

the ascent of the soul, the description of which concludes the revelation. The antithesis of the creator and the highest God is absent here: the demiurge has been commissioned by the Father, and his creation seems to be (as it was still represented later in Manichaeism) the best way of coping with the existence of a chaotic darkness. Yet the unplanned inclusion of the divine Man in the cosmic system is distinctly tragic; and even the character of the most genuine product of the demiurge, the seven spheres and their governors, turns out to be much more problematic than one would expect from the account of their origin. There are considerable difficulties in integrating the different parts of the composition into a consistent doctrine, and perhaps a certain ambiguity, due to the combination of contradictory material, is of its very substance. We shall deal with these questions after having rendered the main body of the text.

(a) THE TEXT

(1) Once, when I had engaged in meditation upon the things that are and my mind was mightily lifted up, while my bodily senses were curbed ... I thought I beheld a presence of immeasurable greatness that called my name and said to me: "What dost thou wish to hear and see and in thought learn and understand?" (2) I said, "Who art thou?" "I am," he said, "Poimandres, the Nous of the Absolute Power. I know what thou wishest, and I am with thee everywhere." (3) I said, "I desire to be taught about the things that are and understand their nature and know God. . . ." And he replied, "Hold fast in thy mind what thou wishest to learn, and I shall teach thee."

(4) With these words, he changed his form, and suddenly everything was opened before me in a flash, and I behold a boundless view, everything become Light, serene and joyful. And I became enamored with the sight. And after a while there was a Darkness borne downward . . .,* appalling and hateful, tortuously coiled, resembling a serpent. Then I saw this Darkness change into some humid nature, indescribably

¹ "having originated in one part" or ". . . part by part," i.e., gradually (?).

agitated and giving off smoke as from a fire and uttering a kind of sound unspeakable, mournful. Then a roar [or: cry] came forth from it unarticulately, comparable to the voice of a fire. (5) From out of the Light a holy Word [*logos*] came over the nature, and unmixed fire leapt out of the humid nature upward to the height; it was light and keen, and active at the same time; and the air, being light, followed the fiery breath, rising up as far as the fire from earth and water, so that it seemed suspended from it; but earth and water remained in their place, intermingled, so that the earth was not discernible apart from the water; and they were kept in audible motion through the breath of the Word which was borne over them.

(6) Then Poimandres said to me: ". . . That light is I, Nous, thy God, who was before the humid nature that appeared out of the Darkness. And the luminous Word that issued from Nous is the Son of God. . . . By this understand: that which in thee sees and hears is the Word of the Lord, but the Nous [thy nous?] is God the Father: they are not separate from each other, for Life is the union of these. . . . Now then, fix your mind on the Light and learn to know it."

(7) Having said this, he gazed long at me intently, so that I trembled at his aspect; then when he looked up, I behold in my nous² the Light consisting in innumerable Powers and become a boundless Cosmos, and the fire contained by a mighty power and under its firm control keeping its place. . . .

(8) He again speaks to me: "Thou hast seen in the Nous the archetypal form, the principle preceding the infinite beginning."³ . . . "Wherefrom then," I ask, "have the elements of nature arisen?" To which he replies: "From the Will⁴ of God, who having received into herself the Word and beheld the beautiful [archetypal] Cosmos, imitated it, fashioning herself into a cosmos [or: ordering herself] according to her own elements and her progeny, i.e., the souls."

"(9) But the divine Nous, being androgynous, existing as Life and Light, brought forth by a word another Nous, the

² I.e., "in my own mind" as identical with the absolute Nous. *Or, perhaps, "the infinite principle preceding the beginning"? * *boule*, a word of feminine gender.

Demiurge, who as god over the fire and the breath fashioned seven Governors, who encompass with their circles the sensible world, and their government is called Heimarmene [Destiny]. (10) Forthwith the Word of God leapt out of the downward-borne elements upward into the pure [part of the] physical creation [the demiurgical sphere] and became united with the Nous-Demiurge, for he was of the same substance. And thus the lower elements of Nature were left without reason,⁵ so that they were now mere Matter. (11) And together with the Word the Nous-Demiurge, encompassing the circles and whirling them with thunderous speed, set his creations circling in endless revolution, for it begins where it ends. And this rotation of the spheres according to the will of the Nous [-Demiurge] produced out of the lower elements irrational animals, for those elements had not retained the Word. . . . [air, water, earth—the last two now separated—each producing its own animals: androgynous ones, as appears later.]

"(12) Now the Nous, Father of all, being Life and Light, brought forth Man like to himself, of whom he became enamored as his own child, for he was very beautiful, since he bore the Father's image; for indeed even God became enamored of his own form, and he delivered over to him all his works. (13) And Man, beholding the creation which the Demiurge had fashioned in the fire [the celestial spheres], wished himself to create as well, and was permitted by the Father. When he had entered the demiurgical sphere where he was to have full authority, he beheld his brother's works, and they [the seven Governors] became enamored of him, and each gave him a share in his own realm.⁶ Having come to know their essence and having received a share of their nature, he then wished to break through the circumference of the circles and to overcome [?]⁷ the power of him who rules over the fire. (14) And he [Man] who had full power over the world of things mortal

⁵"without *logos*," since the Logos (Word) had departed from them: *logos* meaning "word" and "reason," the argument is not fully apparent in the English rendering.

⁶ Or: "of his own endowment."

⁷ Or: "fully comprehend."

and over the irrational animals bent down through the Harmony⁸ and having broken through the vault showed to lower Nature the beautiful form of God. When she beheld him who had in himself inexhaustible beauty and all the forces of the Governors combined with the form of God, she smiled in love; for she had seen the reflection of this most beautiful form of Man in the water and its shadow upon the earth. He too, seeing his likeness present in her, reflected in the water, loved it and desired to dwell in it. At once with the wish it became reality, and he came to inhabit the form devoid of reason. And Nature, having received into herself the beloved, embraced him wholly, and they mingled: for they were inflamed with love. (15) And this is why alone of all the animals on earth man is twofold, mortal through the body, immortal through the essential Man. For though he is immortal and has power over all things, he suffers the lot of mortality, being subject to the Heimarmene; though he was above the Harmony, he has become a slave within the Harmony; though he was androgynous, having issued from the androgynous Father, and unsleeping from the unsleeping one, he is conquered by love and sleep."

