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Words

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# “To Try to Bring the Divine in Us Back Up to the Divine in the All”: The Gnostic Background of Plotinus’s Last Words

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ZEKE MAZUR†

Controversy has long surrounded Plotinus’s dying words to his disciple Eustochius, as reported by Porphyry in his *Vita Plotini*. This paper focuses not on the philological difficulties of his last words, but their philosophical significance. First, it argues that these words are in fact intelligible within Plotinus’s overall system: they evoke an insoluble paradox at the very center of his conception of contemplative ascent. Second, it argues that these words find significant parallels in Platonizing Sethian sources, by which Plotinus was likely influenced (and not vice versa). Third, it suggests that his final words may have been a ritual utterance, something like the “redemption” rite performed at the moment of death among followers of the Valentinian heresiarch Marcus, as reported by Irenaeus. This would help to explain the urgency of his dying words: could Plotinus have been waiting on Eustochius precisely so he could utter this “last rite,” as it were, in his company and thus “bring the divine in us back up to the Divine in the All”?

## INTRODUCTION

The imperial Roman intelligentsia had a particular fondness for the pithy deathbed utterance, of which the oft-cited *ultima verba* of the emperor Vespasian—“Oh dear, I feel I am becoming a god”—is only the best-known example.<sup>1</sup>

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1. A curious compendium of deathbed utterances of Roman emperors can be found in Francis Bacon’s 1612 essay “On Death” in *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*. Among philosophers, we might note especially the account of the death of Seneca in Tacitus, *Annals* 15.61–63.

It is therefore not surprising to encounter this literary topos in Porphyry’s account of the last moments of Plotinus’s life. Yet the type of dark humor evident in the emperor’s utterance is entirely absent from the account of Plotinus’s last moments, which bespeaks instead a scene of abject misery. According to Porphyry, towards the end of his life Plotinus suffered from a horribly debilitating disease, and as a consequence, had been almost completely abandoned by his pupils, with the sole exception of Eustochius, an Alexandrian physician who had become a devoted philosophical disciple of Plotinus and who treated him during his final illness. Eustochius was the only one who attended Plotinus’s death, and is thus Porphyry’s ostensible source for their teacher’s last words.<sup>2</sup> Although an insoluble conflict between equally authoritative manuscript variants has generated a considerable philological debate<sup>3</sup>—indeed, the passage has been called “one

2. During his terminal illness, at some point in 269 C.E., Plotinus moved from the house where he lived in Rome to an estate in Campania that had belonged to his closest friend, Zethus the Arab, who had previously died, and it was there that Plotinus himself died; see Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 2.1–34, 7.17–25.

3. Different manuscript families attest the conflicting variants τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν θεῖον “the divine in us,” τὸν ἐν ὑμῖν θεῖον, “the divine in you,” and τὸν ἐν ὑμῖν θεὸν, “the god in you.” Editors therefore confront choices between [a] θεὸν, “god,” and θεῖον, “divine,” and between [b] ἐν ἡμῖν, “in us,” and ἐν ὑμῖν, “in you.” For a survey of prior opinions see J. Pépin, “La dernière parole de Plotin,” in L. Brisson et al., eds. *Porphyre: la Vie de Plotin*, vol. 2, *Histoire des doctrines de l’Antiquité classique*, 16 (Paris: Vrin, 1992), 355–84.

The principal editors and commentators break down on the choices as follows:

	ἐν ἡμῖν (“in us”)	ἐν ὑμῖν (“in you”)
θεὸν (“god”)	Schwyzter 1976; Most 2003	H-S <sup>2</sup> 1964 ( <i>editio minor</i> ); Henry 1953; Sala 2002
θεῖον (“divine”)	H-S <sup>1</sup> 1951 ( <i>editio maior</i> ); Harder 1958; Igal 1972; Pépin 1992	

H.-R. Schwyzter, “Plotins letztes Wort,” *Museum Helveticum* 33 (1976): 86–87; G. Most, “Plotinus’ Last Words,” *Classical Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2003): 576–87; H-S<sup>1</sup> = P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzter, eds. *Plotini Opera* (editio maior) (Paris, 1951–73); R. Harder, *Schriften 5c: Anhang: Porphyrios über Plotins Leben*, ed. W. Marg (Hamburg, 1958); J. Igal, “Una nueva interpretación de las últimas palabras de Plotino,” *Cuadernos de Filología Clásica* 4 (1972): 441–62; H-S<sup>2</sup> = P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzter, eds. *Plotini Opera* (editio minor) (Oxford, 1964–82); P. Henry, “La dernière parole de Plotin,” *Studi Classici e Orientali* 2 (1953): 113–30; T. A. Sala, “Die entwendeten (vor)letzten Worte Plotins,” *Prima Philosophia* 15, no. 3 (2002): 327–42.

of the most controversial in later Greek literature"<sup>4</sup>—we can reasonably assume that Porphyry wrote<sup>5</sup> something like the following:

When [Plotinus] was about to die—as Eustochius explained to us—since Eustochius himself had been staying in Puteoli and was late coming to him, Plotinus said “I am still waiting for you”; and, *saying that he was trying to bring the divine in us back up to the Divine in the All* (φῆσας πειρᾶσθαι τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν θεῖον ἀνάγειν πρὸς τὸ ἐν τῷ παντὶ θεῖον)<sup>6</sup>—just as a snake slithered under the bed on which he was lying and disappeared into a hole in the wall—he relinquished his *pneuma*.<sup>7</sup>

I will not dwell here on the purely philological problems with this passage, for which I would simply defer to the magisterial 1992 study by Jean Pépin, which has been largely, if not unanimously, persuasive among Plotinian scholars.<sup>8</sup> Textual issues aside, the most perplexing questions about Plotinus's last utterance concern its essential significance. To *which entities* do the “divine in us” and the “Divine in the All” respectively

4. G. Most, “Plotinus’ Last Words,” *CQ* 53.2 (2003): 576.

5. This is not, however, an assertion of the accuracy either of Porphyry or of Eustochius with respect to Plotinus's last actual words.

6. Or: “saying, ‘try to bring the divine in us back up to the Divine in the All . . .’”

7. Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 2.23–29: Μέλλον δὲ τελευτᾶν, ὡς ὁ Εὐστόχιος ἡμῖν διηγείτο, ἐπειδὴ ἐν Ποτιόλοις κατοικῶν ὁ Εὐστόχιος βραδέως πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀφίκετο, εἰπὼν ὅτι σὲ ἔτι περιμένω καὶ φῆσας πειρᾶσθαι τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν θεῖον ἀνάγειν πρὸς τὸ ἐν τῷ παντὶ θεῖον, δράκοντος ὑπὸ τὴν κλίνην διελθόντος ἐν ᾗ κατέκειτο καὶ εἰς ὅπῃ ἐν τῷ τοίχῳ ὑπάρχουσαν ὑποδεδοκότες ἀφῆκε τὸ πνεῦμα. This and all subsequent translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

8. The most crucial interpretative issue about which commentators are divided involves the ambiguous construction φῆσας πειρᾶσθαι, a verb of saying plus infinitive, which may be interpreted either as [a] an indicator of direct discourse, thus implying an exhortation virtually equivalent to an imperative—something to the effect of, “saying (to Eustochius), ‘try to bring the divine in us (or in you) back up to the Divine in the All’” (thus, Henry, “La dernière parole”; Igal, “Una nueva interpretación”; Schwyzer, “Plotins letztes Wort”; Sala, “Die entwendeten (vor)letzten Worte Plotins”; and Most, “Plotinus’ Last Words”)—or as [b] an indirect statement about Plotinus's own activity, either at the moment of his impending death or just prior to dying: “saying that he [i.e., Plotinus himself] was trying to bring back the divine in himself to the Divine in the All” (thus, Harder, *Porphyrios über Plotins Leben*, and Pépin, “La dernière parole de Plotin”). In the former case, [a], the exhortation would seem to refer to philosophizing during life, while in the latter case, [b], it could equally refer to an activity to be undertaken at the moment of death (following Pépin, it seems to me inescapable that, whichever interpretation of the phrase one chooses, Plotinus's *ultima verba* do refer, in one way or another, to his imminent death, and are not merely a platitude concerning philosophical practice). As we will see, the hypothesis of this paper accommodates either choice.

