Claudio Calabrese, Ethel Junco

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Abstract. The article studies the motif of the descent of the soul in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (*H. Hom.* 2.1–46) and in Plotinus' *Ennead* 4.8.1. If we consider that myth is a form of orientation in the world, that is, a form of thought, and that metaphysics is one of its possible lines of continuity, we could argue that both texts — although distant in time and genre — express the same symbolic structure: the departure from the divine principle, the experience of loss, and the possibility of return. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the abduction of Persephone triggers a cosmic crisis that can only be resolved through the establishment of the Mysteries, which offer a path of ritual and ontological reintegration. In the *Ennead* 4.8.1, the fall of the soul is conceived as a process that does not compromise its entire essence: a part always remains in the Intellect, which enables the return through contemplation. In both cases, we propose that the descent does not represent a definitive degradation but rather a necessary stage in the soul's journey toward knowledge and the restoration of its original condition.
Keywords: soul, descent, myth, return.

1. Introduction

Ancient thought expresses the great questions of existence through both mythical and philosophical language. Although these discourses may seem divergent in their formal structure and immediate aims, they share the same fundamental aspiration: to consider human beings in the root tension that comes from inhabiting the frontier between the

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sensible and the intelligible. In this article, we explore a moment of convergence between these two registers: in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (*H. Hom.* 2.21–46), and in Plotinus' *Ennead* 4.8.1. This work posits that both texts deal with the drama of the soul: its fall, its union with the body, and its desire to return to the fullness of its origin.

As we see it, such a correlation does not mean we treat one text as a source of the other in a literary or philosophical sense; rather, we see the *Hymn to Demeter* as an echo or a resonance that is present in the conceptual structure with which Plotinus unfolds his understanding of the world. Clearly, Plotinus' account is not itself a myth, but neither is it unrelated to myth. Although such a correlation is not foreign to the Hellenistic-Roman world, in our modern age it is hard to contend that mythical consciousness is not inferior to that of the positive sciences (including what is generally understood today as philosophy). Consequently, to accept that self-consciousness requires a mythical dimension, since its authenticity cannot be sustained solely by the critical or objective distance of rationality.[1] Indeed, the invective against mythical consciousness rests on the fact that it is incapable of critical distance, and therefore lives at all times obscured by "fictions" and "fables", unable to escape from the realm of illusion. The prestige of the positive sciences led to the definition of rationality as scientific, as opposed to mythical consciousness.[2] Thus, myth and science became enemies; the core of the argument is that, in the beginning, consciousness is mythical insofar as it is primitive, and that authentic consciousness is scientific as such.

One of the first challenges in reflecting on myth is the semantic shift of the term: from referring to what was taken as true to denoting falsehood. One of the most significant contributions on myth criticism, which comes from J.M. Losada,[3] lies in bringing μῦθος and θεῖον into hermeneutic alignment. We see this change in mentality in the transition from the Homeric era to the Sophistic period of the fifth century BC. During this period, the word "myth", which linked the divine

[1] Gusdorf 2012: 153.

[2] Krappe 1938: 27–33; Luijpen 1976: 3–4.

[3] Losada 2022: 29.

and the human like a bridge, slowly crumbled as the Athenian Enlightenment came to believe that myths did not adequately represent the essence of the divine; if this is indeed the case, then those traditional stories are simply false.

Although the relationship between myths and their organization into a mythology is a highly complex issue,[4] it is clear that the semantic variation of μῦθος depends entirely on the fact that it no longer expresses a link with the divine.[5] If we accept that myth, in its pristine form, is orientation in life, that is, a model of meaning and intelligibility, it means that it constantly refers back to divine life. A story is true insofar as it is sacred: it refers to how the world in which we live came to be, making clear the origin of the real; this statement should not be understood only in an abstract sense but rather in an experiential sense, that is, as something that has become present through a ceremonial or ritual narrative.[6] The story thus recovers an event or series of events that took place at the beginning and is the foundation of the cosmos. If this is so, for the archaic man the myth of Demeter is true because the succession of the seasons proves it.

However, myths do not only answer the question of why something exists but also of how it came to be. All of this manifests a single event: the irruption of the divine into the world.[7] In this way, two perspectives are established between two functions, one horizontal and the other vertical. The first function expresses a certain transcendence, and therefore a certain condition of universality: that primal experience in which all experience is contained. In this sense, the mythical narrative is exemplary.[8] The vertical function is properly ontological, meaning that things are considered in themselves and in relation to the word that expresses them.

Indeed, if myth simply bursts forth and is considered in pre-reflective terms, its presence can only be considered as an event that

[4] Kerényi 1997: 15.
[5] Van der Leeuw 1975: 51–52.
[6] Cruz Cruz 1971: 31–84.
[7] Calame 2015: 55–57.
[8] Ricoeur 1988: 167–173.

took place *ab origine*, but which is embedded in the present of the narrative. In fact, the non-perception of this link (or its denial) is what we call secularization. The vertical function consists in introducing, without explaining anything in particular, the difference between beings[9] with respect to things in themselves and with respect to their relationship with the word. The story is the natural resource when the understanding of the primordial event of the world's existence bursts forth. Thus, the word — myth — is established as a reality behind reality, whose presence is renewed through ritual storytelling.[10]

2. Homeric Hymn to Demeter

2.1. The myth

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* sets out the mythical core that underpins the institution of the Eleusinian Mysteries, centered on the figure of the Mother Goddess (Demeter) and her daughter (Kore/Persephone). The narrative is structured around three key moments: loss, search, and restoration. Persephone is kidnapped by Hades while gathering flowers in the plain of Nysa; for nine days, Demeter searches tirelessly for her, refusing to eat ambrosia. Only after consulting Helios does she learn the whole truth: the abduction took place with Zeus' consent. Demeter, outraged, withdraws from Olympus, and takes on the appearance of an old woman. In Eleusis, she is taken in by the royal family under the name Doso and agrees to care for the infant Demophon. Instead of feeding him as a traditional wet nurse, she anoints him with ambrosia and subjects him to a nightly ritual in the fire, with the intention of conferring immortality upon him. Interrupted by the child's mother, who is unaware of what is really happening, Demeter reveals

[9] Cruz Cruz 1971: 42.