[There follows a circumstantial account of the origin of the present race of men (16-19), and a moral instruction (20-23),

⁸I stick to the astrological and dynamic meaning of the term. The most recent interpreters take *harmonia* here in the concrete sense it had in the language of the carpenter: "joint," "fitting together"; thus *Nock*, proposes the translation "composite framework," *Festugiere* translates "*armature des spheres*." Both these excellent scholars, though tentative as to the most suitable translation, are certain that the word throughout our treatise denotes a particular *material* structure and not, as I understand it, the general essence of a *power* system, viz., the law of the interrelated motions of the macrocosmos represented by the seven planets (the latter, however, considered mainly in their "psychological" aspect, as the subsequent account of the soul's ascent makes clear). Of the reasons I have against the newer interpretation, I indicate only two: that supplied by the phrase "[Man] having in himself the nature of the harmony of the Seven" (16), which makes sense only in connection with the *abstract* meaning first given to "harmony" by the Pythagoreans; and its additional support by the close correlation in which our text repeatedly (15; 19) puts "harmony" to "heimarmene" (destiny). In brief, *harmonia* stands for a totality of forces (the Governors) denoted by its unifying characteristic (**the** form of their collective government), and not just for a partitioning wall or any more complex entity of that kind, like a scaffolding. Incidentally, the spheric system was fashioned out of fire, which hardly goes well with a framework.

which we here summarize as follows. Since the Man, now intermingled with Nature, "had in himself the nature of the harmony of the Seven," Nature brought forth seven androgynous men, corresponding to the natures of the seven Governors. We pass over the details of the respective contributions of the elements earth, water, fire, and ether to the constitution of these creatures. As to the contribution of Man as a part of the begetting mixture, he turned "from Life and Light into soul and mind (*nous*), into soul from Life and into mind from Light" (17). This condition of creation lasted to the end of a world-era. The new world-era was initiated by the separation of all the androgynous creatures, animals and men alike, into male and female. And here occurs the only instance in which the author shows his familiarity with the Greek Old Testament in something like a direct quotation: on the model of Gen. 1:22, 28, God admonishes the new bisexual creation, "Be fruitful and multiply," then continues in a very different vein: "And [man] endowed with mind shall recognize that he is immortal and that the cause of death is love" (viz., ultimately the love which drew the Primal Man down into nature) (18). He who has come thus to know himself has come into the supreme good; he, however, who has cherished the body issued from the error of love, he remains in the darkness erring, suffering in his senses the dispensations of death. What then is the sin of those ignorant ones, that they should be deprived of immortality? The first cause of the individual body is the hateful darkness, from which came the humid nature, from which was constituted the body of the sensible world, from which death draws nourishment. Thus the lovers of the body actually are *in* death and deserve death. On the other hand, he who knows himself knows that the Father of all things consists of Light and Life, therefore likewise the Primal Man issued from him, and by this he knows himself to be of Light and Life, and will through this knowledge return to the Life. The knowing ones, filled with love for the Father, before they deliver the body to its own death abhor the senses, whose effects they know; and the Poimandres-Nous assists them in this by acting as a warder at the gates and barring entrance to the evil influences of the body.

The unknowing ones are left a prey to all the evil passions, whose insatiability is their torment, always augmenting the flame that consumes them.]

[The last part of the instruction (24-26) is devoted to the soul's ascent after death. First at the dissolution of the material body you yield up to the demon your sensuous nature (?)⁹ now ineffective, and the bodily senses return each to its source among the elements.] "(25) And thereafter, man thrusts upward through the Harmony, and to the first zone he surrenders the power to grow and to decrease, and to the second the machinations of evil cunning, now rendered powerless, and to the third the deceit of concupiscence, now rendered powerless, and to the fourth the arrogance of dominion, drained of [or: now impotent to achieve] its ambition, and to the fifth the impious audacity and the rashness of impulsive deed, and to the sixth the evil appetites of wealth, now rendered powerless, and to the seventh zone the lying that ensnares. (26) And then denuded of the effects of the Harmony, he enters the nature of the Ogdoas [i.e., the eighth sphere, that of the fixed stars], now in possession of his own power, and with those already there exalts the Father; and those present rejoice with him at his presence, and having become like his companions he hears also certain powers above the eighth sphere exalting God with a sweet voice. And then in procession they rise up towards the Father and give themselves up to the Powers, and having become Powers themselves, enter the Godhead. This is the good end of those who have attained gnosis: to become God."

(b) COMMENTARY

The composition of the treatise is clear. Its greatest part (1-26) is a report, in the first person, of a visionary experience and of the teachings conveyed in the course of it. The concluding paragraphs (27-32), omitted in our rendering, describe the subsequent missionary activity of the recipient among his fellow men. In the report of the revelation, with which alone we are dealing here, we discern

⁹ The text has *ethos* = "character," which in its meaning of moral character somehow clashes with the whole sequence, 25-26, as also do other statements in 24.

¹⁵⁴ the following major divisions. Paragraphs 1 to 3 describe the *visionary situation* with the appearance of Poimandres ("Shepherd of Men"), who identifies himself as the Nous (Mind), i.e., the highest godhead. Paragraphs 4 to 11 propound the *cosmogony* up to the creation of irrational animals; paragraphs 12 to 19 the *anthro-pogony*, the central doctrine of the whole revelation. Paragraphs 20 to 23, drawing the moral conclusions from the preceding theoretical parts of the revelation, outline the two opposite types of *human conduct*. Paragraphs 24 to 26 complete the revelation by describing the *ascent* of the Gnostic's soul after death. We shall first comment on the central doctrine concerning the origin and essence of *man*, to which the cosmogonic part provides a background knowledge not absolutely necessary for its understanding. We shall then treat the *ascent of the soul*, which corresponds to the original descent of Primal Man, and whose details complement the account given of the latter. Only then shall we turn back to the *cosmogony* and make an attempt at disentangling the somewhat elusive and possibly not entirely homogeneous account of these opening phases of the drama.