refer, and what is the nature of the relationship between them? What *type of activity* is implied by the phrase “trying (or ‘try’) to bring back up” (πειρᾶσθαι . . . ἀνάγειν)? And *for what purpose* does Plotinus direct this particular utterance to his doctor Eustochius at the moment of his own death? Despite the seemingly self-evident reference to some kind of ascent and re-integration with one’s divine source, this deceptively simple utterance defies any straightforward explanation in terms of Plotinus’s own system. Indeed, Plotinus’s last utterance has been the subject of several conflicting attempts at interpretation, none of which are entirely conclusive, and all of which, in my view, ultimately remain inadequate.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I would suggest that Porphyry’s account of Plotinus’s death has a non-trivial relationship with Gnostic thought and practice, with which Plotinus was in considerable tension and even vehement disagreement, and yet with which he was both personally and doctrinally very close throughout the course of his life.

## PLOTINUS’S LAST UTTERANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS OWN PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEM

We may begin, then, by briefly outlining the central perplexities raised by the most obvious interpretation of Plotinus’s last words, without getting

9. The most recent commentator on this passage, Glenn Most (“Plotinus’ Last Words”), has opted for interpretation [a], that of exhortation, (“saying, ‘try . . .’”) on the basis of a peculiarity of Plotinus’s penultimate utterance upon Eustochius’ arrival, σὲ ἔτι περιμένω, “I am still waiting for you.” In an argument perhaps more clever than persuasive, Most interprets the present tense of the verb to indicate that Plotinus intends to tell Eustochius that he is, seemingly paradoxically—“like a Zen Buddhist *koan*,” according to Most—*still* waiting for Eustochius even *after* his arrival, and suggests that Plotinus’s *ultimate* utterance is therefore an exhortation to Eustochius to begin to conduct philosophy in a manner that Plotinus believed the latter had previously failed to do. Yet this seems to me to be, at best, an implausible overinterpretation, given [i] the logical relation, explicitly stated by Porphyry (on the basis of Eustochius’s own report), between the latter’s late arrival and Plotinus’s utterance (ἐπειδὴ ἐν Ποτιόλοις κατοικῶν ὁ Εὐστόχιος βραδέως πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀφίκετο, εἰπὼν ὅτι . . .); [ii] Plotinus’s own impending death (could his last utterance really have nothing to do with this critical event?); and [iii] the much more obvious possibility that Plotinus meant that he was “still waiting” for Eustochius in the present moment, simply by *still being alive* when the latter arrived; and finally, most importantly, [iv] the complete absence of any evidence that Plotinus was ever disappointed with Eustochius’ philosophical aptitude, and, in fact, good evidence for the opposite: indeed, Porphyry himself—who was not likely to praise potentially rival co-disciples too easily—explicitly concedes that Eustochius had become very close to Plotinus at the end of his life and that he “had acquired the disposition of a genuine philosopher” (ἐξὶν περιεβάλλετο γνησίου φιλοσόφου; Porphyry, *Plot.* 7.11–12).

embroiled in all the minute details. According to Pépin, who is followed, *grosso modo*, by Cristina D'Ancona,<sup>10</sup> the phrase τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν θεῖον, the “divine in us,” refers to the individual soul—i.e., Plotinus’s own soul—while τὸ ἐν τῷ παντὶ θεῖον, the “divine in the All,” refers to the universal Soul.<sup>11</sup> The sense would thus be that at the moment of death the individual human soul discards its body and “ascends” to (so to speak) “reintegrate” with the universal Soul,<sup>12</sup> the original source from which it had extended “downward” (to continue the spatial metaphor) so as to particularize itself as an individual soul.<sup>13</sup>

A first problem arises, however, from Plotinus’s alleged use of the verb πειρᾶσθαι, “to try,” which implies some effort is necessary for the supposed

10. C. D'Ancona Costa, “‘To Bring Back the Divine in Us to the Divine in the All.’ *Vita Plotini* 2, 26–27 Once Again,” in T. Kobusch and M. Erler, eds., *Metaphysik und Religion: zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens: Akten des internationalen Kongresses vom 13.–17. März 2001 in Würzburg* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2002), 517–65.

11. On the basis of Plotinus’s frequent use of τὸ πᾶν to indicate the physical cosmos, and thus ψυχὴ τοῦ παντός the cosmic Soul. Pépin suggests here an ultimate allusion to certain Platonic passages including *Phaedrus* 246b, but especially *Timaeus* 90c8–9: τῷ δ’ ἐν ἡμῖν θεῖῳ συγγενεῖς εἰς κινήσεις αἱ τοῦ παντός διανοήσεις καὶ περιφοραί / “The thinking and the revolutions of the All (i.e., the cosmos) are connatural with the Divine within us.” D’Ancona also argues more specifically that in Plotinus’s last utterance the “divine in us” is uniquely the undescended (intellectual) portion of the individual soul; her essential point is to show that Plotinus believes this aspect of the individual retains its identity even after death.

12. We should be aware that in certain passages, and particularly in anti-Gnostic contexts, Plotinus himself distinguishes firmly between cosmic and the hypostatic souls, which means that “the Divine in the All” cannot be unproblematically identified. Pépin remarks this in a footnote (377n83), but refrains from discussing it. A further difficulty arises from the fact that while in Plotinus τὸ πᾶν does often refer to the sensible cosmos, it can also refer, as C. Tornau points out in *Plotin, Enneaden IV 4–5 [22–23]: ein Kommentar*, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 113 (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1998), to the *noetic* cosmos as well, i.e., the divine *Nous*, as he does throughout the great treatise on the omnipresence of Being, 6.4–5[22–23].

13. For Plotinus’s schema of the particularization or individuation of the soul, see e.g., 4.8[6].3–4 and 4.3[27].1–8. He seems to conceive of this process in terms of a kind of elasticity or “stretching” (note ἐκταθῶσι at 4.3[27].15.4). Significantly, as H. Blumenthal, “Soul, World-Soul, and Individual Soul in Plotinus,” in *Le Néoplatonisme: Royaumont, 9–13 juin 1969* (Paris: Éd. du C.N.R.S., 1971), 55–66; and W. Hellemann-Elgersma, *Soul-Sisters: A Commentary on Enneads IV 3 (27), 1–8 of Plotinus*, Elementa 15 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980), have demonstrated, Plotinus maintains that the individual human soul derives *not* from the cosmic Soul, with which we have a relation of sorority (2.9[33].18.16; 4.3[27].6.13), but from the hypostatic or essential Soul itself, which has no “body.” This is quite likely a position developed in response to the position held by his—please pardon the expression—Gnostic “frenemies”; see Plot. 2.9[33].10.21–23 and discussion in Hellemann-Elgersma, *Soul-Sisters*, 104–30.

reintegration. If we agree with Pépin and D'Ancona that Plotinus's last utterance must refer in some way to a perimortal act, there would be no need to "try"—that is, to expend any *effort* whatsoever—to cause the soul to "reascend";<sup>14</sup> rather, this process would automatically be entailed simply by dying.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is well known that Plotinus typically envisions the apex of the individual soul to abide permanently, if usually unconsciously, "above," within the intelligible,<sup>16</sup> and to be prevented from attaining complete identity with the hypostatic Intellect only by its temporary association with the body, an association which is supposedly attenuated by philosophical practice, and which, by definition, is dissolved at death.<sup>17</sup>

