is the only pagan philosopher to treat the 'Gnostics' as men who had a place in the Greek tradition (*De Anima*, *apud* Stobaeum I, p. 375 Wachsmuth). Nothing therefore prevents us from supposing that the rare name Aquilinus denotes the same man in Eunapius and in Porphyry, and that Plotinus would have lamented such a man as an erring colleague.

Whether or not we feel that we can identify the objects of these strictures more precisely, their literary pedigree should now be sufficiently clear. Plotinus' allusion to Plato and Aristotle is an elegant device which enables him to evade the claims of

[6] Ammonius Saccas himself does not appear to have been a 'Gnostic'. Nothing in the reconstructions of his philosophy by H. Dörrie (*Hermes* 83 [1955], 439–77), H. Langerbeck (*JHS* 77 [1957], 67–74) or F. M. Schroeder (*ANRW* 36.1 [1987], 493–526) indicates that he was likely to embrace the doctrine so foreign to all Greek thought, that 'the Maker of this Universe is malign'.

[7] On the identity and activities of Origen see Schroeder, art. cit. 494–509. On the identification of Aquilinus as a 'friend' see L. Brisson, 'Amélius, sa Vie, son Oeuvre, sa Doctrine, sa Style' in *ANRW* 36.2 (1987), 815. On the inaccuracy of Eunapius see R. Goulet, 'Variations Romanesques sur la Mélancolie de Porphyre' in *Hermes* 110 (1982), 443–57, at 445–8.

friendship in the name of a tradition whose greatest masters had been distinguished by their urbane but steadfast resistance to the august proponents of error. His subsequent animadversions upon the intemperance and pride of his opponents are intended to imply that they have failed to note the apophthegm which ought to be the maxim of the Platonist, the Greek and the philosopher – that we must not prefer a man before the truth.

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