

Similarity and Difference in Proclus' Theory of the Symbol

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This paper aims to outline Proclus' theory of the symbol. Although the Greek term σύμβολον was widely used well before the time of Proclus in the generic sense of a *conventional sign* or *token*¹, it is in the fifth and sixth essays of his *Commentary on Plato's Republic* that the term undergoes a radical transformation, placing it at the center of a Neoplatonic theory of metaphysical allegory, based on the lost teachings of Proclus' 'guide', Syrianus.² What is unique about Proclus' notion of the symbol is that, as we shall see below, he insists in several places that it depicts its objects non-mimetically, meaning that the proper nature of the symbol is to express the difference rather than the likeness between it and its referent. However, there are some indications that a form of iconic resemblance may still be at work in the symbol as Proclus understands it. By investigating this theory of the symbol and the relationship between similarity and difference at its core, we will also come to see in what ways the doctrine demarcates, from within the framework of a uniquely Neoplatonic theory of poetics, what Proclus considers to be the limits of philosophical reason.

1 For one example of the use of σύμβολον in this sense see Aristotle, *On Interpretation* (16a 5–8, 19–20, and 27–8). Cf. Liddell & Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 1676.

2 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems: Essays 5 and 6 of His Commentary on Plato's Republic*, tr. R. Lambertson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), K71, 4. Subsequent references to this text will be given according to section and line numbers. On Proclus' debt to Syrianus see A. Sheppard, *Studies on the 5th and 6th Essays of Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Republic* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupert, 1980), 39–103 passim.

1. FROM METAPHOR TO SYMBOL

Our starting point is Aristotle's discussion of metaphor, which highlights by way of contrast the features of Proclus' theory of the symbol that I aim to discuss in what follows. Aristotle defines metaphor in *Poetics* 21 as 'the application of a word that belongs to another thing'.³ He goes on in *Poetics* 23 to affirm that metaphor is by far the most important element of poetic style, since '[t]his alone cannot be acquired from another, and is a sign of natural gifts: because to use metaphor well is to discern similarities'.⁴ The importance of this last claim is explained in a passage of the *Topics*, which states that 'a metaphor in a way adds to our knowledge of what is indicated on account of similarity, for those who use metaphors always do so on account of some similarity'.⁵

This connection between metaphor and similarity is thus the basis for the claim that metaphors furnish knowledge, or make the metaphorically signified thing 'familiar' (γνώριμον) to us in a way. A number of remarks in Aristotle's discussion of style in *Rhetoric* III clarify exactly how and to what extent a metaphor is able to do this. In *Rhetoric* III.2, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of choosing appropriate metaphors, noting that 'one word is more proper than another, more of a likeness, and better suited to putting the matter before the eyes (πρὸ ὀμμάτων)'.⁶ In Chapter 11 he explains what he means by this last expression,

3 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1457b 7–9, tr. Halliwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995): μεταφορὰ δὲ ἐστὶν ὀνομάτων ἀλλοτρίου ἐπιφορὰ. Unless otherwise indicated all subsequent references to the *Poetics* will be to the translation of Halliwell.

4 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1459a 5–7: πολὺ δὲ μέγιστον τὸ μεταφορικὸν εἶναι. μόνον γὰρ τοῦτο οὔτε παρ' ἄλλου ἐστὶ λαβεῖν εὐφυΐας τε σημειῖον ἐστὶ· τὸ γὰρ εὖ μεταφέρειν τὸ τὸ ὅμοιον θεωρεῖν ἐστὶν.

5 Aristotle, *Topica* 140a 9–12 (my italics), tr. Forster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960): ἡ μὲν γὰρ μεταφορὰ ποιεῖ πῶς γνώριμον τὸ σημαινόμενον διὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα· πάντες γὰρ οἱ μεταφέροντες κατὰ τινὰ ὁμοιότητα μεταφέρουσιν.

6 Aristotle, *The "Art" of Rhetoric* 1405b 11–12 (my italics): ἐστὶ γὰρ ἄλλο ἄλλου κυριώτερον καὶ ὁμοιωμένον μᾶλλον καὶ οικειότερον τῷ ποιεῖν τὸ πρᾶγμα πρὸ ὀμμάτων.

which itself is metaphorical, noting that ‘things are set before the eyes by such words as signify them in action (ἐνεργούντα).’⁷ As illustrated by the examples Aristotle offers in this chapter, and as 1412a 10 makes explicit, ἐνέργεια in this context means motion, κίνησις.⁸ The upshot is that, for Aristotle, the most appropriate kinds of metaphors are those that depict their referents in a lively state of movement, for such metaphors create images in the mind that maximally approximate actual sensation in their vividness.