More importantly, however, the subtle implication inherent in the phrase "to try to bring the divine in us back up to the Divine in the All" that there has been any *division* whatsoever in the Divine—a division in need of an attempt at corrective reunification—has a troublingly un-Plotinian aura about it, especially considering Plotinus's more typical insistence—an insistence especially evident in his anti-Gnostic treatises<sup>18</sup>—upon the omnipresence and indivisibility of the intelligible; his intention, presumably, is to refute the Gnostic tendency to delimit or compartmentalize the Divine and to postulate a discrete division between the Pleroma and the sub-pleromatic realm.<sup>19</sup> Although Pépin himself stopped short of declaring the phrase "un-Plotinian," he explicitly recognized its uncharacteristic nature. In his own words,

La particularité de celle-ci est qu'il ne s'agit pas, comme dans tous ces [autres] textes [plotiniens], de monter soi-même vers le divin, mais bien de faire remonter vers le divin universel ce que l'on pourrait appeler une spécification du divin, le divin qui est en nous. C'est cette dualité originelle, et, destinée à l'abolir, cette aspiration à la réunification qui sont la substance de la formule mise sur les lèvres de Plotin; il n'y a là rien que l'on ne puisse comprendre. Il apparaît néanmoins difficile d'en découvrir un précédent

14. As Most, "Plotinus' Last Words," to his credit, points out, neither Pépin nor D'Ancona note this incongruity.

15. Pépin adduces a parallel from the famous passage of the *Phaedrus* where the human soul-chariot attempting to follow the gods out of the cosmos towards the hypercosmic (intelligible) realm is said to face its "final struggle" (ἀγὼν ἑσχατος; 247b5).

16. See, e.g., 4.7[2].10; 5.9[5].13; 4.8[6].8; 5.1[10].10–12; 6.4[22].14.21–22; 4.3[27].12; 3.8[30].5.10–15, 1.1[53].12–13.

17. E.g., 6.9[9].10.1–3.

18. By anti-Gnostic treatises I mean not only the more or less explicitly anti-Gnostic tetralogy (the so-called *Großschrift*, 3.8[30], 5.8[31], 5.5[32], and 2.9[33], the last of which uniquely bearing the Porphyrian title, *Against the Gnostics*) but also other treatises that tacitly oppose Gnostic thought, such as 4.8[6], 4.3[27], 6.4–5[22–23], etc.

19. See Plot. 6.4–5[22–23].

littéraire, ou même seulement doctrinal, dans le platonisme antérieure ou contemporain. . . .<sup>20</sup>

The initial perplexity, then, has to do with the fact that at such a momentous event as his own death, Plotinus appears to utter a thought that is alien to his own philosophy by intimating a struggle to overcome a division within the Divine itself, a division with a distinct Gnostic resonance. To appreciate just how striking this is, it might help to understand the lengths that Plotinus went to deny precisely such a division throughout his oeuvre. As Jean-Marc Narbonne has shown, Plotinus's notoriously innovative doctrine of the "partially undescended soul" reacts specifically against the Gnostic doctrine of the individual soul's radical alienation and imprisonment in the material body.<sup>21</sup> Yet perhaps the most radical of Plotinus's ostensible philosophical innovations was the relocation of the entire superstructure of the intelligible realm "within" the self, which thus, in theory, renders the entirety of the divine Intellect directly accessible to anyone who undertakes a contemplative self-reversion. Although Plotinus's interiorization of the Divine may be a surreptitious borrowing of a Gnostic conception,<sup>22</sup> it is virtually certain that it also reacts *against* the Gnostic postulation of a discrete, even catastrophic, rupture that has trapped within the individual human not merely a soul—a relatively mediocre entity, according to a variety of Gnostic schemata—but a distinct

20. Pépin, "La dernière parole de Plotin," 374, trans.: "The peculiarity of this is that it does not have to do, as in the case of these [other Plotinian] texts, with bringing *oneself* up towards the divine, but rather with bringing that which one might call a *particularization* of the divine back up to the *universal* divine. It is this original duality, and the aspiration towards the reunification that is destined to abolish it, that comprise the substance of the formula placed on the lips of Plotinus; there is nothing here that one cannot comprehend. It appears nevertheless difficult to find a literary or even merely doctrinal precedent in prior or contemporaneous Platonism."

21. J.-M. Narbonne, "L'Énigme de la non-descente partielle de l'âme chez Plotin: la piste gnostique/hermétique de l'omoousios," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 64 (2008): 691–708, and "The Riddle of the Partially Undescended Soul in Plotinus: the Gnostic/Hermetic Path of the *Homoousios*," in *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 56–95. Throughout his oeuvre, one can see evidence of a profound tension between various different accounts of the descent of the individual soul into the body, undoubtedly provoked by his encounter with the Gnostics.

22. Most recently in Z. Mazur, "Those Who Ascend to the Sanctuaries of the Temples': The Gnostic Context of Plotinus' First Treatise, I.6[1] *On Beauty*," in K. Corrigan and T. Rasimus et al., eds. *Gnosticism, Platonism, and the Late Ancient World. Essays in Honour of John D. Turner*. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 82. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 329–68, but also in Z. Mazur, "The Platonizing Sethian Gnostic Background of Plotinus' Mysticism" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2010).



fragment of the aeonic realm or even the transcendent deity itself, a fragment so thoroughly alienated from its divine origin that radical soteriological rituals and/or revelations—rituals and revelations that only the Gnostics themselves can purvey—are needed to restore it to its divine source.<sup>23</sup> It is in large part for this reason, for instance, that throughout his corpus, but *especially* in his more or less explicitly anti-Gnostic tetralogy (the so-called *Großschrift*) Plotinus rejects the doctrine of extra-noetic intelligibles, and repeatedly insists that we possess within our souls not mere “impressions” (*tupoi*) of the intelligible Forms, but those very Forms themselves.<sup>24</sup> This appears to be an attempt to refute a conception of the sort one finds in the Platonizing Sethian tractate *Zostrianos*, in which salvific ascent occurs through the assistance of certain luminous *tupoi* of the aeons that inhere within the souls of the Sethian elect.<sup>25</sup>

Yet one important qualification must be made. While Plotinus rejects the notion that either the individual soul or Nous *within us* are ultimately separate or “cut off”<sup>26</sup> from their hypostatic analogues—since these may ultimately be discovered, *in actuality*, and not as mere images, within ourselves—he is less sanguine about the location of the supreme, hyper-transcendent principle, the One (or the Good) itself, about whose location he vacillates throughout his works. Could Plotinus ever refer to the One itself as τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν θεῖον? While one may agree with Pépin that this expres-

23. This widespread schema is broadly evident, but see especially *Apoc. John*, short recension (*NHC* III,1) 32.9–22 and parallels [BG 63.14–64.13; long recension *NHC* II,1 25.2–16 = IV,1 38.30–39.15].

24. See esp. 5.5[32].1.9–2.24 and 2.9[33].1.34–63; also, note the hint of a refutation of the Gnostic terminology of *tupoi* in Plotinus’s insistence at 5.8[31].4.5 that in the intelligible realm there is “nothing that makes a *tupos*” (οὐδὲ ἀντίτυπον).

25. *Zost.* (*NHC* VIII,1) 46.6–31. Here and with all Platonizing Sethian literature, I follow the text of the BCNH edition unless otherwise noted: C. Barry, W.-P. Funk, P.-H. Poirier, and J. D. Turner. *Zostrien* (*NH* VIII, 1). Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section “Textes” 24. (Québec: Les presses de l’Université Laval, 2000). “While he (nevertheless) has a power that is eternal and immortal, he is caught up in the claws of the body. He . . . and is always bound . . . in fetters, rigid and lacerating, by every evil spirit, until he acts and begins to come back to him[self]. This is why they are appointed for their salvation. And these powers, they are in th[is] place; and within the ‘autogenous’ ones, corresponding to each one of the aeons, there stand glories, so that one who is in th[is] place might be saved alongside them. The glories are perfect, living thoughts. They cannot perish because they are *tupoi* of salvation: that is, each one who receives them will escape up to them, and taking a *tupos* will receive power from each of them, and having the glory as helper, will, in this way, transcend the cosmos and all the aeons.”