[10] We bear in mind that calendars are almanacs that record magical-religious forecasts and prescriptions on a daily basis, meaning a correlative order is established between the two. By ritually establishing primordial times, profane time is given shape, and at the same time the understanding of human acts is ordered (cf. Hubert, Mauss 1905: 229).

her identity in an epiphanic gesture of divine radiance, suspends the process, and demands the construction of a temple in her honor.

Retreating to her sanctuary in Eleusis, Demeter prevents the crops from growing until she is reunited with her daughter, unleashing a devastating drought. Zeus, faced with the crisis, intercedes with Hades, who agrees to allow Persephone's return, but with a trick: he induces her to eat a pomegranate seed, a sign of belonging to the underworld. The myth thus establishes Persephone's cyclical stay in Hades for a third of the year. After the mother and daughter are reunited, the earth regains its fertility. Before her ascent to Olympus, Demeter reveals the Eleusinian rites to Triptolemus, Diocles, Eumolpus, and Celeus, establishing a system of mysteries that promises the initiates not only agricultural fertility but also spiritual renewal and a promise of continuity beyond death.

2.2. Most significant semantic nuclei of verses 1–46

The beginning is typical of the hymn form, as it invokes the deity to be celebrated; indeed, as is often the case in this genre, the first word describes its protagonist, Demeter, using a device common in early Greek poetry, the annular composition. The poem also ends with Demeter and her daughter (vv. 1–2 and 493).[11]

The first eleven verses of the poem form an extended sentence that emphasizes the shock caused to the daughter and the mother by the violent abduction, Zeus' devious plans, and the wonderful effect of the narcissus. The structure of the sentence links and then separates mother and daughter. These elaborate openings are also found in both Homeric epics. As a result of Hades' abduction of Persephone, there is a rupture and subsequent restoration of the cosmic order; the former is manifested in the mother's lament and her refusal to return to Olympus, to feed on ambrosia, to allow the earth to be fertile; and the latter, in the founding of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

The figure of Demeter embodies the nurturing dimension of the feminine principle, while Persephone represents the cyclical transition be-

[11] Van Groningen 1958; Whitman 1958; Lohman 1970: 12–94.

tween life and death, fertility and sterility.[12] The descent of the daughter into Hades can be read as an image of the soul or the grain that must die in order to be reborn, in a cycle that links agricultural rituals and mysteries. In symbolic terms, the hymn articulates a cosmogony of suffering and reconciliation, in which the goddess's pain is transformed into a cosmic pact: the earth will bear fruit again only if the daughter returns (due to Hades' trick, this return will occur periodically). This scheme expresses an understanding of natural and spiritual cycles, which will be liturgically codified in the mysteries.

Therefore, we are dealing with a piece of theopoetics: the mythical narrative not only explains the origin of a rite but also legitimizes the mediation between the human and the divine.[13] The articulation between the narrative, the symbolic, and the ritual is essential to understanding the cultural function of this hymn within archaic Greece. Furthermore, it expresses an archetypal structure of ancient religious thought, where divine suffering becomes the foundation of a theology of return, cycles, and initiation. From this perspective, myth not only accounts for the origin of a ritual but also reveals a model of human experience mediated by the divine. In this sense, the story of Persephone symbolizes both the descent of the soul and the dramatic movement of initiation. Earthly fertility and eschatological hope are intertwined in a plot that gives meaning to suffering and waiting, according to the cyclical rhythm of the cosmos. In the hymn, Persephone's journey becomes a figure of the soul descending into the world of matter and returning to the world of light, as in the Orphic and Platonic conceptions. The poet's song then functions as a vehicle for an implicit metaphysics, in which separation and return are keys to understanding the human (in an agricultural context) and divine meaning of existence.

Although the term ἡ ψυχή does not appear in the *Hymn*, it is represented by the figure of Persephone as the trapped life principle. Let us follow the composition of the first part of the work (vv. 1–46) to consider what the myth establishes as the life principle. The formula

[12] Durand 2016: 65–66; Eliade 1949: 211.

[13] Faber 2013.

ἄρχομ᾽ ἀείδειν (v. 1) is a traditional opening device, which at the same time establishes a ritual link with the divine, with the poet as mediator. Demeter is named with a double epithet,[14] and the proper name of Persephone is omitted — she is mentioned instead as Demeter's daughter, followed, in turn, by a formulaic epithet, "slender-ankled", with a relative clause that places the action of the abduction in the past (use of the aorist):

> αὐτὴν ἠδὲ θύγατρα ττανίσφυρον, ἣν Ἀϊδωνεὺς
> ἥρπαξεν… (*H. Hom.* 2.2–3)[15]

We bear in mind that a god can also be the object of the action, even if grammatically he is not the agent; for this reason, we must consider that the text suggests that the distinction between acting and suffering disappears in the mythical narrative and that its characters can be defined both by what they do and by what happens to them.[16] However, for this to happen, it was necessary to make clear the will of Zeus, whose voice is heard from afar.[17]

Far from her mother Demeter, Persephone played with the daughters of Oceanus and gathered flowers:

> νόσφιν Δήμητρος χρυσαόρου, ἀγλαοκάρπου,
> παίζουσαν κούρῃσι σὺν Ὠκεανοῦ βαθυκόλποις
> ἄνθεά τ᾽ αἰνυμένην… (*H. Hom.* 2.4–6)

Once again, the poet uses a double epithet, a device that enhances the majesty of the goddess: one of them has a warlike connotation, "of

[14] Parry 1928: 47–64; Walden 2021: 17–18.