The Origin of the Divine Man

Man is the third in the triad of successive divine creations or emanations: Word (Logos), Mind-Artificer (Nous-Demiurgos), Man (Anthropos). He can regard the Demiurge as his brother, but has the special analogy to the Logos that they both enter into close connection with the lower Nature which in due course is dissolved again. The Word and the Demiurge had to fulfill each a cosmogonic task, with which we shall deal later; whereas Man was begotten by the first God *after* the establishment of the cosmic system, though outside it, and with no apparent purpose except for God's enjoying his own perfection in a perfect image of himself untainted by the admixture of the lower world. In the traits of being created "in God's image" and only after the end of the cosmic creation, this version of the origin of the god Man shows a closer proximity to the biblical account than the version more generally current in Gnosticism according to which Man *precedes* creation and himself has a cosmogonic role. Rabbinical speculations about Adam based on the duplication of the report of his creation in

Gen. 1 and 2, which were referred to a celestial and a terrestrial Adam respectively, supply a link between biblical and gnostic doctrines concerning the First Man. Certain Zoroastrian teachings, either through the medium of those Jewish speculations or directly, may also have contributed to the conception of this supremely important figure of gnostic theology. The departure from the biblical model (if this really was the starting point of the development, which is much debated among modern scholars) is conspicuous in the following features: God does not "make" Man, but as an androgynous generative principle begets him and brings him forth, so that he is really an emanation of His own substance; he is not formed of clay, but is Life and Light purely; the "likeness" is one not of symbolic similitude but of a full sameness of form, so that in him God contemplates and loves His own adequate representation; he is extra-mundane, while even the Demiurge has his seat within the cosmic system, albeit in its highest and outermost sphere, the eighths; his dimensions are commensurate with those of the physical creation, as his later union with the whole of Nature shows; the mastery given to him is not as in Genesis over the terrestrial fauna merely, but over the astral macrocosmos as well.

The exercise of this power, however, was hardly the original purpose of his production by the Father: it accrued to him with the granting of his wish "himself to create as well." This motivation of divine descent and eventual involvement in the lower world is more often, and more logically, connected with the demiurgical principle itself and is to account for the very existence of the world.¹⁰ But here the world is already created, and it is difficult to

¹⁰ Thus in the Mandaean story of creation contained in the third book of the Right Ginza we read that first from the Great Mana issued the Life: "and this addressed a request to itself; and at its request there came forth the fast-grounded Uthra whom the Life called the Second Life. . . . That Second Life then created Uthras, established sh'kinas. . . . Three Uthras came forth who addressed a request to the Second Life; they *asked permission to create sh'kinas for themselves*. The [Second] Life granted it. . . . Then they said to it, 'Give us of thy splendor and of thy light, and we will go forth and descend beneath the streams of water. We will call forth unto thee sh'kinas, create unto thee a world, and the world be ours and thine.' This pleased [the Second Life], and it said, 'I will grant it to them'; but the Great [Mana] it did not please, and the [First] Life did not approve of it." It is in a countermove to this plan of the Uthras that the Great Mana creates Manda d'Hayye, who in this system most nearly corresponds to Primal Man, and charges him: "'Do thou mount up above the Uthras and see what they are up to

see what the Man either in collaboration or in competition with the Demiurge has still left for him to do. Nor does the subsequent narrative provide an answer to this question: rather than a creative urge, his main motive in penetrating the demiurgical system seems to be curiosity. These inconsistencies suggest that we have here an adapted form of the Anthropos myth, with some traces of an original cosmogonic function of the figure faintly preserved.

The Descent of Man; the Planetary Soul

His entrance into the demiurgical sphere marks the beginning of his inner-worldly history. The tribute rendered him by the seven Governors' each giving him a share in his own realm appears to be in the nature of a positive accretion to his own being: he absorbs and henceforth has in himself the nature of the Harmony, i.e., the powers of the seven Governors in their respective spheres; and this, at least in the eyes of the lower Nature, seems to add to the attraction of the divine form when he shows himself to her. Yet it must not be forgotten that the Governors and their spheres were fashioned by the Demiurge out of fire, which, though the purest, is still one of the physical elements originating from the primal Darkness. Thus we may already at this point suspect that the gifts of the planetary powers might not have been wholly desirable to a being of pure divinity, and might even have their fatal aspects. The immediate context contains nothing to bear out such a suspicion, and would rather tend to dispel it, were it not for the subsequent

and what they intend, they who say, We will create a world"; and later on "Thou hast seen, Manda d'Hayye, what the Uthras are doing and what they plan about this and that. Thou hast seen that they have forsaken the House of Life and turned their faces to the place of Darkness. . . . Who will bring order among them, who will deliver them from failure and error . . . that they brought upon themselves? Who will make them hear the call of the Great [Life] ?" In the sequence of this very ill-composed treatise an individual demiurgical figure becomes the executor of the cosmogonic plan of the Uthras—Ptahil-Uthra, who from his father (one of the Uthras, here called B'haq Ziva, elsewhere Abathur) receives the mandate, "Go, descend to the place without sh'kinas and without worlds. Create and make thyself a world like the sons of Blessedness whom thou hast seen' [here we have the motif of imitating an ideal world, widespread in gnostic speculation and also occurring in the *Poimandres*—possibly but not necessarily a distorted reminiscence of the Platonic Demiurge]. Ptahil-Uthra went forth and descended beneath the sh'kinas to the place where there is no world. He stepped into the filthy slime, he stepped into the turbid water . . . and the living fire in him was changed" (G 65 ff. 97 f.).

description of the *ascent* of the soul and for independent accounts, inside and outside of Hermetic literature, of its original descent through the spheres to its earthly abode. Here is indeed one of the instances, characteristic of the composite nature of Hermetic religion, in which it oscillates between the pre-gnostic and gnostic meaning of the same mythological theme. It is the theme of the planetary equipping of the soul. The conception belongs to the astrological range of ideas: each of the planetary powers makes its contribution to the equipment of the soul prior to its embodiment. In an affirmative cosmology these are useful gifts which fit man for his earthly existence. And by reason of having these psychical components in himself man is sympathetically connected with their astral sources, i.e., with the cosmos, in whose "harmony" he thus participates. Through this sympathy he is also subject to the *influences* of the stars and thus to the heimarmene—the basic premise of astrology—but as long as the cosmos is considered good there is nothing deleterious in this conception; indeed, it is the expression of cosmic piety.¹¹

To this complex of ideas Gnosticism gave a new turn by conceiving the planetary constituents of the soul as *corruptions* of its original nature contracted in its descent through the cosmic spheres. The Christian Arnobius reports this as a Hermetic teaching:

While we slide and hasten downwards to the human bodies, there attach themselves to us from the cosmic spheres the causes by which we become ever worse.