26. E.g., 5.2[11].1.22: Οὐδὲν δὲ τοῦ πρὸ αὐτοῦ ἀπῆρτηται οὐδ’ ἀποτέμνεται / “Nothing is separated or cut off from that which is prior to it.”

sion must refer in a broad sense to the individual soul, in non-technical contexts Plotinus's conception of the human soul is far from unambiguous. In a passage of his 10th treatise, for instance, Plotinus describes the individual soul as divine, and insists—remarkably—that it contains within itself three principles that are microcosmic analogues of the so-called “three hypostases,”<sup>27</sup> the totality of which he then compares to Plato's description of the “inner human being” in Book 6 of the *Republic*.<sup>28</sup> In the next chapter of the same treatise, Plotinus reiterates that not only the Intellect, but also the transcendent One itself abides within us: “There must be, within us, the intellect that does not reason discursively but eternally has the right, and there is also, [within us], the principle and cause and god of intellect.”<sup>29</sup> Here and in several other passages throughout his works, he emphasizes not only the transcendence but also the omnipresence of the One and its immanence within the human being. Yet most often he seems to suggest that the One abides within us only as a “trace” (*ichnos*) or “image” (*eikōn*) of itself, which is attained through self-reversion, and which serves as the faculty of the ultimate transcendental apprehension; that is, it is only by means of this indwelling *eikōn* that we are then able to apprehend the One.<sup>30</sup> It therefore seems likely that by τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν θεῖον Plotinus means not merely those aspects of the soul that would correspond

27. Namely Soul, Intellect, and One.

28. 5.1[10].10.5–12: “Ὡςπερ δὲ ἐν τῇ φύσει τριττὰ ταῦτ᾽ ἐστὶ τὰ εἰρημένα, οὕτω χρὴ νομίζειν καὶ παρ' ἡμῖν ταῦτα εἶναι. Λέγω δὲ οὐκ ἐν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς—χωριστὰ γὰρ ταῦτα—ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τοῖς αἰσθητῶν ἔξω, καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον τὸ «ἔξω» ὥςπερ κάκεῖνα τοῦ παντὸς οὐρανοῦ ἔξω· οὕτω καὶ τὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, οἷον λέγει Πλάτων τὸν εἶσω ἄνθρωπον. Ἔστι τοῖνυν καὶ ἡ ἡμετέρα ψυχὴ θεῖον τι καὶ φύσεως ἄλλης, ὅποια πᾶσα ἡ ψυχῆς φύσις· / “Just as these three [principles] of which we have spoken exist in nature, so also one must think that these things are in us. I am not speaking about things in the perceptible world—for they are separate—but about those outside of the perceptible, and the sense of “outside” is just like that which also outside the entire heaven; so also are those [faculties] of the human being, similar to what Plato calls the ‘inner human being’ [*Resp.* 6.589a7–b1: ὁ ἐντὸς ἄνθρωπος]. Therefore, our own soul is something divine, and of another nature, like all nature of soul.”

29. 5.1[10].11.5–7: δεῖ τὸν <μῆ> λογιζόμενον, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ ἔχοντα τὸ δίκαιον νοῦν ἐν ἡμῖν εἶναι, εἶναι δὲ καὶ τὴν νοῦ ἀρχὴν καὶ αἰτίαν καὶ θεόν.

30. For example, 3.8[30].9.19–23: Καὶ γὰρ αὐτῆς γνώσεως διὰ νοῦ τῶν ἄλλων γινομένης καὶ τῷ νῷ νοῦν γινώσκειν δυνάμενον ὑπερβεβηκὸς τοῦτο τὴν νοῦ φύσιν τίνι ἂν ἀλίσκοιτο ἐπιβολῇ ἄθροα; Πρὸς δὲ δεῖ σημῆναι, ὅπως οἷόν τε, τῷ ἐν ἡμῖν ὁμοίῳ φήσομεν. Ἔστι γὰρ τι καὶ παρ' ἡμῖν αὐτοῦ· ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν, ὅπου μὴ ἔστιν, οἷς ἔστι μετέχειν αὐτοῦ. Τὸ γὰρ πανταχοῦ παρὸν στήσας ὅπου οὐκ ἔστιν, ὅπου μὴ ἔστιν, οἷς ἔστι μετέχειν αὐτοῦ. / “For, again, since knowledge of other things occurs through intellect, and we are able to know intellect by intellect, by what sudden grasping could we seize that [One] which supersedes the nature of intellect?—in response to which one should note how it is possible: we will say, it is by means of the likeness within us. For there is something of it with us too; there

to the cosmic or hypostatic souls, but rather the *entirety* of the metaphysical principles—that is, (1) the individual soul; (2) the Intellect (i.e., the “undescended” apex of the soul); and, most importantly, (3) the image (*eikōn*) of the One—which abide “within” the individual human being.

With this in mind, we may note that one early Plotinian description of the contemplative ascent to the One foreshadows his last utterance.<sup>31</sup> At the very end of his 9th treatise, Plotinus declares that at the penultimate phase of ascent the aspirant must first unite with an inherent “image” (*eikōn*) of the One that abides at the very apex or center-point of the self, the “self *beyond Being*,” but then at the ultimate phase, proceed thenceforth *away* from the self, moving, as it were, “from image to archetype,” so as to attain union with the supreme principle itself.

And so if one should see oneself having become this [i.e., the hyperontic self], one has oneself as a likeness of that, and *if one goes on from oneself as an image to an archetype* (ὡς εἰκὼν πρὸς ἀρχέτυπον) one reaches the “end of the journey.”<sup>32</sup>

Although in this passage we do not find the explicit formula “within the self / within the All,” the functional parallel with Plotinus’s last utterance is evident in the specifically anagogic relationship between the merely “subjective” *eikōn* of the supreme principle within the self on the one hand, and on the other hand, the corresponding “objective” or universal divine principle itself.<sup>33</sup> It must be emphasized here that the notion of an indwelling *eikōn* of the transcendent deity is a Gnostic conception *par excellence*,<sup>34</sup> and the notion of reascent from image to archetype occurs more or less

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is not somewhere it is not, for those able to participate in it. For standing anywhere, you have from there that which is able to have that which is present everywhere.” See also 1.6[1].9.16–25; 6.9[9].3.20–22, 3.26, 4.27–28, 8.14–15, 5.1[10].11.13–14; 3.8[30].9.22; 6.7[38].31.8, 35.19–25, and 6.8[39].15.14–21. I have discussed this at length in Mazur, “The Platonizing Sethian Gnostic Background of Plotinus’ Mysticism” and Mazur, “Those Who Ascend to the Sanctuaries.”

31. The “end and goal” not so much of Plotinus’s death, but rather, if we are to trust Porphyry, *Plot.* 23.15, of his entire *life*.

32. 6.9[9].11.43–45: Εἰ τις οὖν τοῦτο αὐτὸν γεγόμενον ἴδοι, ἔχει ὁμοίωμα ἐκείνου αὐτόν, καὶ εἰ ἀφ’ αὐτοῦ μεταβαίνει ὡς εἰκὼν πρὸς ἀρχέτυπον, τέλος ἂν ἔχοι τῆς πορείας. Interestingly, that Porphyry, at least, might have recognized a connection between these lines and Plotinus’s last *spoken* words is suggested by the fact that they occur in the very last passage of the treatise that Porphyry placed last in the *Enneads*.