It is crucial to note here that, according to Aristotle’s theory of perception, motion is the most important of the common sensible objects, since it is by motion (κινήσει) that we perceive the other five common sensibles as well.⁹ In this way, the importance of motion to sensory experience implicitly makes clear how a metaphor is able to make its referent familiar to us: it is not by disclosing the perfect similarities that lead to the discovery of a thing’s essential features, but rather by likening the object to something else with which we are more familiar through sensation. In this way a metaphor, according to Aristotle, serves the function of bridging the theoretical gap between the objects of sense experience and what lies beyond the sensible, ideally likening the latter to the former through images of movement.¹⁰ Nevertheless it is precisely this theoretical function attributed by Aristotle to metaphor that Proclus will purge from the symbol.

The fifth and sixth essays of Proclus’ *Commentary on Plato’s Republic* are an attempt to reconcile his view of Homeric poetry

7 Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric* 1411b 25 (my translation): λέγω δὴ πρὸ ὀμμάτων ταῦτα ποιεῖν, ὅσα ἐνεργούντα σημαίνει.

8 Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric* 1412a 10: κινούμενα γὰρ καὶ ζῶντα ποιεῖ πάντα, ἢ δ’ ἐνέργεια κίνησις. Strictly speaking, the identification of ἐνέργεια and κίνησις ignores the fundamental distinction Aristotle draws between them in *Metaphysics* IX.6. For an excellent resolution of this apparent contradiction, see Sachs, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, 266, note 231.

9 See Aristotle, *De Anima* 425a 14–19. For a good explanation of motion’s role as the most common of the common sensibles, cf. R. Polansky, *Aristotle’s De Anima* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 371–3 passim.

10 On this point see C. Rapp, *Aristoteles Rhetorik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), 905.

as a progenitor of Platonic theology with Plato's own criticisms of Homer in particular, and poetic mimesis in general, in *Republic* III and X. Proclus pursues this objective by (1) drawing a distinction between those elements in Homeric poetry that are suitable for the education of youth and the formation of a virtuous character, and those elements that are not suitable for such education; and then by (2) arguing that those elements that are unsuitable for the education of youth are not simply to be discarded, but rather regarded as having a different function in the philosophy of Plato. This function, as we shall see, is initiation into secret rites of ancient religion that correspond for Proclus to a program of spiritual ascesis, in which the individual human soul, already purified through the attainment of a virtuous character, is elevated into mystical union with the divine.

In the fifth essay, Proclus presents the above distinction between the educational and the mystical elements of Homeric poetry as a distinction between two kinds of *mimesis*: one imitating, the other non-imitating. The fifth essay focuses exclusively on the negative aspect of non-imitating *mimesis*, associating it with a lack of accuracy that, according to Proclus, is the main reason that Plato so heavily censors poetry in Book III of the *Republic*. Here, non-imitating *mimesis* is not yet related to what Proclus in Essay 6 calls σύμβολα, nor given a positive role to play. It is simply distinguished from the imitating kind of *mimesis* for the purposes of justifying Plato's critique of poetry and clarifying the implications Proclus considers to follow from it.

Yet, at certain points in the fifth essay Proclus anticipates the positive role that the symbol will come to play, even if it is not until the sixth essay that we learn exactly what this is. He begins the fifth essay with a list of ten questions, the answer to the first of which is worth consulting. The first question queries why, if Plato in other places recognizes that poetry has something divine in it (τι θεῖον ἔχει), he exiles it from his 'divine state'¹¹.

11 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K42, 9–11.

The answer, which is divided into three parts, begins with the claim that Plato considers the poets to err in two basic ways: ‘sometimes they produce inaccurate imitations (ἀνομοίως μιμούμενοι) of the things they write about, while at other times they produce imitations that are accurate, but as imitators of diverse and complex things, their imitations are, appropriately, diverse and complex’.¹² Proclus then links this non-imitating mimesis to faulty depictions of the gods and heroes, suggesting that mimetic poets imitate these things inaccurately by likening their actions and words to those of ordinary humans, who are familiar to them.¹³ In this passage, what is problematic about non-imitating mimesis is that it ‘drags down’ (καθέλκοντας) the heroes and the gods to the human level by depicting them performing actions and using language that are familiar to humans. Proclus merely hints at the possibility of a positive role to be played by this non-imitating form of mimesis when he refers to it as a παραπετάσμα — that is, a ‘screen’ or ‘curtain’.¹⁴ Significantly, παραπετάσμα here pertains to the act of concealing or presenting indirectly a truth that may only be suitable for a small number of people to hear, which, as we shall see, is the precise function that Proclus will assign to the symbol in the sixth essay.