(*Adv. nat.* II. 16)

A very close parallel (in inverse direction) to the *Poimandres* account of the soul's ascent is found in the following description of its descent:

As the souls descend, they draw with them the torpor of Saturn, the wrathfulness of Mars, the concupiscence of Venus, the greed for gain of Mercury, the lust for power of Jupiter; which things effect a confusion in the souls, so that they can no longer make use of their own power and their proper faculties.

(*Servius In Aen.* VI. 714)

¹¹For this positive meaning of the gifts of the planets cf. Macrobius *In somn. Scip.* I. 12, Servius *In Aen.* XI. 51, and in the *Corpus Hermeticum* itself the *Kore Kosmou*.

The expressions make it clear that what attaches itself to the soul on its downward journey has the character of substantial though immaterial entities, and these are frequently described as "envelopments" or "garments." Accordingly the resultant terrestrial "soul" is comparable to an onion with so many layers, on the model of the cosmos itself, only in inverse order: what is outermost there is innermost here, and after the process is completed with incarnation, what is innermost in the spherical scheme of the cosmos, the earth, is as body the outer garment of man. That this *body* is a fatality to the soul had long ago been preached by the Orphics, whose teachings were revived in the era of Gnosticism. But now the *psychical* envelopments too are considered impairments and fetters of the transmundane spirit.

Looking down from that highest summit and perpetual light, and having with secret desire contemplated the appetite of the body and its "life," so called on earth, the soul by the very weight of this its earthly thought gradually sinks down into the nether world. . . . In each sphere [which it passes] it is clothed with an ethereal envelopment, so that by these it is in stages reconciled to the company of this earthen garment. And thus it comes through as many deaths as it passes spheres to what here on earth is called "life."

(Macrobius *In somn. Scip.* II. 11)

Now, what are these foreign accretions? In their sum they are the empirical character of man, comprising all the faculties and propensities by which man relates himself to the world of nature and society; that is, they constitute what would normally be called his "psyche." And what is the original entity overlaid by these accretions? It is the transcendent acosmic principle in man, normally hidden and undiscovered in his earthly preoccupations, or only negatively betraying itself in a feeling of alienness, of not completely belonging, and becoming positive here only through the *gnosis*' giving it in the beholding of the divine light an acosmic content of its own and thereby restoring it to its original condition, now obscured. Frequently, as we have learned before, this secret principle is called "pneuma," while the term "psyche" is reserved for its manifest "cosmic" envelopment. The Hermetic writings avoid

the term "pneuma" in the spiritual meaning,¹² replacing it by "nous"; but elsewhere the name "psyche" is also used, with appropriate qualifications, for *both* parts, and often, as in the above quotations, we read simply of the "soul" descending and undergoing the deteriorations described. In that case, where the traditional dignity of the term "soul" is retained, those deteriorations are called either spirits superadded to the original soul or outright a second soul containing the first one. For the first version we quote Clement of Alexandria:

Those around Basilides are in the habit of calling the passions "appendages," which they say are in essence certain spirits appended to the rational soul in consequence of an original upheaval and confusion.

(*Strom.* II. 20. 112)

In Basilides' school these "appendages" in their entirety were considered as themselves constituting a soul, as the title of a lost book by his son Isidorus shows, *On the Accreted Soul*, which treated of "'the force of the appendages" (*ibid.*).¹³ This results in a two-soul

"Where it occurs, it is in the sense of a physical element, agreeing with the Stoic use of the term.

"Already Plato uses the following telling simile for the present condition of the soul in relation to its true nature: "Our description of the soul is true of her present appearance; but we have seen her afflicted by countless evils, like the sea-god Glaucus, whose original form can hardly be discerned, because parts of his body have been broken off or crushed and altogether marred by the waves, and the clinging overgrowth of weed and rock and shell has made him more like some monster than his natural self. But we must rather fix our eyes on her love of wisdom [*philosophia*] and note how she seeks to apprehend and hold converse with the <i>divine, immortal, and everlasting world to which she is akin, and what she would become if her affections were entirely set on following the impulse that would lift her out of the sea in which she is now sunken, and disencumber her of all that wild profusion of rock and shell whose earthy substance has encrusted her, because she seeks what men call happiness by making earth her food. Then one might see her true nature . . ." [*Republic* 611C-612A, tr. F. M. Cornford]. It is remarkable how in this rather incidental simile Plato toys with several of the images which later were to become so deadly serious with the Gnostics: the symbolism of the sea and the foreign "accretions" to the soul. As regards the latter, Plato uses the same expression (*symphyein*—translated by Cornford with "overgrowth") as Isidorus has in the title of his book. Six hundred years after Plato, Plotinus refers to the passage in the *Republic* in his own most interesting discourse on the higher and lower soul (*Enn.* I. 1. 12), to which we shall have occasion to refer once more in connection with the symbol of the reflected image.

theory concerning terrestrial man, which we find explicitly stated as a Hermetic doctrine in a late Neoplatonic work.

Man has two souls: the one is from the First Mind and also shares in the power of the Demiurge, the other has been put in from the revolution of the heavens, and into this the God-seeing soul enters. Since this is so, the soul that has come down into us from the spheres (lit. "worlds") follows along with the revolutions of the spheres; but the one present in us as mind from the Mind is superior to the motion that works becoming, and it is through it that the liberation from the heimarmene and the ascent to the Intelligible Gods comes about.