33. In anti-Gnostic contexts, Plotinus adduces the dynamic link between *eikōn* and archetype to defend the divinity of the cosmos and its connection with the divine intellect; thus V.8[32].1–2; II.9[33].16.39–56.

34. Examples can be found in the Sethian tractates *Zost.* (NHC VIII,1; Barry et al., BCNH) 5.15–16, 44.11; *Holy Book / Gos. Eg.* (NHC III,2) 50.10–13; *Tri. Prot.* (NHC

explicitly in *Zostrianos*.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, perhaps reflecting the gradual crystallization of his anti-Gnostic stance, in descriptions of visionary ascent in subsequent treatises, Plotinus virtually abandons the explicit language of the passage from *eikōn* to archetype, and of the final transport *out from* the self. Rather, later mystical passages, even those that employ the terminology of *eikōn*, have a more strictly centripetal thrust,<sup>36</sup> and tend to emphasize that the final unitive vision of the One occurs within the self once the extraneous aspects of the Soul and even the Intellect have been discarded.<sup>37</sup> Plotinus's last words therefore evoke an insoluble paradox at the very center of his conception of contemplative ascent: on the one hand, in anti-Gnostic contexts, he is adamant that the One, like both subsequent hypostases, is indivisible and omnipresent, including within all of us; on the other hand, in mystical contexts, the *eikōn* of the One within us is, by definition, *not yet identical to its archetype*, and implicitly remains in need of an ultimate reintegration with its source.

#### SOME DOCTRINAL PARALLELS IN PLATONIZING SETHIAN LITERATURE

We may thus begin to detect a slight Gnostic resonance in Plotinus's last utterance. Although Pépin may have been technically correct about the

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XIII,1) 45.16–27; *Untitled* [Bruce Codex] §9, 242.14–18 Schmidt-MacDermot; *Treat. Seth* (NHC VII,2) 68.5–13; in Valentinian sources, *Gos. Phil.* (NHC II,3) 67.9–18; Clem. Alex. *exc. Thdot.* 4.86.2; among Peratae acc. to Hippolytus *Refutatio* 5.17.8.1–10.5 [Marcovich]; and in other sources, e.g., *Great Pow.* (NHC VI,4) 47.15–26; *Gos. Thom.* (NHC II,2) 37.24–35 [log. 22], 41.30–42.6 [log. 50], and 47.24–29 [log. 84]. I discussed this theme in an (unpublished) paper presented at the colloquium of the Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism Network at Yale in 2011.

35. At *Zost.* 12.3–18, the initial phases of salvific ascent are said to occur by means of a series of translations from certain “copies” or *antitupoi* of the successive aeonic strata to the “truly existing” aeonic strata themselves.

36. E.g., 5.8[31].11.1–6: Εἰ δέ τις ἡμῶν ἀδυνατῶν ἑαυτὸν ὁρᾶν, ὑπ’ ἐκείνου τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπὶ τὴν καταληφθεὶς εἰς τὸ ἰδεῖν προφέρει τὸ θέαμα, ἑαυτὸν προφέρει καὶ εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ καλλωπισθεῖσαν βλέπει, ἀφείς δὲ τὴν εἰκόνα καίπερ καλὴν οὖσαν εἰς ἓν αὐτῷ ἐλθὼν καὶ μηκέτι σχίσας ἐν ὁμοῦ πάντα ἐστὶ μετ’ ἐκείνου τοῦ θεοῦ ἀποφητὶ παρόντος . . . / “If one of us is unable to see himself, then, when he is possessed by that god, if he should bring forth the spectacle into an act of seeing, he presents himself and looks at a beautified image of him[self?], but dismisses the image though it is beautiful, coming into one with him[self?], and, being no longer separate, is simultaneously one and all things with that god noiselessly present. . . .”

37. Culminating in the very last line of Plotinus's very last description of the ultimate unitive vision of the One in his writings, at 5.3[49].17.38: Ἀφελε πάντα / “Remove everything.”

scarcity of analogues of the particular “within the self / within the All” schema in contemporaneous Platonism, if we do not restrict our search to the sphere of strictly *academic* Platonism, it is, I believe, possible to find a significant, if imprecise, parallel in Platonizing Sethian sources. One such parallel I came across entirely by accident several years ago during research for my dissertation. It first appeared in the guise of a purely textual problem in *Allogenes*, in the passage in which the eponymous visionary provides a post-factum account of his transcendental apprehension—or “primary manifestation” (ἡντῶρπ νογῶντῃ ἐβολ)—of the supreme principle, the “Unknowable,” at the culmination of his visionary ascent through the Barbelo Aeon.<sup>38</sup> The crucial passage appeared at first glance to be garbled by a dittography or some other confusion of either the copyist or the translator, since it repeats—seemingly unnecessarily—the account of the “primary manifestation”:

I was filled with a manifestation [1] by means of a Primary Manifestation of the Unknowable; as though “unknowing” him, I knew him, and I received power from him, and having received within myself an eternal strength, I knew that which *exists within me* (ἐτῶορπ ἤεντ) and the Triple-Powered, and the manifestation of that of his which is uncontainable. And [2] by means of a Primary Manifestation of the First who is unknowable to them all—the god who is beyond perfection—I saw him and the Triple-Powered *who exists within them all* (ἐτῶορπ ἤεντοῦ τηροῦ).<sup>39</sup>

Upon closer examination, however, there is a subtle but crucial difference between the two phrases, which suggests that they refer not to the same event, but rather to respective penultimate and ultimate modalities of apprehension. The first “primary manifestation of the Unknowable” allows the aspirant to undertake a negative theological act of “un-knowing” by which he paradoxically “knows” the Triple Powered and the Unknowable “within *himself*,” while the second “primary manifestation of the First who is unknowable to them all” in some way enables him to attain the ultimate “objective” apprehension of the Unknowable and the Triple-Powered “within *them all*.” We may note the structural parallel between Plotinus’s last utterance and this passage, in which we find a similar trajectory, albeit implicit, from the principles [1] within the aspirant’s own self to those [2] within “all of them,” or in other words, “in the All.” One should not be too troubled by the slight difference in terminology here; the

38. *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3) 58.7–26 (W.-P. Funk, P.-H. Poirier, M. Scopello, and J. D. Turner, *L’Allogène* (NH XI,3), Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi Section: «Textes» 30 (Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval), 58–61.)

39. *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3) 60.29–61.14.

peculiar, referentless Coptic syntagma  $\eta\eta\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \tau\eta\rho\omicron\upsilon$  that occurs repeatedly throughout the tractate could potentially render any of a number of Greek antecedents, all of which are more or less functionally equivalent.<sup>40</sup>

Yet this is not the only occurrence of the “within the self / within the All” schema in the extended passage of *Allogenes*, since once we have been attuned to it, we may detect subtler hints of this conception elsewhere. Earlier in the same passage, at 59.10–18, the Luminaries of Barbelo instruct Allogenes to undertake a series of contemplative self-withdrawals so as to attain the three successive powers of the Triple-Powered—the triad consisting of Blessedness, Vitality, and Existence (*huparxis*)—that abides *within himself*: “Behold your Blessedness . . . that by which you know yourself according to your [true] self; and withdraw upon the Vitality by turning to yourself. . . .” In the case of the final withdrawal upon the supreme term of the triad, Existence, the luminaries inform Allogenes that it is an image of the supreme deity within himself, with language redolent of the “Divine in the All” formula; thus we read on in lines 18–25: “You will find it standing and at rest, according to the likeness<sup>41</sup> of the one who is truly at rest and *who possesses ‘all of them’* ( $\epsilon\varphi\alpha\mu\alpha\zeta\tau\epsilon\ \eta\eta\eta\alpha\iota\ \tau\eta\rho\omicron\upsilon$ ) in silence and inactivity.” It is confirmed earlier in the tractate that the intimation of both the “within the self / within the All” and the “*eikōn*-to-archetype” schemata are non-coincidental, when Allogenes is told that the principles he will discover within himself are analogous to the divine realities in themselves: “And according to the impression (*tupos*) that is *within you* ( $\eta\eta\eta\tau\epsilon\kappa$ ), know that it is *the (same) way with all these things*, ( $\eta\tau\eta\epsilon\ \overline{\epsilon\eta\eta\eta\alpha\iota}\ \tau\eta\rho\omicron\upsilon$ ), according to this (same) pattern ( $\sigma\mu\omicron\tau$ ).”<sup>42</sup>