An even more explicit intimation of the function of the symbol emerges in the third section of Proclus’ answer to this question, in which he explains why Plato considers poetry to have something divine in it, and yet banishes it from the ideal city envisioned in the *Republic*. It is here that a cognate of the term σύμβολον makes its first appearance in the text. Proclus argues that, for Plato, non-imitating mimesis in fact

12 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K44, 1–6:[...] τότε μὲν ἀνομοίως μιμούμενοι τὰ πράγματα, περὶ ὧν ποιῶνται τοὺς λόγους, τότε δὲ ὁμοίως μὲν ποικίλων δὲ ὄντες μιμηταὶ ποικίλας παρεχόμενοι τὰς μιμήσεις εἰκότως.

13 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K44, 10–16.

14 Lamberton, *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, 7. Cf. *ibid.*, note 9.

has its place in the intermediate mysteries, where that which is expressed in symbols (τὰ συμβολικῶς λεγόμενα) is clearly appropriate to the general service of the divinities and the recital of these [symbols] constitutes an element of the hieratic art [...].¹⁵

Proclus here shows that there is a positive function to be played by non-imitating *mimesis*, which he identifies with ‘that which is expressed in symbols’, τὰ συμβολικῶς λεγόμενα. But since he recognizes that non-imitating *mimesis* is inappropriate to the education of the young and to the formation of ethical character, and since this is what he takes to be the aim of the city envisioned by Plato in the *Republic*, he does not yet say what this positive function is. He merely links it to the ‘intermediate mysteries’ and the ‘hieratic art’, justifying its exclusion from the ideal city of the *Republic* with the claim that it is inappropriate for the education of youth and the formation of virtuous character.

The fifth essay’s distinction between the educational and hieratic functions of Homeric myth allows Proclus both to save Homer from Plato’s criticisms in the *Republic* and to defend Plato himself from accusations of inconsistency in his evaluation of Homeric poetry. Yet Proclus goes even further than this in the sixth essay by arguing that Homer and Plato in fact ‘[teach] the same things about the same things’, and are ‘interpreters of the same truth about reality’.¹⁶ Setting out to show how Homeric myth is ‘appropriate’ (προσήκουσαν) to the nature of the divine such as Plato understood it, he begins by dialectically elaborating the position that he will refute in what follows. He poses the rhetorical question: ‘How on earth, one might ask, could these words that depart exceptionally from goodness, beauty and order, and are themselves ugly and monstrous, ever

15 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K48, 2–5: [...] καὶ τὴν ψευδῶς τὰ θεῖα μεμιμημένην ἐν μέσοις ἱεροῖς χώραις ἔχειν, ἐν οἷς καὶ τὰ συμβολικῶς λεγόμενα πρέποντα φαίνεται τῇ συμπάσῃ θεραπείᾳ τῶν θεῶν καὶ ἡ τούτων ἀκρόασις συντελεῖ πρὸς τὴν ὅλην ἱερατικὴν [...].

16 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K71, 15–16: καὶ περὶ τῶν αὐτῶν ἀμφοτέροι τὰ αὐτὰ διδάσκοντες καὶ ὡς ἀφ’ ἑνὸς θεοῦ προεληλυθότες καὶ μίαν συμπληροῦντες σειρᾶν.

be appropriate to things that draw their existence from the Good itself and are of the same substance as the Beautiful [...]?'¹⁷ He proceeds to sum up this view by means of the following rule: '[I]et no one tell us things about the gods that can appropriately be said about men as well [...]: these symbols (σύμβολα) will never bear any resemblance to the being of the gods'.¹⁸

Note that Proclus here uses the term σύμβολα in the negative sense that the fifth essay attributes to it in view of its inaccuracy as a kind of mimesis. Yet from this point on in the sixth essay, Proclus proceeds to refute this view by elaborating an alternate theory of the symbol's function, which he has until now only alluded to, but which becomes more clear as the sixth essay progresses. For starters, Proclus hints at K74, 27 towards a function of myth that is altogether different from the educational one presupposed throughout the fifth essay. Again pointing to the fact that myths 'use visible screens (φαινομένοις παραπετάσμασι) for concepts that are obscure and unknowable to the many', he claims that the problem is not the myths themselves, but rather the literal interpretation to which they are subjected by people who, instead of seeking out the truth hidden behind the visible screen they present, 'are content with the curtain of mythic fabrications and, instead of purification of the intellect, encounter only fantastic and figurative concepts'.¹⁹ Consistently with the idea that there is more than one way of understanding myths, Proclus later distinguishes between two mythical 'modes' (προαιρέσεις): on the one hand the "so-called 'educational myths'", and on the other 'the more inspired ones that are more concerned with