(Iamblichus *De myst.* VIII. 6)

To give one more quotation, the Syrian Gnostic Bardesanes says:

There are hostile powers, stars and signs, a body from the Evil One without resurrection, a soul from the Seven.

(Ephraem, *Hymn.* 53)

We could multiply testimonies for the doctrine of the planetary soul (e.g., from the Mandaean literature and the *Pistis Sophia*), but our selection has made the essentials of the conception clear enough.

The Hermetic quotation from Iamblichus shows with singular distinctness what stands behind this mythological fantasy: not just a rejection of the physical universe in the light of pessimism, but the assertion of an entirely new idea of human freedom, very different from the moral conception of it which the Greek philosophers had developed. However profoundly man is determined by nature, of which he is part and parcel—and plumbing his own inwardness he discovers in layer after layer this dependence—there still remains an innermost center which is not of nature's realm and by which he is above all its promptings and necessities. Astrology is true of natural man, i.e., of every man as member of the cosmic system, but not of the spiritual man within the natural.¹⁴ It is the first time in

¹⁴This supremacy is extended to the whole person of the Gnostic, in whom the "spirit" has become dominant: "Hermes asserts that those who know God not only are safe from the incursions of the demons but are not even under the power of fate" (Lactantius *Div. inst.* II. 15. 6; cf. Arnobius *Adv. nat.* II. 62—"not subject to the laws of fate"). Christian Gnostics thought similarly: "Prior to baptism fate

history that the radical ontological difference of man and nature has been discovered and the powerfully moving experience of it given expression in teachings strange and suggestive. This rift between man and nature was never to close again, and protesting his hidden but essential *otherness* became in many variations an abiding theme in the quest for truth concerning man.

The Union of Man with Nature; the Narcissus Motif

We now come to the other part of the Anthropos drama, the sinking of Man into lower Nature. Here our narrative is wonderfully clear and impressive: the revealing of his divine form from on high to terrestrial Nature is at the same time its mirroring in the lower elements, and by his own beauty thus appearing to him from below he is drawn downward. This use of the Narcissus motif is, at least in this explicitness, an original feature of the *Poimandres* and recurs only in indistinct indications elsewhere in the literature of the era. The Narcissus motif, however, gives merely a particular turn to a mythological idea of much wider currency in gnostic thought, whose original meaning had nothing to do with the Greek legend: the idea that either the cosmogonic process or the sinking of the Soul, or generally the downward movement of a divine principle, was initiated by a reflection of the upper Light in the Darkness below. If we analyze the *Poimandres* version carefully, we see that it adroitly combines three different ideas: that of the Darkness* becoming enamored of the Light and getting possession of a part of it; that of the Light's becoming enamored of the Darkness and voluntarily sinking into it; that of a radiation, reflection, or image of the Light projected into the Darkness below and there held fast. All three ideas have found independent representation in gnostic thought. The first ascribes the initiative toward the eventual intermingling to the nether forces, and this version is most completely expressed in the Manichaean system, with which we shall deal separately. The second version has been exemplified in the Hermetic quotation from Macrobius (p. 158). That it applied not only to the descent of the individual soul but first and foremost to the cos-

is real, after it the predictions of the astrologers are no longer true" (*Exc. Theod.* 87. 1).

mogonic descent of the primal Soul is shown by the Arabic account of the Harranites from which we have quoted before.¹⁵

The third version is to us strangest of all, as it implies the mythic idea of the substantiality of an image, reflection, or shadow as representing a real part of the original entity from which it has become detached. We have to accept this symbolism as convincing to those who used it for a crucial phase in the divine drama. In this role we find it used in the speculation of the Sethians (Hippol. V. 19), the Peratae (*ibid.* 12 ff.), the Gnostics Plotinus wrote against, and in a system recorded by Basilides not as his own but as that of certain "barbarians," by which most probably Persian thinkers are meant (*Act. Arch.* 67. 5). The general idea common to these doctrines is as follows. By its nature the Light shines into the Darkness below. This partial illumination of the Darkness either is comparable to the action of a simple ray, i.e., spreading brightness as such, or, if it issued from an individual divine figure such as the Sophia or Man, is in the nature of a *form* projected into the dark medium and appearing there as an image or reflection of the divine. In both cases, though no real descent or fall of the divine original has taken place, something of itself has become immersed in the lower world, and just as the Darkness treats it as a precious spoil, so the unfallen deity has become involved in the further destiny of this effluence. The Darkness is seized with greed for the brightness that has appeared in its midst or on the surface of the primordial waters and,

¹⁵ See above, page 63. We give here the rest of the passage. "God, always concerned to turn everything to the best, joined her to Matter, of which he saw her so enamored, distributing in it a multitude of forms. Hence came about the composite creatures—the heaven, the elements [etc.: all of these are to be understood as receptacles of the "Soul"]. But unwilling to leave the Soul in her degradation with Matter, God endowed her with an intelligence and the faculty of perceiving, precious gifts which were intended to recall to her her high origin in the spiritual world, . . . to restore to her the knowledge of herself, to indicate to her that she was a stranger down here. . . . Since the Soul received this instruction through perception and intelligence, since she recovered the knowledge of herself, she desires the spiritual world, as a man transported to a foreign land sighs for his distant hearth. She is convinced that in order to return to her original condition she must disengage herself from the worldly bonds, from sensual desires, from all material things" (Chwolson, *Die Ssabier*, II, p. 493). Although the later part of the passage seems to refer to the human soul, and indeed does so, since it is in man that the fallen world-soul comes to be endowed with intelligence and perception, the earlier part unequivocally speaks of a universal Soul whose fall is the cause of the origination of the world.