Given the repeated occurrence of this peculiar schema at the climax of the visionary ascent in *Allogenes*, a lacunose passage of the closely related Platonizing Sethian tractate *Zostrianos* also merits attention. In the course

40. E.g.,  $\epsilon\bar{\nu}\ \pi\alpha\upsilon\tau\iota$ , “in all things”;  $\epsilon\bar{\nu}\ \tau\tilde{\omega}\ \pi\alpha\upsilon\tau\iota$ , “in the All” (as in Plotinus’s last utterance);  $\epsilon\bar{\nu}\ \pi\tilde{\alpha}\sigma\iota\nu$  /  $\epsilon\bar{\nu}\ \tau\omicron\iota\varsigma\ \pi\tilde{\alpha}\sigma\iota\nu$ , “in everyone”; or, what is most likely, in my opinion, given its awkwardness,  $\epsilon\bar{\nu}\ \tau\omicron\iota\varsigma\ \delta\omicron\lambda\omicron\iota\varsigma$ , literally “in the Entireties” or “in the Alls,” i.e., “among the Aeons,” “in the Pleroma.” The curious expression  $\tau\tilde{\alpha}\ \delta\omicron\lambda\eta$  has a particularly Gnostic tone; it occurs in Clem. Alex. *exc. Thdot.* 2.32.2–33.1 [Sagnard] in a context remarkably similar to that of Plotinus’s last utterance: Οὗτος δέ, καταλείψας τὴν Μητέρα, ἀνελθὼν εἰς τὸ Πλήρωμα, ἐκράθη, ὥσπερ τοῖς Ὅλοις, οὕτω δὲ καὶ τῷ Παρακλήτῳ. / “This one [Christ] abandoned his mother by ascending into the Pleroma, and just as he mingled with the Entireties, so also he mingled with the Paraclete.”

41. *Allog.* 59.22,  $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\pi\iota\eta\epsilon$ , “according to the image,” possibly from *eikōn*.

42. *Allog.* 59.39–60.2 Note also a similar opposition implied even earlier, when the eponymous visionary embarks on his ascent, at 58.38–59.2: “I stood upon *my [own] knowledge*; I turned toward the knowledge *of the Universals*, [i.e., to] the Barbelo Aeon.”

of an ostensible revelation concerning the postmortem fate of the souls of the elect, the eponymous visionary is informed that the individual who obtains salvation is one who has first discovered “himself and his *nous*”; at this point—if one accepts Turner’s conjectural reconstruction<sup>43</sup>—he will possess *within himself* an image of *ναῖ τηρου*, “all of them,” that is, the aeons, which in this context presumably correspond to the realm of Platonic Forms. This individual is subsequently “saved” by first assimilating himself to, and then transcending, “all of them” (*ναῖ τηρου*), after which he withdraws to his divinized self, a self that, if my interpretation is correct, is superior to the lower aeonic strata and even to the intelligible realm itself. The passage runs as follows:

The person that can be saved is the one that *seeks himself and his Intellect and finds each one of them*. And how much power this one has! The person that has been saved is the one who has not known about these things themselves in the manner in which they are (themselves), but he himself (has known about them) in a *logos*, in the manner it exists [*in him*]. He received their image . . . in every place, having become simple and one. For then he was saved, *this one who is able to pass through them all* (*ναῖ τηρου*). *He becomes all of them* (*ναῖ τηρου*). When he wishes, again he separates from them all (*ναῖ τηρου*) and he withdraws to himself, for this one becomes divine, having withdrawn to God.<sup>44</sup>

Here we seem to be dealing with an implicit instance of the ‘within the self / within the All’ schema in the context not only of visionary ascent, as in *Allogenes*, but also, apparently, of personal eschatology, as in the case of Plotinus’s last utterance. In this passage we can discern the *eikōn*-to-archetype schema,<sup>45</sup> an interpretation confirmed by an earlier passage of

43. I would follow Turner, in Barry et al., BCNH, 555, in reconstructing *νηντῆ* at *Zost.* 44.10 and *ει[νε]* on the next line, but I am dubious of his conjecture about the rest of the lacuna: “He has grasped their [image that changes] in every situation . . .”).

44. *Zost.* 44.1–22.

45. This passage is also an example of the Gnostic claim to be able to transcend Intellect altogether during the visionary ascent to which Plotinus specifically objects in his central anti-Gnostic treatise; see especially 2.9[33].9.51–52: τὸ δ’ ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἦδη ἐστὶν ἔξω νοῦ πεσεῖν / “One is able to go as far as Intellect leads, but to go above Intellect is to immediately fall outside of it.” Interestingly, we can find a reaction to this passage elsewhere in the anti-Gnostic tetralogy, when Plotinus adopts the general sense but denies that the aspirant either departs from himself or transcends the All; thus (continuing the passage quoted *supra* in note 37), 5.8[31].11.9–13: ἐν δὲ τῇ ἐπιστροφῇ κέρδος τοῦτ’ ἔχει· ἀρχόμενος αἰσθάνεται αὐτοῦ, ἕως ἑτερός ἐστι· δραμὼν δὲ εἰς τὸ εἶσω ἔχει πᾶν, καὶ ἀφείξ τὴν αἴσθησιν εἰς τοῦπίσω τοῦ ἑτεροῦ εἶναι φόβον εἰς ἐστὶν ἐκεῖ· κἄν ἐπιθυμήσῃ ὥς ἑτερον ὄν ἰδεῖν, ἔξω αὐτὸν ποιεῖ. / “In this reversion he has this advantage: from the beginning *he perceives himself*, so long as he is different; but



the same tractate,<sup>46</sup> which describes salvation in terms of ascent from an indwelling image or *typos* towards a reintegration with a totality of superior principles, yet again described as “all of them” (καὶ τῆρου). Although the beginning of the passage is damaged beyond recognition, the legible portion begins with a reference to an “eternal *typos*” (οὐτῦπος ἠφαινεῖ) within the self.<sup>47</sup> The passage continues by correlating differential degrees of epistemological aptitude with spiritual baptisms corresponding to each of the three successive subaeons of Barbelo (Autogenes, Protophanes, and Kalypsos), and specifies that one attains the baptism corresponding to the supreme ontological stratum—that of the subaeon Kalypsos—only once one has understood how parts or species separate off from wholes or genera, and how they subsequently recombine.<sup>48</sup> Implicit here is a theory about the salvation of the elect, who are reabsorbed into the superior aeons just as a part reintegrates with the whole, and in fact the passage concludes with the statement that the salvific ascent occurs *in practice* by the re-unification of the “portion” (μερικόν) of the “eternals” that one contains within oneself: a re-unification with, it is implied, the “whole” from which each “portion” originally derived.

And [with respect to] the principle (ἀρχή / ἄρχή) of these things, if one knows how all things are manifested in a single head, and how all of these that are joined (ῥωτῖ) separate (πῶρξ εἶναι), and how those that are separate join again, and how the parts (νῖμερος / μέρος) join with the wholes (νῖτῖ / τὰ ὅλη?), and the species [or “Forms”] (νῖελαος / εἶδος) with the genera (νῖρεῖνος / γένος); if one understands these things, one has washed in the washing of Kalypsos. And with respect to each of the places, one has a portion of the eternal ones, and one ascends . . . in the manner one [becomes pure and] simple.<sup>49</sup>

At this point we may consider the significance of the Platonizing Sethian evidence for Plotinus's last utterance. Admittedly it is very difficult to

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*running into the within, he has everything*, and leaving perception behind in fear of being different, he is one there. And if he should desire to see while being different, he makes himself external.” See also 6.5[23].12.14–29.