17 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K72, 10–16: Πῶς γὰρ δὴ ταῦτα, φαίη τις ἂν, τὰ πόρρω τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ τῆς τάξεως ἀποπλανώμενα καὶ αἰσχρὰ καὶ ἐκθεσμα τῶν ὀνομάτων πρέποντα ἂν γενοιτό ποτε τοῖς κατ' αὐτὸ τὸ ἀγαθὸν τὴν ὑπαρξιν λαχοῦσιν καὶ τῷ καλῷ συνυφεστηκόσιν [...];

18 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K73, 7–12: μὴ οὖν λεγέτω τις ἡμῖν τοιαυτ' ἅπαντα περὶ τῶν θεῶν [...]· οὐ γὰρ εἰοικότα φανείηται τὰ σύμβολα ταῦτα ταῖς ὑπάρξεσι τῶν θεῶν.

19 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K74, 16–29.

the universe than with the state or condition of the audience'.²⁰ Significantly, Proclus then identifies Homeric and Hesiodic poetry with the "more inspired" kind of poetry, affirming that although these myths are not suitable for education 'they are in line with the nature of the universe and the hierarchy of beings [...]'.²¹

What then is the nature of the universe and the hierarchy of beings, such that Homeric and Hesiodic myth would be appropriate to it while still being unsuitable for the education of youth? Proclus answers this question by affirming that

nature creates images of nonmaterial and noetic forms and embellishes this cosmos with imitations of them, depicting the indivisible in a fragmented manner, the eternal by means of things that proceed through time, the noetic through that which the senses can grasp, and portraying the nonmaterial materially, the non-spatial spatially, and that which is permanently fixed through change.²²

In other words, Proclus conceives of the cosmos, much as Plato does in the *Timaeus*, as a material and moving imitation of that which remains immaterial and immutable. Yet if this is the truly Platonic meaning of imitation, it is an imitation that can only be accomplished by means of an inversion of the principle in the beings that owe their existence to it. As Jean Trouillard notes in a succinct formulation in *L'un et l'âme selon Proclus* which relates the notion of imitation to the Eriugenian concept of expression, '[u]ne expression n'est pas un calque, mais implique une sorte d'inversion'.²³

20 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K76, 25–29:[...] πρῶτον μὲν διαιετέον οἶμαι τὰς τῶν μύθων προαιρέσεις καὶ χωρὶς ἀφοριστέον τοὺς τε παιδευτικούς λεγομένους καὶ τοὺς ἐνθεαστικωτέρους καὶ πρὸς τὸ πᾶν ἀποβλέποντας μᾶλλον ἢ τὴν τῶν ἀκουόντων ἔξιν.

21 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K77, 10: [...] ὅτι δὲ τῆ φύσει τῶν ὄλων ἔπονται καὶ τῆ τάξει τῶν ὄντων [...], τοῦτο προστιθῶμεν [...].

22 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K77, 14–20: Κατιδόντες γὰρ οἱ τῆς μυθοποιῆας πατέρες, ὅτι καὶ ἡ φύσις εἰκόνας δημιουργοῦσα τῶν ἀϋλῶν καὶ νοητῶν εἰδῶν καὶ τόνδε τὸν κόσμον ποικίλλουσα τοῖς τούτων μιμήμασιν τὰ μὲν ἀμέριστα μεριστῶς ἀπεικονίζεται, τὰ δὲ αἰῶνα διὰ τῶν κατὰ χρόνον προϊόντων, τὰ δὲ νοητὰ διὰ τῶν αἰσθητῶν, ἐνύλως τε τὸ ἀϋλον ἀποτυπῶνται καὶ διαστατῶς τὸ ἀδιάστατον καὶ διὰ μεταβολῆς τὸ μονίμως ἰδρυμένον [...].