[15] The Greek text is given according to Richardson 1974.

[16] Walden 2021: 17.

[17] *H. Hom.* 2.3: δῶκεν δὲ βαρύκτυπος εὐρύοπα Ζεύς. It is clear that Hades had Zeus' consent; the subject, although named at the end, is reinforced by two epithets that draw attention to the god's power: "thundering", and "whose voice is heard from afar" or "who sees from afar", depending on how the formant -ὄπα is interpreted, whether from ὄψ, ὀπός, "gaze", or from ὄψ, ὀπός, "voice". In any case, the epithet εὐρύοπα may be related to the Sanskrit terms describing divine entities as vast or extensive, cf. *urucákṣas-*, "of broad gaze" (of Varuna), and *urūcí-*, "far-reaching" (of the Earth-goddess). In both cases, εὐρύοπα, deriving from an Indo-European root, would imply the visual/spatial breadth or extension (cf. West 2007: 171–173; Watkins 1995: 406–407). This introduces a dimension of patriarchal power and cosmic order: even Demeter's suffering is subordinate to Zeus' supreme will.

the golden sword", and the other highlights her agricultural nature, "of beautiful or resplendent fruits". The adverb νόσφιν indicates the separation between mother and daughter, and suggests the vulnerability of the latter. The actions, which have been translated using two imperfect past tenses, are presented in the original by two participles in the present tense and in feminine (παίζουσαν and αἰνυμένην), which express the carefreeness of "playing" and the ritual suggestion of "picking flowers", as it connects the moment of the abduction with the fullness of vegetation, in an obvious reference to the maiden, a suggestion that is also supported by the presence of the daughters of Ocean.

This passage thus establishes the setting for the abduction of Persephone, replete with beauty and innocence. The separation of the daughter from her mother is not merely physical but heralds the cosmic imbalance that pervades the rest of the hymn until reconciliation. The image of the girl picking flowers, accompanied by female figures associated with water, anticipates the fracture of the natural order: like those splendid flowers, the girl will be violently taken by Hades. This image is a symbol of the passage from fullness to the descent into the underworld, that is, maturity and death, and in ritual terms it expresses the transition of initiation, which consists of the awakening of consciousness: from the meadow (place of play) to the underworld (space of materiality and sexual consummation).

Next, the flowers that Persephone finds along the way are listed: roses, saffron, violets, iris, hyacinths, and narcissus.

> …ῥόδα καὶ κρόκον ἠδ' ἴα καλὰ
> λειμῶν' ἄμ μαλακὸν καὶ ἀγαλλίδας ἠδ' ὑάκινθον
> νάρκισσόν θ'… (*H. Hom* 2.6–8)

Although it is not easy to establish a correlation between the names and scientific designations, that is, to be specific about which plant we are talking about (except for the hyacinth), this list is not a random enumeration. First, these are wild (uncultivated) plants, and second, they share the characteristic of having edible fruits or roots. Finally, all the plants listed bloom in late summer or spring, confirming that the abduc-

tion coincides with ripening and not with the sowing of crops.[18] From a symbolic point of view, roses are associated with Eros, and the narcissus is considered an aphrodisiac. Most of these flowers are known to have developed associations with the underworld, at least at a later date. Furthermore, hyacinths, violets, and saffron are linked in later myths to young heroes (Hyacinth, Narcissus, and Attis) who were victims of premature death.[19] It has been suggested that flower gathering (often by women and in a ritual context), especially flowers that grow from bulbs, is associated with gathering and pre-cereal farming cultures; if so, the choice of flowers derives from an alternative version of the myth, in which the abduction takes place before humans had agriculture (here it is already established). The poem's vagueness about the season in which the abduction occurred may suggest a world in which the cycle of the seasons is not yet fully established.

We know that the narcissus had a strong presence in the Eleusinian rites, as it was used to weave garlands as offerings to both goddesses (Soph. *OC* 681–685); it is also present in mythical tales of the abduction of maidens; in both cases, the importance of the narcissus is also due to its perfume, which has a slight narcotic effect, and this may be where its link with the cult of the dead originated.[20]

> …ὃν φῦσε δόλον καλυκώπιδι κούρῃ
> Γαῖα Διὸς βουλῇσι χαριζομένη πολυδέκτῃ,
> θαυμαστὸν γανόωντα, σέβας τό γε πᾶσιν ἰδέσθαι
> ἀθανάτοις τε θεοῖς ἠδὲ θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποις·
> τοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ ῥίζης ἑκατὸν κάρα ἐξεπεφύκει,
> †κῶδιστ' ὀδμή† πᾶς τ' οὐρανὸς εὐρὺς ὕπερθε
> γαῖά τε πᾶσ' ἐγελάσσε καὶ ἁλμυρὸν οἶδμα θαλάσσης.
>
> (*H. Hom.* 2.8–14)

[18] Chirassi 1968: 91–124; Piccaluga 1966; Poli 2010: 89–90; Richardson 1974: 140 ff.

[19] Foley 1994: 33–34.

[20] We find the etymological suggestion in Plu. *M.* 647b, where he links ὁ νάρκισσος with ἡ νάρκη ("lethargy", "slumber"). However, according to Chantraine 1968: 736, this is a popular etymology; even so, it is very significant that the Greeks themselves associated the two terms, linking the sopor, supposedly produced by its perfume, with abduction. Cf. Foley 1994: 34–36.