46. *Zost.* 22–23.

47. *Zost.* 22.3–4.

48. An example of the discrete fragmentation of the Divine about which Plotinus complains. As suggested in Z. Mazur, “The Platonizing Sethian Gnostic Interpretation of Plato's *Sophist*,” in A. D. DeConick, G. Shaw, and J. D. Turner, eds. *Practicing Gnosis: Ritual, Magic, Theurgy, and Other Ancient Literature. Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson*. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 85 (Leiden: Brill. 2013), 469–93, the Platonizing Sethian language of part/whole and species/genus derives from a particular interpretation of Plato's *Sophist*.

49. *Zost.* 23.6–25.



determine the precise intellectual-historical relationship between Plotinus's own thought and the tractates *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*.<sup>50</sup> In a general sense, Plotinus's oeuvre contains many parallels with certain elements of Platonizing Sethian thought, and yet also strong reactions against other elements.<sup>51</sup> It is perhaps not surprising then, to find yet another parallel. But it is important to note that with respect to the "in the self / in the All" schema, any influence is considerably more likely to have passed from the Gnostics to Plotinus than vice versa, since this schema is most naturally at home in Gnostic thought more generally, where other parallels may be found, albeit in socio-historical and intellectual contexts somewhat more remote from Plotinus. One such example occurs in Hippolytus' account of ostensibly Simonian doctrine.<sup>52</sup> In this case the transcendent deity, referred to as the divine power, is said to be "divided above and below," and in its lower aspect ("he who stood, stands, and will stand") indwells every human being as an *eikōn* of the transcendent deity. Salvation is obtained by one whose indwelling power is successfully "(re-)made into (or out of) an *eikōn*" (ἐξεικονισθῆναι) in order to reascend to stand beside the transcendent deity; otherwise, this indwelling image perishes when the human being dies. Moreover, terminology reminiscent of the "in the self / in the All" formula, if not the explicit schema itself, seems also to occur in classic Sethian-Barbeloite literature such as the *Apocryphon of John*,<sup>53</sup> and also the *Trimorphic Protennoia*,<sup>54</sup> where the formula reveals a distinct Pauline echo,<sup>55</sup> an echo of which Synesius of Cyrene was perhaps subconsciously

50. Although I cannot argue the point here, I am of the strong opinion that the existing Coptic texts are more or less faithful translations of the homonymous Greek tractates known to Plotinus's circle.

51. See Mazur, "Those Who Ascend to the Sanctuaries."

52. Pseudo-Simon Magus, *Apophysis Megalē*, in Hippolytus *Refutatio* 6.12.3.1–4.6, 17.1.1–3.4, 18.2.1–7.5 (Marcovich).

53. *Apoc. John*. short recension (NHC III,1) 32.9–22 and parallels.

54. *Tri. Prot.* (NHC XIII,1), trans. Turner: "I am the movement that dwells in the All, she in whom the All takes its stand, [the first-]born among those who [came to be, she who exists] before the All. She (Protennoia) is called by three names, although she dwells alone, since she is perfect. I am invisible within the Thought of the Invisible One. I am revealed in the immeasurable, ineffable (things). I am incomprehensible, dwelling in the incomprehensible. I move in every creature."

55. Colossians 1.15–17: ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι· τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτίσται· καὶ αὐτὸς ἐστὶν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν / [RSV trans.]: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or

aware when he misquoted Plotinus's last utterance—"bring the divine within you back up to the *First-Born Divine*"—in a letter composed more than a century after the latter's death.<sup>56</sup>

## A RITUAL CONTEXT FOR PLOTINUS'S LAST UTTERANCE?

A certain amount of evidence therefore connects the doctrinal content of Plotinus's last words with Gnostic thought. Yet once we concede a Gnostic background for the *content* of the utterance, there emerges a hitherto neglected but nevertheless striking possibility for a similarly Gnostic context for *the very occurrence of its being uttered*. Indeed, it is interesting that for all the attention given to this utterance, no previous commentators have, to my knowledge, even considered its relevance as a speech act, or in other words, as a ritual utterance. Yet we have, of course, one such parallel: Irenaeus' well-known description of the perimortal ritual utterance during the so-called "redemption" (*apolutrosis*) ritual practiced by a subset of followers of the Valentinian heresiarch Marcus, who

practice the rite of "redemption" on the dying at the moment of death, putting oil and water on their heads, or the aforementioned ointment along with water, and they make the aforementioned invocations, so that they may become ungraspable and invisible to the Principalities and Powers, and so that their "inner human being" might ascend above the invisible realm, relinquishing their body to the created world, but leaving their soul with the Demiurge. Arriving at the Powers after their death, they are enjoined to make use of these words: "I am a son from the Father, the pre-existent Father, and a son in the Pre-existent. I have come to see all things, both those things that are mine and those that are alien—and not entirely alien, but those that belong to Achamoth, who is female, and who made this by herself—but (my) race derives from the pre-existent, and I am returning myself to my own, whence I have come." And by saying these things, they say, one evades the Powers. . . .<sup>57</sup>

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dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

56. Synesius, *Epistle* 139.32–37 (Hercher): ἔρρωσο καὶ φιλοσόφει, καὶ τὸ ἐν παντὶ θεῶν ἄναγε ἐπὶ τὸ πρωτόγονον θεῖον. καλὸν γὰρ ἅπασαν ἐμὴν ἐπιστολὴν τοῦτο παρ' ἐμοῦ τῇ τιμῇ σου διαθέσει λέγειν, ὃ φασι τὸν Πλωτῖνον εἰπεῖν τοῖς παραγενομένοις ἀναλύοντα τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος. / "Farewell, and philosophize! And *bring the divine within you back up to the First-Born Divine*. For it is fine for my entire letter to say to your honorable condition what Plotinus said to those present when he released his soul from his body."

57. The complete passage: Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 1.21.5 (Rousseau-Dutrelleau 1:304–6): Alii sunt qui mortuos redimunt ad finem defunctionis, mittentes eorum capitibus oleum

Several elements of this ritual are reminiscent of Porphyry's account of Plotinus's last moments, and might help to explain some of the difficulties. (1) These Marcosian "last rites," so to speak, must occur in the presence of at least one other person. If we imagine a broadly similar ritual context for Plotinus's death, this would explain Plotinus's penultimate utterance to Eustochius, "I am still waiting for you;" that is, he was waiting for Eustochius' arrival either for the latter to assist him, or to perform himself the ritual utterance in Eustochius' presence. (2) Among the Marcosians, the dying person must recite a ritualized utterance *at the point of death*: either immediately afterwards, during the postmortem ascent itself (as Irenaeus's account makes explicit), or—one might imagine—as a rehearsal immediately prior to death. This might provide an explanation for the grammatical ambiguity of the verb of saying plus infinitive (φήσας πειρᾶσθαι) in Plotinus's last utterance,<sup>58</sup> which would make more sense if the latter were simply a report of a ritualized formula that (as in the case of the Marcosian ritual) must be recited after death but that in practice could be uttered either *by* or *to* the dying person as a preparatory reminder.<sup>59</sup> (3) The *substance*