trying to mingle with it thoroughly and permanently to retain it, drags it downward, engulfs it, and breaks it up into innumerable parts. From then on the higher powers are concerned in recovering these raped particles of Light. On the other hand, it is with the help of these elements that the lower forces are able to create this world. Throughout this creation is dispersed their original prey in the form of the "sparks," i.e., the individual souls. In a slightly more sophisticated version of the idea it is with the help of the projected *image* of the divine *form* that the lower forces make the world or man, i.e., as an *imitation* of the divine original; but since in this way the divine form also becomes embodied in the matter of Darkness and the "image" is conceived as a substantial part of the deity itself, the result is the same as in the cruder case of the swallowing and splitting up. In any case, this whole complex of imagery develops the divine tragedy without either a guilt from above or an invasion from below of the divine realm itself. That the mere and inevitable radiation of the Light and its reflection in the form of images creates new hypostases of its own being is still in Plotinus a metaphysical principle of the first order, affecting his general ontological scheme. As regards particularly the relation of the higher and lower soul, he explains, in the same context where he refers to Plato's simile of the sea-god (above, n. 13), that the turning downward of the Soul was nothing but illumining that which is beneath her, through which illumination there originated an *eidolon*, a reflection, and this is the lower soul subject to the passions; but the original Soul never really descended (*Enn.* I. I. 12). A surprisingly similar doctrine was held by the very same Gnostics who came under Plotinus' severe attack:

The Soul, they say, and a certain Wisdom [*sophia*—Plotinus is not sure whether she is different from or the same as the "Soul"] turned downward . . . and with her descended the other souls: these, as it were "members" of the Wisdom, put on bodies. . . . But then again they say that she on whose account they descended did in another sense not descend herself and somehow did not really turn downward, but only illumined the Darkness, and from this an "image" (*eidolon*) originated in Matter. Then they feign a further "image of the image" forming somewhere down here through Matter or Materiality . . . and let thus be generated him whom they call Demiurge and make

him secede from his Mother, and from him they go on to derive the world down to the last of the "images"¹⁶

{*Enn.* II. 9.10)

The main difference, and indeed a crucial one, between the Gnostics and Plotinus on this point is that the former deplore the "descent" by image-reflection as the cause of divine tragedy and passion, while Plotinus affirms it as the necessary and positive self-expression of the efficacy of the first source. But the vertical structure of this scale of unfolding, that is, the *downward* direction of all metaphysical generation which therefore cannot be but deterioration, is common to both.

Now, this appearing of the Light from on high in a reflection from down below could also be used as an explanation of divine error. The whole tragedy of the Pistis Sophia, all her wanderings, distress, and repentance in the world of darkness, followed from the one initial fact that she mistook the light she saw below for the "Light of Lights" for which she yearned, and went after it into the depths. We have furthermore, especially in Mani's speculation, the frequent use of a divine likeness as a bait used either by the archons to lure and entrap divine substance or by the messengers of the deity to extract captured light-substance from the hold of the archons. We now see that the Narcissus motif in the love-error of the Anthropos in the *Poimandres* is a subtle variation and combination of several of the enumerated themes. He is not as guilty as that primordial Soul which succumbs to a desire for the pleasures of the body, for it is the beauty of his own divine form, itself the perfect likeness of the highest God, that draws him downward. He is more guilty than the simply deceived Pistis Sophia, for he wished to act independently and could not mistake the reflection down below for the light of the Father from whom he had purposely departed. Yet he is half excused by his error, in that he was ignorant of the true

¹⁶ Cf. the Mandaean passage "Abathur (one of the Uthras plotting the creation of a world) goes into that world [of darkness]. . . . He sees his face in the black water, and his likeness and son is formed unto him out of the black water." This son is Ptahil-Uthra, the actual demiurge of this world (G 173). This example from an area so far removed from the intellectual environment in which Plotinus met *his* Gnostics shows how persistently the act of mirroring is conceived in gnostic literature as the production of an *alter ego*, and at the same time how closely this is connected with cosmogony.

nature of the lower elements, clothed as they were in his own reflection. Thus the projection of his form upon earth and water has lost the character of a substantial event in itself, and in the hands of this Hellenistic author has become a means of motivating rather than constituting the submersion of a divine emanation in the lower world.

The Ascent of the Soul

We come now to the ascent of the knower's soul after death, the main prospect held out to the true Gnostic or pneumatic, in the anticipation of which he conducts his life. After what we have heard about the current doctrines connected with the astral descent of the soul, the description of the ascent in the *Poimandres* requires no further explanation: it is the reversal of the former. But some parallels and variations from other schools of gnostic speculation may emphasize the wide currency and great importance of this theme throughout the whole range of gnostic religion. The celestial journey of the returning soul is indeed one of the most constant common features in otherwise widely divergent systems, and its significance for the gnostic mind is enhanced by the fact that it represents a belief not only essential in gnostic theory and expectation, and expressive of the conception of man's relation to the world, but of immediate *practical* importance to the gnostic believer, since the meaning of *gnosis* is to prepare for this final event, and all its ethical, ritual, and technical instruction is meant to secure its successful completion. Historically there is an even more far-reaching aspect to the ascent doctrines than their literal meaning. In a later stage of "gnostic" development (though no longer passing under the name of Gnosticism) the external topology of the ascent through the spheres, with the successive divesting of the soul of its worldly envelopments and the regaining of its original acosmic nature, could be "internalized" and find its analogue in a psychological technique of inner transformations by which the self, *while still in the body*, might attain the Absolute as an immanent, if temporary, condition: an ascending scale of mental states replaces the stations of the mythical itinerary: the dynamics of progressive spiritual self-transformation, the spatial thrust through the heavenly spheres. Thus could transcendence itself be turned into immanence, the whole process

become spiritualized and put within the power and the orbit of the subject. With this transposition of a mythological scheme into the inwardness of the person, with the translation of its objective stages into subjective phases of self-performable experience whose culmination has the form of ecstasis, gnostic myth has passed into mysticism (Neoplatonic and monastic), and in this new medium it lives on long after the disappearance of the original mythological beliefs.