23 Trouillard, *L'un et l'âme selon Proclus* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, "Édition

If the material cosmos is therefore an inverted imitation, or expression that depicts its immutable causes through mutable things, then it follows for Proclus that a correct understanding of reality requires an awareness of the fundamental ontological *difference* between sensible things and their intelligible principles. To the extent that the awareness of this difference is precisely what is obscured by the depiction of divine reality in sensuous form, Proclus goes on to claim that the myths of Homer and Hesiod, precisely because they are so diametrically unlike the things they imitate, are perfectly appropriate for the initiation into mystical union with the divine. He holds that when Homer and Hesiod grasped that nature itself produces inverted imitations of intelligible things sensibly,

they themselves fabricated images of the divine in the medium of language, expressing the transcendent potentiality of the models by those things most opposite to them and furthest removed from them: that which is beyond nature they represent by things contrary to nature; that which is more divine than all reason, by the irrational; that which transcends in simplicity all fragmented beauty, by things that are considered ugly and obscene. They do this, in all probability, to remind us of the transcendent supereminence of that which they treat.²⁴

These remarks form the basis of Proclus' conclusion at the end of section C that the myths of Homer and Hesiod, while unfit for education and the formation of virtuous character, are intended by the poets themselves not as accurate imitations of the divine, but rather as what Proclus calls 'a mystical tool', ὄργανον τι μυστικόν.²⁵ The reason such myths are able to serve the function of promoting mystical union with the divine is that, through the use

Société," 1972), 85. See also "Le symbolisme chez Proclus," *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 7 (1981): 300.

24 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K77, 22–30: εἰκόνας καὶ αὐτοὶ πλάττοντες ἐν λόγοις φερόμενας τῶν θεῶν τοῖς ἐναντιωτάτοις καὶ πλείστον ἀφεστηκόσιν τὴν ὑπερέχουσαν τῶν παραδειγμάτων ἀπομιμοῦνται δύναμιν, καὶ τοῖς μὲν παρὰ φύσιν τὸ ὑπὲρ φύσιν αὐτῶν ἐνδείκνυνται, τοῖς δὲ παραλόγοις τὸ παντὸς λόγου θεϊότερον, τοῖς δὲ φανταζομένοις ὡς αἰσχροῖς τὸ παντὸς μεριστοῦ κάλλους ὑπερηπλωμένον· καὶ οὕτω δὴ κατὰ λόγον τὸν εἰκότα τῆς ἐκεῖνων ἡμᾶς ἀναμνηνησκουσιν ἐξηρημένης ὑπεροχῆς.

25 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K79, 18.

of profane images that are obviously unlike the divine things they represent, they serve as reminders of the ineffable transcendence of their objects, to which no mortal thing can be likened in truth.

What is crucial is to see that, throughout the rest of Essay 6, Proclus repeatedly uses the terms σύμβολα (and, to a lesser extent συνθήμα) in reference to the depictions encountered in this latter kind of non-imitating mimesis. The precise sense that the terms σύμβολον and συνθήμα have in the sixth essay is especially evident in Section 8, which explicitly connects the symbol to non-imitating *mimesis* and to representation through difference rather than similarity: '[h]ow, moreover, could the term "mimetic" be applied to that poetry which interprets the divine by means of symbols (διὰ συμβόλων)? For symbols are not imitations of those things they symbolize. Things could never be imitations of their opposites (good imitating bad, natural imitating unnatural), *but the symbolic mode indicates the nature of things by means of their complete opposites*'.²⁶

Here, in the words of Trouillard, '[o]n voit que l'essence du symbole est, à la différence de l'image, de proposer sa signification à travers une inversion, de substituer à l'analogie la correspondance des opposés.'²⁷ To the extent that, as we have already seen, non-imitating *mimesis* in general, and what Proclus calls the symbolic mode in particular, are inscribed within a program of spiritual ascesis whose ultimate goal is to elevate the purified soul into mystical union with the divine, the stark opposition between Aristotle's theory of metaphor and Proclus' theory of the symbol comes into focus. For Aristotle, metaphor serves the theoretical function of bringing what is remote from human sense experience down to the human level. Yet the symbol for Proclus serves precisely

26 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K198, 14–19 (my italics): Καὶ πῶς γὰρ ἂν ἡ διὰ συμβόλων τὰ θεῖα ἀφερμηνεύουσα μιμητικὴ προσαγορεύοιτο; τὰ γὰρ σύμβολα τούτων, ὧν ἔστι σύμβολα, μιμήματα οὐκ ἔστιν· τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐναντία τῶν ἐναντίων οὐκ ἂν ποτε μιμήματα γένοιτο, τοῦ καλοῦ τὸ αἰσχρὸν, καὶ τοῦ κατὰ φύσιν τὸ παρὰ φύσιν· ἡ δὲ συμβολικὴ θεωρία καὶ διὰ τῶν ἐναντιωτάτων τὴν τῶν πράγματων ἐνδείκνυται φύσιν.