The narcissus then appears as a deception (vv. 8–9) of the gods, and therefore sets the stage for the central scene that prepares the abduction. Its beauty — prodigious, seductive, even overwhelming — induces the events, for it is not innocent: Gaia has made it sprout to facilitate Hades' action, and ultimately to fulfill Zeus' will, according to the role already assigned to it in the Hesiodic account (Hes. *Th.* 213–214). Here the text presents the mythical motif of fatal attraction: the flower is not just a decoration of the landscape ("a deception for the beautiful-eyed girl") but a symbolic device that introduces the rupture of the cosmic order through the abduction: the flower has a prodigious brilliance, which makes "it shone wondrously" (θαυμαστὸν γανόωντα). It caused amazement in all who saw it, that is, σέβας: awe that was both religious and aesthetic.

Narcissus affects both gods and humans, for his beauty links the levels of reality, the higher and the lower. This can be seen in the reaction of nature: the aorist form of γελάω ("burst into laughter") foreshadows the solidity of what always is: the sufferings that lie ahead do not prevent us from contemplating the joyful end of divine decisions, as if the witness were a silent accomplice.[21] This moment can be read, in philosophical terms, as the soul's attraction to the sensible, before its descent into matter, in line with Neoplatonic or mystical readings. The flower is a figure of desire, the meadow is the surface of the world, and the rapture is the fall.

Let us see how the story is organized: the earth (ἡ χθών) opens like "a crack" or "a yawn" (aorist indicative of χάσκω), and in turn we have to determine the scope of the adjective εὐρυάγυια ("from wide avenues or wide streets"), which is applied to χθών ("the earth"), but which, in the epic, refers to cities, especially Troy, but not exclusively.[22] In this case, the use of hypallage transfers urban characteristics (organization and spaciousness) to the earth, which is usually considered formless or wild; a certain degree of personification comes into play, in that the earth is capable of opening up and participating in the divine drama.

[21] Foley 1994: 34–35; Calame 2015: 55–72.

[22] Richardson 1974: 147–148.

This notion, which also suggests that the cosmos is an order, is at the beginning of the descent into Hades, and by extension means that there are invisible paths between the worlds, an essential key to understanding the scope of the term "mysteries" referring to Eleusis and its rites of passage or transit.[23]

Between verses 16 and 18, the expression "in the plain of Nisa"[24] confirms that this is a threshold to the invisible world (Hades), as it is a *locus amoenus* or mythical place name, where Persephone played before her abduction, and therefore has both paradisiacal and initiatory characteristics: as a place of beauty, a space of transformation; ὄρουσεν (aorist of ὀρούω), in fact, implies a violent movement ("jumped") on the part of Hades, here referred to by the epic epithet, ἄναξ πολυδέγμων ("the sovereign who receives many"), both because of the bad omen of calling him by his name and because of its adaptation to the rhythmic structure of the hexameter.[25] Immediately afterwards comes the account of the key event:

> ἁρπάξας δ' ἀέκουσαν ἐπὶ χρυσέοισιν ὄχοισιν
> ἦγ' ὀλοφυρομένην· ἰάχησε δ' ἄρ' ὄρθια φωνῇ,
> κεκλομένη πατέρα Κρονίδην ὕπατον καὶ ἄριστον. (*H. Hom.* 2.19–21)

The transition between the two scenes (from bucolic peace to abduction) is rapid and dramatic, sustained by the rhythm of the hexameter. The aorist (active participle) of ἁρπάζω marks Hades' act of violence, which is enhanced by the accusative of ἀέκων, which expresses what is contrary to someone's will (in this case, Persephone). The golden chariot driven by Hades[26] highlights his power to cross thresholds between worlds and alter their realities: "he drives" her (aorist of ἄγω) to the underworld, while she moans or cries (present middle/passive participle

[23] Kalogeropoulos 2023: 11–54.

[24] *H. Hom.* 2.17: Νύσιον ἂμ πεδίον τῇ ὄρουσεν ἄναξ πολυδέγμων; the preposition ἂμ with the accusative conveys the idea of "being on the surface", suggesting that there is something "below" that surface (as we have already pointed out, the invisible world of Hades).

[25] For this reason, the use of the epithet πολυώνυμος ("of many names", v. 18) also emphasizes the essence of his ambiguity: the gods of the underworld were rarely named directly.

[26] Calabrese 2009: 23–53.

of ὀλοφύρομαι): Zeus' will was being fulfilled and Persephone's was unknown. This increases the tension of the story: Persephone's cry (ἰάχησε, aorist of ἰάχω, to give a cry) calling for her father Zeus[27] has the irony we mentioned earlier: he himself has decided it. We believe that this theological drama reaches its climax with the use of superlative epithets (ὕπατον καὶ ἄριστον) that expose the irony: is this the action of the one who is excellence itself?

> οὐδέ τις ἀθανάτων οὐδὲ θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων
> ἤκουσεν φωνῆς, οὐδ' ἀγλαόκαρποι ἐλαῖαι,
> εἰ μὴ Περσαίου θυγάτηρ ἀταλὰ φρονέουσα
> ἄϊεν ἐξ ἄντρου Ἑκάτη λιπαροκρήδεμνος,
> Ἠέλιός τε ἄναξ Ὑπερίονος ἀγλαὸς υἱός,
> κούρης κεκλομένης πατέρα Κρονίδην· ὃ δὲ νόσφιν
> ἧστο θεῶν ἀπάνευθε πολυλλίστῳ ἐνὶ νηῷ,
> δέγμενος ἱερὰ καλὰ παρὰ θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων.
> τὴν δ' ἀεκαζομένην ἦγεν Διὸς ἐννεσίῃσι
> πατροκασίγνητος, πολυσημάντωρ πολυδέγμων,
> ἵπποις ἀθανάτοισι, Κρόνου πολυώνυμος υἱός. (*H. Hom.* 2.22–31)

The response to Persephone's cry is the profound silence of the entire cosmos.[28] We believe that this silence expresses the breakdown of order: neither gods nor humans nor nature perceived her cry. Olive trees, a typical feature of the Mediterranean, represent the space of communication between gods and men (the nymphs of the forest are linked to those of the trees). In primitive epics, trees are not endowed with hearing; from the idea of their whispering in the wind arose the metaphor that they listened and responded with songs or lamentations. This became a topic in later bucolic poetry and fables.[29]

Polysyndeton (the intentional and emphatic repetition of the conjunction οὐδέ) gives expressive force and emotional depth to the dis-

[27] Persephone's cry is mentioned repeatedly (vv. 27, 39, 57, 67, 432). In Indo-European communities, the cry for help is an important element of primitive law, especially in cases of rape or abduction, where the lack of a cry invalidates the victim's subsequent claim. Cf. Eur. *Tr.* 999–1000, where Hecuba rejects Helen's claim of abduction because she did not cry out. Cf. González González 2023: 105–115.