In the *Poimandres* the ascent is described as a series of progressive subtractions which leaves the "naked" true self, an instance of Primal Man as he was before his cosmic fall, free to enter the divine realm and to become one again with God. We have encountered before an alternative version of the ascent, where not the stripping of the soul but its passage as such is the point of the journey. This version implies that what begins the ascent is already the pure pneuma disengaged from its earthly encumbrances, and furthermore that the rulers of the spheres are hostile powers trying to bar its passage with the aim of detaining it in the world. For both versions there is ample evidence in gnostic writings. Wherever we hear of the doffing of garments, the slipping of knots, the loosing of bonds in the course of the upward journey, we have analogies to the *Poimandres* passage. The sum of these knots, etc., is called "psyche": thus it is the soul that is put off by the pneuma (e.g., *Iren.* I. 7. 1; 21. 5). In this way the ascent is not only topological but also a qualitative process, that of putting off the worldly nature. It is noteworthy that in certain cults this ultimate process was anticipated by ritual enactments which in the way of sacraments were to effect the transformation provisionally or symbolically already in this life and guarantee its definitive consummation in the next. Thus the mysteries of Mithras had for their initiates the ceremonial of passing through seven gates arranged on ascending steps representing the seven planets (the so-called *limax heptapylos*, Origen *Contra Celsum* VI. 22); in those of Isis we find a successive putting on and off of seven (or twelve) garments or animal disguises. The result achieved by the whole protracted and sometimes harrowing ritual was called rebirth (*palingenesis*): the initiate himself was supposed to have been reborn as the god. The terminology of "rebirth," "reformation" (metamorphosis), "transfiguration" was

coined in the context of these rituals as part of the language of the mystery cults. The meanings and applications that could be given to these metaphors were wide enough to make them fit into various theological systems, their prima-facie appeal being "religious" in general rather than dogmatically specific. But though by neither origin nor validity bound to the gnostic frame of reference, they were eminently suited to gnostic purposes. In the context of the mystery cult, or in private and spiritualized substitutions for it inspired by its general model, the "celestial journey" might become an actual visionary experience attainable in the brief ecstatic state. The so-called Mithras Liturgy¹⁷ gives a circumstantial description of such an experience, preceded by instructions on how to prepare for and induce the visionary state. (The theological system in this case is cosmic-pantheistic, not dualistic, the aim immortality by union with the cosmic principle, not liberation from the cosmic yoke.) The more specifically gnostic conception of the journey as a gradually subtractive ascent through the spheres had a long mystical and literary afterlife. A thousand years after the *Poimandres*, Omar Khayyam sings

Up from earth's center through the seventh gate I
rose, and on the throne of Saturn sate,
And many a knot unravel'd by the road;
But not the master-knot of human fate.

There was the door to which I found no key; There
was the veil through which I might not see:

Some little talk awhile of Me and Thee There
was—and then no more of Thee and Me.

(Ruba'is 31-32 in Fitzgerald's translation)

The other version of the ascent, less spiritualized, has a more sinister aspect. It is with anxiety and dread that the soul anticipates its future encounter with the terrible Archons of this world bent on preventing its escape. In this case the gnosis has two tasks: on the one hand to confer a magical quality upon the soul by which it becomes impregnable and possibly even invisible to the watchful Archons (sacraments performed in this life may secure this end);

¹⁷Misleadingly so called since it is a literary product, not an actual cult document.

on the other hand by way of instruction to put man in possession of the names and the potent formulas by which the passage can be forced, and this "knowledge" is one meaning of the term "gnosis." The secret names of the Archons have to be known, for this is an indispensable means of overcoming them—the pagan author Celsus who writes about these beliefs ridicules those who "have wretchedly learned by heart the names of the doorkeepers" (Origen *Contra Celsum* VII. 60). While this part of the "gnosis" is crude magic, the formulas by which the Archons are to be addressed reveal significant aspects of the gnostic theology. We quoted one of them before (p. 135) and add here a few more examples. Epiphanius read in a gnostic Gospel of Philip:

The Lord revealed to me what the soul must say when ascending into heaven, and how she must answer each of the upper powers: "I have come to know myself, and I have collected myself from everywhere, and I have not sown children to the Archon but have uprooted his roots and have collected the dispersed members, and I know thee who thou art: for I am of those from above." And thus she is released.

(Epiph. *Haer.* 26. 13)

Origen in his precious account of the Ophites renders their complete list of the answers to be given "at the eternally chained gates of the Archons," of which we translate the following two. To Ialdabaoth, "first and seventh":

... I, being a word of the unmixed Nous, a perfect work to Son and Father, bearing a symbol imprinted with the character of Life—I open the world-gate which thou hast locked with thine aeon, and pass by thy power free again. May grace be with me, yea, Father, be it with me.

To Sabaoth:

Archon of the fifth power, ruler Sabaoth, advocate of the law of thy creation, now undone by grace that is more powerful than thy fivefold power, behold the symbol impregnable to thine art¹⁸ and let me pass by.

(Origen *Contra Celsum* VI. 31)

"Tentative translation; alternatively: "impregnable symbol of thine art" (?).

It is obvious that these formulas have the force of passwords. What then is the interest of the Archons in opposing the exodus of the soul from the world? The gnostic answer is thus recounted by Epiphanius:

They say that the soul is the food of the Archons and Powers without which they cannot live, because she is of the dew from above and gives them strength. When she has become imbued with knowledge ... she ascends to heaven and gives a defence before each power and thus mounts beyond them to the upper Mother and Father of the All whence she came down into this world.

(Epiph. *Haer.* 40. 2)

The First Beginnings

In the *Poimandres* we hear nothing about the Governors' being evil, though to be subject to their government, called Destiny, is clearly regarded as a misfortune of Man and a violation of his original sovereignty. This raises the question of the theological quality of the creation, and thus we come finally to the puzzling first part of the vision, dealing with the opening phases of cosmogony. The whole part of the revelation preceding the begetting of Man (4-11) shows the following subdivisions: direct vision of the first phase of cosmogony, preceding actual creation (4-5); explanation of its content by Poimandres (6); resumption and completion of the vision, revealing the intelligible world in God after which the sensible was fashioned (7). From here on the vision turns into audition, that is, the history of actual creation is verbally expounded by Poimandres to the now illumined understanding of the hearer. Paragraph 8 deals with the origin of the elements of nature: the relation of this instruction to the first visionary phase (4-5) presents the riddle with which we have now mainly to deal. Paragraphs 9-11 relate the begetting of the Demiurge by the first God, his fashioning the seven planetary powers and their spheres, the setting in motion of this system, and, in consequence of its revolution, the production of the irrational animals out of the lower elements of nature. Of the events following the appearance of the Demiurge in the theological scheme, only the leaping up of the Word from Nature into the uppermost sphere requires an explana-

170 tion. For the rest, we are concerned with the pre-demiurgical phases only.