27 Trouillard, "Le symbolisme chez Proclus," 299.

the opposite function: rather than bring its object down to the human level by pointing out a similarity, it aims to raise the human soul to the divine level by bringing to the fore the fundamental difference between its mode of presentation and the object to which it refers. Thus Trouillard, differentiating the symbol from the image (which for Aristotle is 'a kind of metaphor'²⁸), notes that the former is 'more radical' than the image: 'Dans le symbole on ne fait que traverser l'ordre de la connaissance, on part de plus bas pour monter plus haut, on va de l'irrationnel au supra-intelligible.'²⁹

2. SIMILARITY AND/OR DIFFERENCE?

If the foregoing suffices as a rough sketch of Proclus' theory of the symbol, nevertheless it passes over an interpretive difficulty that is worth considering. For there is one aspect of Proclus' procedure in the sixth essay that suggests that, even if it is explicitly associated by Proclus with difference rather than with similarity, there is still a latent form of iconic resemblance at work in the symbol.

This aspect is visible in several of the exegeses of specific Homeric and Hesiodic myths, which Proclus aims to validate as instances of non-imitating rather than imitating *mimesis*. At K86 17–20, for instance, Proclus gives a general characterization of the symbol that is consistent with our presentation up to this point, distinguishing it from images that operate 'by virtue of analogy', ἐξ ἀναλογίας.³⁰ He then proceeds to apply this general principle to the myths that depict the gods as warring amongst themselves, asking '[w]hat are the various ways in which the secret truth in the "Battle of the Gods" is brought to light?'³¹ Proclus' response to this question draws heavily on

28 Aristotle, *The "Art" of Rhetoric* 1406b 20: Ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἡ εἰκὼν μεταφορά. Cf. 1410b 16.

29 Trouillard, "Le symbolisme chez Proclus," 302–3.

30 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K86, 17–20. For an excellent discussion of this passage, see Sheppard, *Studies on the 5th and 6th Essays of Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 197.

31 *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K87, 1–2: Τίνας οἱ παρὰ τοῖς θεολόγοις θεομαχίας διάφοροι τρόποι τὴν ἐν αὐτῇ ἀπόρρητον ἀλήθειαν εἰς φῶς ἄγοντες;

the metaphysical and theological system he elaborates in *The Elements of Theology*, *Platonic Theology* and other works. Inscribing the battles of the gods within the structure of the oppositions of the μέγιστα γένη outlined in Plato's *Sophist*, he postulates that

[j]ust as the first principles of things are divided from one another, in the same way the classes of the divine and of those things that truly exist form orderly processions, divided from one another. [...] All these divisions are defined downward by the primal dyad, by which every being has its limits set, and in their fundamental polarity they proceed from the generative causes to be woven together and produce the diversity of the secondaries. What wonder is it, then, that the mythoplasts, seeing such a fundamental division among the gods themselves and among the most primary of beings, use wars to hint at that division for their disciples (διὰ τῶν πολέμων αὐτὴν αἰνίσσονται τοῖς ἑαυτῶν τροφίμοις) [...]?³²

It seems difficult to deny that both similarity and difference are indeed at work, each on its own level, in this example. On one level, difference (or opposition) characterizes the relationship between the myth and its surface meaning: thus the Titanomachy signifies the opposite of what it seems to say on the surface, for the divine, far from literally being at war within itself, is above all for Proclus a principle of unity.³³ But on another level, similarity of a certain kind characterizes the relationship between the myth and what Proclus above calls its 'secret truth', τὴν ἐν αὐτῇ ἀπόρητον ἀλήθειαν. Thus the depiction of the gods warring amongst themselves signifies something similar to the ordered division of the μέγιστα γένη into opposed groups in Proclus' own theological system.

Further evidence of this implicit interplay between similarity and difference emerges in the language with which Proclus discusses Hera's adornment at K137–8. Here, Proclus contends that 'the

32 Proclus *the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K88, 9 - K89, 9.

33 See, for example, Proposition 13 of *Elements of Theology*, which posits that "[e]very good tends to unify that which participates in it; and all unification is a good; and the Good is identical with the One." Trans. Dodds (Toronto: Oxford, Second Edition, 1963), 15. In the fifth essay and elsewhere, Proclus affirms, in agreement with *Republic* II, that goodness belongs pre-eminently to the divine, so it follows implicitly from this proposition that unity belongs necessarily to the divine as well.