[28] Scheer 2019: 13–28.

[29] Kerényi 1991: 36 ff.; Richardson 1974: 155–156).

course. This negative distribution, which stylistically emphasizes the sound vacuum, symbolizes the passage to the underworld. In mythical argumentation, Persephone's shrill cry must be heard by a deity linked to the crossing of worlds and its rites: Hecate and her role as mediator, and the only witness to the abduction, the god Helios. With the all-seeing god, the idea that the crime is not hidden from the cosmos is introduced. Although justice is not immediate, there is an irrefutable witness to the crime. The repetition of epithets, which highlight Hades' power, uphold his figure as lord of the underworld and instrument of destiny, making his role necessary in the cycle of life.

> ὄφρα μὲν οὖν γαῖάν τε καὶ οὐρανὸν ἀστερόεντα
> λεῦσσε θεὰ καὶ πόντον ἀγάρροον ἰχθυόεντα
> αὐγάς τ' ἠελίου, ἔτι δ' ἤλπετο μητέρα κεδνὴν
> ὄψεσθαι καὶ φῦλα θεῶν αἰειγενετάων,
> τόφρα οἱ ἐλπὶς ἔθελγε μέγαν νόον ἀχνυμένης περ.
> ἤχησαν δ' ὀρέων κορυφαὶ καὶ βένθεα πόντου
> φωνῇ ὑπ' ἀθανάτῃ, τῆς δ' ἔκλυε πότνια μήτηρ. (*H. Hom.* 3.32–39)

Persephone must find comfort in the visible world; newly abducted, she contemplates the entire cosmos: the earth, the sky, the sea, the sun. This poetic catalog is common to the archaic model for expressing an extreme situation, that is, the transition from the upper world to the lower world. The hope of illusion concentrates the tension of captivity and its consequences: the verse τόφρα οἱ ἐλπὶς ἔθελγε μέγαν νόον is key. In fact, until then, that is, until the darkest moment (τόφρα in correlation with ὄφρα), hope deceived (the imperfect of θέλγω carries the basic meaning of "to bewitch") her great spirit or mind, in any case, the rational aspect of Persephone's ψυχή, despite being afflicted by the situation (ἀχνυμένης). Her voice expresses her despair and breaks the silence: Persephone's φωνή ἀθανάτη resounds throughout the cosmos; it is a foundational moment in the mythical cycle.

The fact that Demeter hears her marks a turning point in the plot and in the ritual meaning of the hymn; indeed, ὄφρα μὲν οὖν (v. 33) marks the moment between the abduction and Demeter's discovery: her mother heard her (aorist of κλύω), for that voice resounded between the peaks and abysses of nature. This indicates that the bond

between mother and daughter is finally reestablished by the voice. Immediately afterwards, Demeter sets out in search of her daughter. The Greek text expresses in a very profound way: "she soared" (aorist of σεύομαι) like a bird (ὥστ' οἰωνός), searching for her (μαιομένη) everywhere possible.

3. The Ennead *4.8.1*

Plotinus' *Ennead* 4.7.2 is part of his reflection on the essence of the soul, its relationship with the body, and the conditions of its individualization. In this section, the philosopher critically examines the possibility that the ψυχή is corporeal in nature or arises from a combination of material elements. Contrary to materialist positions, he proposes that the soul is a simple, indivisible, incorporeal principle, and source of life (ζωή). The body, on the other hand, is a mixture (κρῖσις), and is therefore subject to dissolution. It is the soul that imposes order (τάξις) on matter, a capacity that refers to the λόγος coming from the Intellect. Consequently, the soul does not come from the body but is its animating principle.

Plotinus' argument starts from an empirical observation: in every living being there is a principle that animates it, and which, because it is life itself, is immortal. The body, on the other hand, because of its corruptible nature, cannot contain life itself. Thus, the soul is the foundation of living beings. If each being has its own soul, there must be one that animates the universe: the World Soul, which guarantees the unity and cohesion of the whole. This structure implies a tripartite hierarchy: supreme soul, World Soul, and individual souls. All share the same essence, but are distinguished by their degree of contemplation. The higher souls remain separate from the corporeal, while the human soul, as it descends, mixes with the body, hindering its access to the intelligible (*Enn.* 5.1.1). Far from being resolved, this problem remains open in *Enn.* 4.7.1.[30]

Plotinus reworks the thesis of the *Timaeus*, where Plato had presented the descent of the soul as a gift from the Demiurge, but also as

[30] See Calabrese, Junco 2024.

a punishment in Orphic terms. For Plotinus, only the lower part of the soul descends; the upper part remains united with the Intellect (*Enn.* 4.8.8.1–3). For this assertion, he relies on passages from the *Timaeus* (35a, 41a–d), where the mixed composition of the soul and its immortality is addressed. Thus, we can affirm that the soul is only partially manifested in the sensible world; its true essence remains in the intelligible world.[31]

D'Ancona emphasizes the originality of this reading, which will influence Christian thought.[32] Plotinus reinterprets the problems raised in the *Parmenides* and establishes a relationship between *Nous* and the Demiurge in accordance with Book XII of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.[33] This identification leads to a negative view of the Platonic Good as One without attributes, according to the second part of the *Parmenides*. This way, Plotinus configures his system of three hypostases: One, Intellect, and Soul, which constitute the ultimate principles of being. By articulating the five genera of the *Sophistes* with Aristotle's categories,[34] he deepens the body-soul relationship. Porphyry attests that this discussion was central to his school (*Vita Plotini* 3.35–37, 4.9–11, 5.60–61).[35] The question of the soul is addressed in *Enn.* 4.7.2, 4.8.6, and 5.1.10.