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et aquam, siue praedictum unguentum cum aqua et supradictis inuocationibus, ut incomprehensibiles et inuisibiles Principibus et Potestatibus fiant, et ut superascendat super inuisibilia interior ipsorum homo, quasi corpus quidem ipsorum in creatura mundi relinquatur, anima uero proiciatur Demiurgo. Et praecipiant eis uenientibus ad Potestates haec dicere, posteaquam mortui fuerint: *Ego filius a Patre, Patris qui ante fuit, filius autem in eo qui ante fuit. Veni autem uidere omnia quae sunt mea et aliena—non autem aliena in totum, sed sunt Achamoth, quae est Femina et haec sibi fecit, deducit autem genus ex eo qui ante fuit—et eo rursus in mea unde ueni.* (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 2.46.16–20 [Holl]: ἐγὼ υἱὸς ἀπὸ Πατρὸς, Πατὴρ προόντος, υἱὸς δὲ ἐν τῷ παρόντι· ἦλθον <δὲ> πάντα ἰδεῖν τὰ ἴδια καὶ τὰ ἀλλότρια, καὶ οὐκ ἀλλότρια δὲ παντελῶς, ἀλλὰ τῆς Ἀχαμῶθ, ἣτις ἐστὶν θήλεια καὶ ταῦτα ἑαυτῇ ἐποίησεν. κατὰ γὰρ δὲ τὸ γένος ἐκ τοῦ προόντος). Et haec dicentem euadere et effugere Potestates dicunt. Venire quoque ad eos qui sunt circa Demiurgum et dicere eis: *Vas ego sum pretiosum, magis quam Femina quae fecit uos. Si Mater uestra ignorat suam radicem, ego autem noui meipsum et scio unde sum et uniuoco incorruptibilem Sophiam quae est in Patre, Mater est autem Matris uestrae, quae non habet Patrem neque coniugem masculum; Femina autem a Femina nata effecit uos, ignorans et Matrem suam et putans seipsam esse solam; ego autem inuoco eius Matrem.* Haec autem eos qui circa Demiurgum sunt audientes ualde conturbati et reprehendere suam radicem et genus Matris, ipsos autem abire in sua, proicientes nodos ipsorum, hoc est animam.

58. Thus it would be something like, "Saying the (well-known) 'To try to lead back up, etc.' formula."

59. An example of this, involving a formula nearly identical with the Marcosian ritual utterance, occurs in the form of a propaedeutic instruction given by Jesus to James at *1 Apoc. Jas.* (NHC V,3) 33.14–36.1. This also potentially resolves any tension between the rival interpretations of the phrase as either a statement about Plotinus's activity or an exhortation to Eustochius; either one of them could have uttered it to the other, and Plotinus could have directed the formula as an exhortation to himself.

of the ritual utterance is broadly homologous with the “within the self / within the All” schema, in that it is the “inner human being” that is said to ascend and thereby return to “its own,”<sup>60</sup> thus reintegrating itself with the transcendent (pre-existent or hyperontic) Divine from which it was originally separated; moreover, we are reminded of Plotinus’s own statement at 5.1[10].1–12 to the effect that the soul which contains the triad of divine principles is what Plato calls the “inner human being.”<sup>61</sup> (4) The implication, as in Plotinus’s last utterance, is that the process of ascent is not automatic, but requires effort or struggle, in this case against malevolent celestial powers. (5) Finally, there is an intriguing terminological hint of “the All” in the curious phrase, “I have come to see *all things* (πάντα), both those things that are mine and those that are alien.”

## CONCLUSION

What can we make of this? Of course given the exiguous evidence no more than conjecture is possible. Plotinus was certainly *aware* of Gnostic beliefs about the postmortem ascent of the soul, although he explicitly decries these sectaries’ claims to be able to exit the cosmos upon dying.<sup>62</sup> But can one not imagine that Porphyry’s report of Plotinus’s last moments with Eustochius reflects, if not this particular Marcosian-Valentinian ritual, some broadly related ritual scenario,<sup>63</sup> whose precise details have not survived elsewhere?<sup>64</sup> Indeed, this hypothesis is no *less* plausible than Pépín’s

60. Compare also a passage in Plotinus’s second treatise, 4.7[2].10, in which Plotinus insists that the soul discovers it is divine and eternal when it “goes up to itself” (ἐφ’ ἑαυτὴν ἀνέλθῃ). In fact, the entire purpose of this early treatise may already be an argument *against* the Gnostic demotion of the soul.

61. It is perhaps no more than a curious coincidence that the phrase “inner human being” used by both the Valentinians and by Plotinus occurs in both the Pauline epistles (Rom 7.22, 2 Cor 4.6, and Eph 3.1), and in (at least the original) passage of Plato’s *Republic* whose garbled translation is found in Nag Hammadi Codex 6 among various other Gnostic tractates; unfortunately the exact phrase is missing from the Coptic manuscript, presumably lost in a lacuna.

62. 2.9[33].18.35–38: Οὐ δὲ, εἰ μόνοι λέγοιεν θεωρεῖν δύνασθαι, πλεον ἂν θεωρεῖν αὐτοῖς γίνοιτο, οὐδ’ ὅτι αὐτοῖς φασιν εἶναι ἐξελεῖν ἀποθανοῦσι, τοῖς δὲ μὴ, ἀεὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν κοσμοῦσιν / “It certainly does not make [the Gnostics] more contemplative if they claim to be the only ones able to contemplate, nor would they be able to exit the cosmos when they die, while those who eternally decorate the heaven (i.e., the stars) are not.”

63. This is rendered still more plausible by Nicola Denzey Lewis’s recent suggestion in “*Apolytrosis* as Ritual and Sacrament: Determining a Ritual Context for Death in Second-Century Marcosian Valentinianism,” *J ECS* 17, no. 4 (2009): 525–61, of a possible influence of the Valentinian *apolutrosis* ritual on death rituals among a wider community of Christians.

64. Perhaps misunderstood by Porphyry, but more or less correctly reported.

suggestion that Plotinus delayed his death until the arrival of Eustochius so that he could die in the presence of his disciple, as was apparently the custom among the Indian yogic tradition which, according to Pépin, Plotinus supposedly admired.<sup>65</sup> But there is actually very good reason to suspect an unspoken Gnostic background in Plotinus's biography and hence also in his personal spiritual practice. Besides the doctrinal proximity, there is the undeniable fact that the single, *unique* autobiographical datum that Plotinus provides in his corpus concerning *any* of his acquaintances (including teachers, pupils, and philosophical colleagues) is that he has Gnostic friends with whom he came to disagree.<sup>66</sup> This fact, much neglected by scholars, coupled with the embarrassed secrecy with which he veiled his own background and the doctrines of his enigmatic teacher Ammonius Saccas, suggests that Gnostic thought should be the starting point for any rigorous historical study of Plotinus, and not merely a tangential curiosity.<sup>67</sup> Gnostic thought seems likely to have been at his own starting point, and quite possibly at his end-point as well; for if Plotinus emerged from a Gnostic milieu in his youth, it is easy to imagine that the distress of his last years—his illness and his abandonment by his students—caused him to revert, *in extremis*, to his earlier habits.

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65. Pépin, "La dernière parole de Plotin," 382.

66. 2.9[33].10.3–5: Αἰδῶς γάρ τις ἡμᾶς ἔχει πρὸς τινὰς τῶν φίλων, οἱ τοῦτω τῷ λόγῳ ἐντυχόντες πρότερον ἢ ἡμῖν φίλοι γενέσθαι οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως ἐπ' αὐτοῦ μένουσι. / "For we are restrained by a kind of reverence towards some of our friends, who encountered this doctrine prior to becoming our friends, and—although I don't know how!—they keep to it."

67. Other details from Porphyry's biography about religious praxis in Plotinus's circle may be eventually brought to bear in the future, such as Plotinus's vegetarianism, his senior pupil Amelius's sudden interest in sacrifices on the "feast of the New Moon," and the evocation of Plotinus's guardian *daimōn* in the Iseum of Rome, all of which, at the limit, have possible Gnostic interpretations.