number of the filaments of her fringe' symbolically (συμβολικῶς) represents her role as 'a producer of beings [who] gives birth to the great multiplicity of souls'. Yet in the next line he refers to Hera's earrings and sandals as 'images (ἀπεικονίζεται) of the very first and the last of the partial powers that project from her'.³⁴

Far from considering this tension between similarity and difference in Proclus' theory of the symbol to be a result of carelessness or terminological inconsistency, I think it has two important implications that help us to understand just how precisely this theory fits together with the rest of Proclus' metaphysical and theological teachings. (1) In the first place it allows us to connect Proclus' theory of the symbol to the two 'modes' by which, in *Platonic Theology* II.5, he claims that Plato 'unfolds the ineffable and unknown transcendence' of the first principle: 'at one time he unfolds it through analogy (δι' ἀναλογίας), and the similitude of secondary natures; but at another time he demonstrates its exempt transcendency, and its separation from the whole of things, through negations (διὰ τῶν ἀποφάσεων)'.³⁵ The fact that Proclus considers analogy and negation to be the two fundamental, and complementary, modes through which Plato elaborates his philosophical system offers a plausible explanation as to why similarity and difference should cooperate as they evidently do in Proclus' own theory of the symbol.

In fact, in this passage Proclus goes on to specify that analogy is Plato's method of exposition for linking the Good and the sun in the *Republic*, whereas he employs negation in order to separate the One from 'all things posterior to it' in the *Parmenides*.³⁶ To the extent that, as we have already seen (see above, note 45), according to the logic of *Elements of Theology* '[e]very good tends to unify that which participates in it', goodness

34 Proclus *the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K137, 24 - K138, 5.

35 Proclus Diadochus, *On the Theology of Plato*, trans. T. Taylor, with an added seventh book from collected material (electronic edition, 2010, meuser.awardspace.com), 129. Greek references are based on the Portus text.

36 Ibid.

and unity imply one another and represent as it were two fundamental expressions of divinity such as Proclus understands it.

(2) In the second place, the co-operation of similarity and difference highlights the connection between Proclus' theory of the symbol and that of Pseudo-Dionysius, who later brought this theory to bear specifically on the exegesis of Christian scripture. Indeed, the Areopagite's treatment of symbols in *The Celestial Hierarchy* makes explicit the important role played by what he calls 'dissimilar' similarities.³⁷ Beginning with a distinction that is parallel to the one Proclus attributes to Plato between an affirmative and a negative way of speaking about the divine, he reveals that 'the way of negation seems to be more suitable to the realm of the divine and since positive affirmations are always unfitting to the hiddenness of the inexpressible, a manifestation through dissimilar shapes is more correctly to be applied to the invisible'.³⁸ Corresponding to this way of negation is a kind of symbol that uses 'similarities as dissimilarities', as an example of which he mentions how 'the experts in things divine gave him the form of a worm'.³⁹ He concludes, in accordance with the logic of Proclus' theory of the symbol, that 'true negations and the unlike comparisons with their last echoes offer due homage to the divine things. For this reason there is nothing ridiculous about representing heavenly beings with similarities that are dissimilar and incongruous [...]'.⁴⁰

Finally, even beyond these implications, let us focus before concluding on the way that, as mentioned in the introduction, Proclus' theory of the symbol in general demarcates the limits of philosophical reason such as he understands it. To see how this is so, we need only recall the contrast drawn above between the function attributed to metaphor by Aristotle and that attributed by Proclus to the symbol. Precisely because the

37 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, in *Pseudo Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 153.

38 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 150.

39 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 152. Cf. Ps. 22:6.

40 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 152–3.

symbol does not operate by means of the kind of similarity that furnishes theoretical knowledge of its object, it seems to follow that it must be grasped by a power of the soul that is distinct from the rational one. Yet what could this power of the soul be such that, while remaining distinct from the rational power, it permits union with the divine through its receptivity to symbols?