In *Enn.* 4.7.2, Plotinus distances himself from theories that identify the soul with the body or with a material combination. He takes up the "argument of affinity" from Plato's *Phaedo*: the soul is immortal because of its kinship with the intelligible. However, its insertion into the body poses a problem: how to maintain its ontological independence while explaining its union with matter. Plotinus describes the body as an instrument (ὄργανον) granted for a limited time. Even so, the complete human being includes soul and body: the former is form in relation to matter, and the vital principle. Faced with the Stoic and Epicurean postulates, which identify the soul with a subtle body or an aggregate of atoms, Plotinus objects that, if the soul were a composite, it would

[31] Chiaradonna 2023: 59–61.

[32] D'Ancona 2003: 12–16.

[33] See Berti 2012.

[34] See Halfwassen 2012.

[35] Goulet-Cazé 1982; Calabrese, Junco 2024.

be necessary to determine in which of its parts life resides. Only an uncompounded principle can give life to matter. Therefore, there must be a universal soul that gives form to the universe (*Enn.* 4.7.20). He criticizes Epicurus for assuming that consciousness arises from simple aggregation: the unity of experience requires an ordering principle.[36]

Matter cannot give itself form: it requires an external soul. Otherwise, the cosmos would dissolve. The question then arises as to whether the soul is harmony (ἁρμονία), as Plato and the Pythagoreans suggested. But if it were the product of proportion, it would not be substance. Furthermore, there would be as many souls as there are possible combinations. The analogy with the musician tuning an instrument reinforces the idea that order does not come from the body, but from a prior principle. In *Enn.* 4.8.5, Plotinus introduces a reading of Aristotle (*An.* 2.1): the soul is the principle of life in an organized body. Even so, he considers necessary the existence of a rational and sensitive soul, capable of remembering without the support of the body. The soul is an independent substance, not derived from the body, but prior to it (*Enn.* 4.7.5–15, where it is defined as real substance).

The opposition between body and soul becomes ontological: the body is in flux, the soul participates in being (*Enn.* 4.7.2). In Plato's *Phaedrus* (245c), the soul is the principle of movement, beauty, and order. If it remains pure, it lives by itself; when it mixes with the body, it loses clarity, but not its essence. Through contemplation, it can return to its original state (*R.* 547b).

> Πολλάκις ἐγειρόμενος εἰς ἐμαυτὸν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος καὶ γινόμενος τῶν μὲν ἄλλων ἔξω, ἐμαυτοῦ δὲ εἴσω, θαυμαστὸν ἡλίκον ὁρῶν κάλλος, καὶ τῆς κρείττονος μοίρας πιστεύσας τότε μάλιστα εἶναι, ζωήν τε ἀρίστην ἐνεργήσας καὶ τῷ θείῳ εἰς ταὐτὸν γεγενημένος καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ ἱδρυθεὶς εἰς ἐνέργειαν ἐλθὼν ἐκείνην ὑπὲρ πᾶν τὸ ἄλλο νοητὸν ἐμαυτὸν ἱδρύσας, μετὰ ταύτην τὴν ἐν τῷ θείῳ στάσιν εἰς λογισμὸν ἐκ νοῦ καταβὰς ἀπορῶ, πῶς ποτε καὶ νῦν καταβαίνω, καὶ ὅπως ποτέ μοι ἔνδον ἡ ψυχὴ γεγένηται τοῦ σώματος τοῦτο οὖσα, οἷον ἐφάνη καθ' ἑαυτήν, καίπερ οὖσα ἐν σώματι. (*Enn.* 4.8.1.1–12)

[36] Calabrese-Junco 2024.

It is worth noting some aspects of this passage to guide us in its interpretation. First, the adverb πολλάκις indicates the frequency with which an event occurs, that is, Plotinus' experience is not exceptional but habitual, as if it were the result of practice. Furthermore, the present participle of ἐγείρω ("to awaken") seems to insist that this act, which is internal and reflective, is indeed habitual and directed toward the inner life: εἰς ἐμαυτόν, whose introspective meaning (towards myself) leads us to consider that awakening here has a clear spiritual meaning, becoming one of the keys to Neoplatonic mysticism (pagan and Christian). It is also emphasized that it is properly an experience, that is, a conscious activity: ἐκ τοῦ σώματος or outside the body, since the soul is recognized as independent of the sensible. This is a central aspect of Plotinus' anthropology, which focuses on distinguishing between soul and body.

The participle γινόμενος indicates a state of becoming outside of things, but within oneself (ἐμαυτοῦ δὲ εἴσω, or "within myself"), alluding to abandoning the sensible world, which implies the lower psychic faculties. The opposition ἔξω/εἴσω, which conceptually is also a parallelism, maintains that the soul is not bound to what comes from outside but to its own intelligible core. The Greek text reinforces this idea through the use of contrasting particles that are difficult to translate. The adjective θαυμαστόν, which we already saw in the *Hymn to Demeter* with the meaning of "amazing", "wonderful", introduces the mystical perception of "seeing beauty" (ὁρῶν κάλλος), phrased in the present active participle, which indicates a continuous action. Plotinus is certain (πιστεύσας) that the soul is divided into levels and that he has access to its best part (κρείττων μοῖρα): a lower part that operates in the sensible world, and a higher, eternal, and contemplative part. Here, then, we see the narrow path that links the vision of beauty with the recognition of the ontological origin of the soul: beauty seen in contemplation is not something that befalls outside but rather what ensures the nobility of the soul.

At this point, Plotinus becomes aware of being one, of being in unity (εἰς ταὐτόν) with the divine; this is the foundation of the Neo-

platonic certainty that contemplation is becoming one with the divine, a formula that expresses the participation of its being. To express this complex relationship, Plotinus' prose uses two forms of the verb ἱδρύω ("to establish", "to found"): first the passive form ("having been established"), and then the active ("having established myself"). Divinity only receives if the soul first establishes itself in this state. For this very reason, although it seems to have a temporal limitation (μετὰ ταύτην τὴν… στάσιν), this experience has a level of permanence, because στάσις also entails a state of being, which, although permanent, is not perceived as such, and this causes perplexity (ἀπορῶ, "I am perplexed"), since there has been a descent into rational discourse (εἰς λογισμόν). Thus Plotinus perceives the central paradox, as expressed by the succession of interrogative expressions (πῶς ποτε; ὅπως ποτέ): the soul that has ascended falls again. This famous passage paved the way for consideration of the path of interiority, that is, the instance of contemplation that allows access to true knowledge or the "return" of the soul to its origin. This passage is unique in its use of the first person: Plotinus expressed a very personal experience of the divine Intellect.

We consider this passage to be a response to the question posed in *Enn.* 4.7.2: How is it possible to understand the union between the body and the soul, if the latter belongs to the intelligible world? In his response, Plotinus delved deeper into the nature of the soul: on the one hand, it manifests its affinity with the body, and on the other hand, with the intelligible; if its purpose is to guarantee the life of the body (perception and cognitive activity), it must possess a nature distinct from that of the body: when the soul concentrates on intelligible realities, it becomes what it knows and is not qualitatively distinct from the operating model of the Intellect. As D'Ancona[37] observes, this argument combines the theme of the "line of knowledge" from Plato's *Republic* (6, 509d–511e and 7, 531d–535a), in which degrees of knowledge are distinguished[38], with Aristotle's *De anima* (3.4, 430a), where the identity of nature of the knowing principle and the known thing is affirmed.

[37] D'Ancona 2003: 21.

[38] See Grisei 2000; Vegetti 1999: 86.

Plotinus is aware of Aristotle's objections to Plato's thesis on knowledge, and therefore finds it difficult to present the soul as the dual principle of life and the body. Indeed, being the principle of the life of the body (the rational organization of the living being) implies sharing the state of permanent change, but remaining distinct from the body itself. When Plotinus demonstrated his own intellectual faculty, recognizing its identity with intelligible reality, he also noted that the soul has the capacity to change, without which it could not be in relation to the world of becoming. In Plotinus' observation, two realities of the soul concur: belonging to the intelligible cosmos and remaining in the body to which it gives life; immortal and separate, it is also subject to change (it is the immanent principle of life).[39]

This approach ultimately presents an aporia. Plotinus attempts to resolve the aporia based on Plato's inquiry into an organized nature, although he has insisted on the effort to provide a coherent overall view, since Plato seems to contradict himself. Indeed, there are many passages in the dialogues in which the relationship between soul and body is judged negatively, although in the *Timaeus* it is stated that the Demiurge decides "for the best" that the soul should coexist with a body. For Plotinus, this shows that, on the one hand, Plato's approach is coherent, and on the other hand, that this possible "contradiction" actually indicates that the Athenian philosopher considered a double status for the soul: from the perspective of the body, which must be animated, and from the perspective of the cosmos, which makes the soul a perfect reality (devoid of desires and needs).

Plotinus' exegesis shows that the contradiction between Plato's texts is apparent and that there is no single answer to this interpretation, since the soul of the universe coexists with respect to the sensible cosmos, which is considered a living being from the Platonic tradition, and the individual soul coexists with respect to a particular body. When Plato judges the relationship between body and soul to be evil, he is talking about the individual relationship between a body and a soul, which is limited by material needs; but when Plato refers to a providen-

[39] D'Ancona 2003: 21.

tial force at work, he is referring to the only case in which dealing with a lower reality does not imply that the soul is subject to imperfection. In both cases (the sensible universe and the individual body), the soul cannot be absent because neither could exist without the principle of rationality.

In *Enn.* 4.7.2, Plotinus posited the falsity of the doctrine of the soul as the "entelechy" of the living being, if understood solely from the perspective of functionality, since, if the soul were the actual development of vital operations, it would exist only in light of those operations. This passage suggests that the soul can only be correctly understood as "perfection", which is attained separately from the body. Thus, the soul cannot be something added to a body; it is not a function, in the Aristotelian sense, but a principle. Plotinus wondered how the soul "enters" the body, and the explanation he offered made it clear that it is not a metaphor for the rational organization of the body but rather that the soul produces corporeal nature as "a beautiful and varied mansion" (*Enn.* 4.3.27). However, it does not enter as if that mansion already existed (to think that the soul "enters" a body that already exists is not, for Plotinus, a theory that would have been held by Plato).[40] On the contrary, he considers that Plato describes the body and the soul as two opposing realities, and the sensible universe as something that, in some way, already exists when the Demiurge sends the soul. This should not be understood in a literal sense but as the intuitive-didactic production of a myth about the sensible-intelligible relationship. Ultimately, nothing can exist except from the moment it is animated.