Proclus says in the sixth essay only that this power is 'inspired' (τὸ ἐνθουσιάζον), and calls it 'the divine part of the soul' (τὸ θεῖον τῆς ψυχῆς), leaving open whether it corresponds to the 'emotional' part (τὸ παθητικόν), the 'intellect' (νοῦς), or 'something more divine than intellect' (τοῦ νοῦ θεϊότερον).⁴¹ Lambertson remarks in a footnote to this passage that what is under discussion is presumably 'the One of the soul'.⁴² Commenting on a passage of the *Platonic Theology*, Trouillard suggests that for Proclus it is above all through the power of faith (πίστις) and silence that the soul receives the efficaciousness of the symbol. As evidence of this Trouillard points to Proclus' response in I.25 to the question of what 'unites us to the good'.⁴³ He responds that 'it is necessary to investigate the good neither gnostically, nor imperfectly, but [by] giving ourselves up to the divine light, and closing the eyes of the soul [...]. For such a kind of faith as this is more ancient than the gnostic energy [...]'.⁴⁴ This faith exalted by Proclus, according to Trouillard, is not a faith in determinate truths; rather

elle établit au contraire les âmes dans l'absolue indétermination divine. C'est "un silence unitif" qui fixe l'âme dans l'ineffabilité des dieux [...]. Elle nous permet d'atteindre l'Ineffable par l'ineffable (*tôï arrêtôï to arrêton*) [...], parce qu'elle actualise ce qu'il y a d'indéterminé en nous, que notre néoplatonicien désigne souvent par ce mot *hyperaxis*. Ce terme fréquemment synonyme de "l'un de l'âme" est plus hénologique qu'ontologique.⁴⁵

41 Proclus the Successor on *Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, K201, 19 - K202, 1.

42 Lambertson, *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*, 300–301, note 318.

43 Proclus Diadochus, *On the Theology of Plato*, 96.

44 Proclus Diadochus, *On the Theology of Plato*, 96–97 (my italics). Cited by Trouillard on p. 303 of "Le symbolisme chez Proclus."

45 Trouillard, "Le symbolisme chez Proclus," 304. The passage contains three references to the Portus edition of *Platonic Theology* (p. 194, p. 15 and p. 21).

Thus regardless of the name one gives to this divine part of the soul, for Trouillard what is crucial to see is that it is the union of the soul with the divine through silence that gives meaning to the symbol, and this silence is considered by Proclus to be ‘supérieur à toute connaissance’.⁴⁶

Trouillard shows most clearly that the importance of the symbol in Proclus, and its uniqueness vis-à-vis the metaphor and the image, must ultimately be understood in the context of Proclus’ view that intellectual contemplation is insufficient as a means of elevating the soul into contact with the divine.⁴⁷ This reading allows us to see how Proclus’ theory of the symbol becomes fully intelligible only in light of the effort within later Neoplatonism to discover a mode of access to the divine other than philosophical reason. If it is true that, from Iamblichus onwards, the importance attributed to theurgy is directly connected to a view of philosophical reason as being incapable of securing contact with the divine on its own, then it is no accident that Trouillard here and elsewhere links the symbol to what he calls ‘initiatory myths’ and ‘rites’. For theurgy, he goes on to state explicitly, ‘is the symbol in action’.⁴⁸ Yet if it makes sense to speak of Proclus’ theory of the symbol as having its place within a critique of rationality, it must be recognized that this critique is defined not by a denial of reason, but rather by the attempt to transcend reason by grounding it in what, according to Neoplatonism, lies beyond it.

3. CONCLUSION

Whereas Aristotle gives to metaphor the theoretical (or quasi-theoretical) function of revealing similarities between disparate things, and furnishes a kind of knowledge or familiarity with respect to them by bringing them down to the human level, Proclus associates what he calls *σύμβολα* with a non-imitating

46 Trouillard, “Le symbolisme chez Proclus,” 304.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid (my translation).

mode of *mimesis* whose function is rather to elevate the purified soul towards mystical union with the divine. Nevertheless Proclus' applications of this notion of the symbol to specific examples of Homeric and Hesiodic myth reveal that there is still, on a certain level, a latent form of iconic resemblance at work in the symbol, through which the symbol reveals a secret truth that Proclus elaborates in accordance with the principles of his own theological and metaphysical system. Rather than undermining his theory of the symbol, the productive tension between similarity and difference at its heart suggests an effort on the part of Proclus to combine what he affirms in *Platonic Theology* to be the two fundamental modes by which Plato unfolds the transcendence of the One: analogy and negation. To the extent that (1) these two modes of exposition correspond respectively to what, in Proclus' global understanding of Plato's philosophical system, are the two primary expressions of the divine (the Good of the *Republic* and the One of the *Parmenides*), and that (2) in *Elements of Theology* Proclus holds that these two expressions mutually imply one another, the fact that both similarity and difference are necessary to explain how symbols function according to Proclus points to a deep consistency underlying Proclus' poetics of the absolute, on the one hand, and his theological and metaphysical system on the other. In addition to highlighting this consistency, Proclus' theory of the symbol also offers a unique perspective from which to consider his views on the limits of theoretical reason.