4. Texts in dialogue

In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone's descent into Hades is depicted as a kidnapping perpetrated by Hades with Zeus' consent. This act of violence triggers Demeter's mourning and the disruption of the natural cycle. The myth implies a view in which the decisions of the gods directly affect earthly life. Hades, for its part, is not simply

[40] D'Ancona 2003: 26–27.

a punishment but a necessary dimension of the cosmic order. The abduction does not nullify Persephone's divinity but rather inaugurates a transformation of her role in the pantheon: from maiden to queen of the underworld.

For Plotinus, the descent of the soul is not the result of an external imposition but of a free ontological movement: the soul moves toward matter out of a desire to know and organize multiplicity. This inclination implies self-degradation, not punishment, and responds to the very structure of reality as a hierarchical emanation. The fall, then, is a natural movement within the procession of the One. However, this fall entails a darkening of consciousness, a loss of spiritual identity, which requires an arduous path of return. The analogy with the abduction of Persephone allows us to understand the soul as being drawn toward the multiple, though not violently, but rather by a form of lower desire. In this reinterpretation, Plotinus departs from the Orphic reading that conceives of the body as a prison for the soul and proposes a more nuanced view: the soul is not necessarily degraded by its incorporation but rather by its forgetfulness of the Intellect. This idea marks a fundamental difference with the mystery religions, in which descent is usually read as a tragic fall, and return as redemption. In Plotinus, there is no redemption but reintegration.

In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Hades appears as a dark and hidden place, alien to the world of the living. Persephone, having eaten a pomegranate seed, becomes partially bound to this realm. This act of eating has profound symbolic connotations: it indicates an irreversible link with the underworld and the need to divide her existence between two worlds. The symbol of the pomegranate, with its abundance of seeds, represents fertility, but also the fatality of the link with the land of the dead.

In Plotinus, the sensible world is also a lower realm, but not evil in itself. It represents the place where the soul loses the clarity of its original contemplation. The symbolic "pomegranate" in this context is the soul's desire or fascination with the diverse, the mutable, and the corporeal. Like Persephone, the soul is bound to matter by its own

choice, and this attachment becomes the main obstacle to its return. Matter is the limit, the shadow of being, but not an absolute principle of evil as in Gnosticism. Therefore, the fall of the soul into the body is not definitive, nor is the body a prison, but rather a means of exercise and ascension, if it is well oriented. Plotinus introduces a tripartite vision of the soul: the higher soul, which remains united with the Intellect; the lower soul, which is linked to the body, and the intermediate soul, which can fluctuate between the two poles. The body, then, is not the end of the soul but its stage.

5. Conclusions

The first level of analysis of the selected passage from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the fragment from Plotinus' *Enn.* 4.8.1 reveals a vocabulary and linguistic resources that articulate, centuries apart, the same concern: the destiny of the soul in its transition between the divine realm and the sensible world. In this sense, we find two converging lines: lexical coincidences and shared semantic fields. Regarding the former, we verify the coincidence of terms that are key in both texts: a) θαυμαστόν ("amazing"), b) the verbal field of ὁρᾶν/ἰδέσθαι ("to see"/"to contemplate"), c) the opposition ἀθάνατος/θνητός ("immortal"/"mortal"), and d) the adverb νόσφιν ("apart"). All of these appear in both texts or have functional equivalents there. Their presence shows that the experience of wonder at beauty (θαυμαστόν κάλλος) and the act of contemplative vision are basic categories in both the myth of the abduction of Persephone and Plotinus' mystical introspection. Likewise, the immortal/mortal dichotomy and the motif of separation underscore a common background: the ontological fracture that makes the fall possible.

Regarding the shared semantic fields, we observe that the same symbolic execution is present in both texts. Thus, we can align the following pairs of notions: a) contemplation and beauty (the prodigious flower in the Hymn and Plotinus' noetic beauty entail transformation, causing, respectively, the descent of the maiden, and the elevation of the soul); b) descent and duality: Persephone is dragged down to Hades;

the Plotinian soul descends from νοῦς to λόγος. In both cases, the downward movement is not terminal but a prelude to a possible return; c) silence and perplexity: the cry that no one hears and the perplexity (ἀπορῶ) of the philosopher mark the identity crisis suffered by the soul when it is separated from its origin; d) unity and fragmentation: both the temporary union of Persephone with Demeter and the unification of the soul with the divine in Plotinus are broken, giving way to the drama of separation and the longing for restitution.

These lexical and semantic parallels do not imply direct literary dependence; rather, they point to the continuity of a symbolic structure that runs through the Greek tradition: the oscillation of the soul between the vision of absolute beauty and the experience of the fall. By articulating myth, ritual, and cosmology, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* offers the archetype of a fertile instability; by internalizing the drama, Plotinus philosophizes about the same tension in terms of self-awareness and intellectual contemplation. Both texts, therefore, illuminate each other: myth gives Neoplatonic speculation a narrative and emotional dimension; Plotinus' exegesis gives the Hymn a hermeneutical key that underscores its metaphysical relevance. Research confirms that word and symbol operate as vehicles of the same pristine intuition: beauty beckons, descent confuses, the memory of the origin prevents the split from being definitive. The path of return — ritual in Eleusis or contemplative in Plotinus — arises from this dialectic. Recognizing the lexical and conceptual resonances between these texts amplifies our understanding of the ancient imagination and its legacy in Western spiritual reflection.

Finally, the descent of the soul is not an irremediable loss but a transition that can be understood and reversed. Both on the religious and philosophical levels of the story, this fall opens up a possibility of return that unfolds as knowledge, contemplation, or ritual. The figure of Persephone, tirelessly sought by Demeter, and Plotinus' conception of the soul that never completely abandons its origin, constitute two complementary versions of the same spiritual drama. Myth and philosophy coincide here in pointing out that the soul, even when wandering,

retains the trace of its origin and its orientation toward its fulfillment. In short, this study underscores the hermeneutic relevance of ancient texts for thinking about the human condition in symbolic and metaphysical terms.

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