First we fix our attention upon the visual contents of the opening revelation, which makes the spectator an eyewitness of the first beginnings. The divine Light and the appalling serpent-like Darkness as first principles are now familiar to the reader of this book. Two features, however, must be noted in the presentation before us. The first is that the field of vision is to begin with made up of light alone, and that only "after a while" does there appear in one part of it a darkness which is borne downward: which leaves only the conclusion that this darkness is not an original principle coeval with the light but has somehow originated out of it. The other feature is the cryptic remark that a mournful or lamenting cry rises up from the agitated darkness. We shall presently take up the questions posed by both these statements.

As the first separate hypostasis of the supreme Nous, the *Word* issues from the divine Light and "comes over" the humid nature: from what happens later, this "coming over" has to be understood as an intimate union with the humid nature, in which the Word is kept until again disengaged by the work of the Demiurge. For the moment, the effect of the Word's presence in the dark nature is the latter's separating into lighter and heavier elements (incompletely with regard to earth and water, which are separated only later, in the demiurgical phase): this differentiating action upon chaotic matter is the chief cosmogonic function of the Logos (Word), but to maintain this differentiation pending its final consolidation by the work of the Artificer (Demiurge), the Logos has to stay *within* the nature thus parted. The Logos is here clearly in the Greek sense the principle of order, but at the same time a divine entity and as such substantially involved in what he affects.

In paragraph 7 the visionary, having been enjoined to look attentively at the light, discerns therein innumerable powers and discovers that it on its part is not a uniform expanse but is organized into a cosmos, which Poimandres tells him is the archetypal form; at the same time he sees the fire "contained by a mighty power," and this power can only be the Logos keeping the separated elements in their place from inside,¹⁹ the fire being the outer circum-

¹⁹In spite of the term "encompass," suggesting an action from without

ference constituted by its having leapt upward from the humid nature. According to this explanation, the beginning of the second vision presents not a new phase of the cosmogonic process but a recapitulation of the result of the first on a higher level of understanding; and this, if a correct hypothesis, is of decisive importance for the interpretation of the next, on any hypothesis mystifying, paragraph (8).

Just as in paragraph 7 the visionary learns something more about the light which he has seen before, so in this paragraph he asks for and receives instruction about something which had already formed the *visual* subject of the first vision: the origin of the elements of nature. To the question he asks, Wherefrom have they arisen? we expect the answer, From the humid nature by the separating action of the Word; and the humid nature, if the question is pushed farther, came from the odious darkness by the latter's changing into it; and then the remaining question would be, Whence came that, if it was not there from the beginning? which according to the first vision it was not: and this would be precisely the question of questions which all non-Iranian gnostic dualism must finally face and whose answer forms the main content of the ingenious speculations of the Valentinian type. Their common principle is that a break or darkening within the divinity must somehow account for the existing division of reality. Now, it is my tentative contention, seeing that all other explanations leave us even worse off, that the *Boulé* (Will) of God, introduced in this paragraph and dropped as suddenly, never to be mentioned again, is an alternative to the Stygian Darkness of the first vision, and as such an isolated rudiment of the Syrian type of speculation which has somehow found its way into this account. The main support of my argument is the role of the Logos in both instances. As the humid nature, after the Logos has "come over her," separates into the elements, so the female Will of God, having "received" into herself the Logos, organizes herself "according to her own elements." The additional feature in the latter case is that the Boulé orders herself "in imitation" of the archetypal order perceived by her through the Logos; that is, the Boulé is more of an independent agent than is the humid nature of the first vision. Also, beside the "elements" which were the subject of the question, a *psychical* "progeny" of the Boulé is

mentioned, which supposedly is among her contributions to the future creation. Both traits give her a noticeable kinship with the Sophia figure of the Syrian gnosis. In other words, we would have in the Boulé a version of that problematical divine personage, capable of every degradation, which we first met in the Ennoia of Simon Magus.²⁰

A crucial point in the proposed analogy of the Boulé to the "humid nature" is the meaning of the expression: she "received" the Logos. Fortunately this same expression recurs in the union of Nature with Man, where it not only carries a perfectly evident sexual meaning but also is elaborated into the description of how in this union Nature absorbs in his entirety him whom she thus "receives" (14). If this is what happened also to the Logos "received" by the Boulé, then he like the Anthropos after him is in need of a liberation from this immersion. And indeed we find that the first effect of the spheric organization of the macrocosmos by the Demiurge is the Logos' leaping upward from the lower Nature to the kindred spirit in the highest sphere. Now, this result of the Demiurge's work agrees perfectly with a doctrine most prominently represented in Manichaeism but also found elsewhere in Gnosticism, that the cosmic organization was undertaken with the *purpose* of extricating a divine principle fallen into the hold of the lower realm in the pre-cosmic stage. I cannot help feeling that all this puts the female "Will of God" into an interchangeable position with the "humid nature": it is into the former that the Logos had been "received" in the meaning of that term vouchsafed for our treatise; it is from the latter that he leaps upward to his true kin with the construction of the universe—which construction then was in the nature of a primordial "salvation."

The author of the *Poimandres* has permitted no more than traces of this doctrine to enter his composition. The liberation of

²⁰ The equation of the Boulé with the Sophia (via Isis) was first proposed by Reitzenstein (*Poimandres*, p. 45 f.), though with a "monistic" interpretation and therefore with conclusions different from ours. Festugiere's arguments against it (*La Revelation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, IV, pp. 42 ff.) have not convinced me, especially since his alternative—the derivation from Pythagorean speculations on the issue of the (dark and female) dyad from the male-female monad—is not necessarily alternative but, in the give-and-take of syncretism, perfectly compatible with the Sophia hypothesis. I do agree with Festugiere that there is no need to bring in Isis.

the Logos through the creation of the Demiurge is, on the terms of the *Poimandres* itself, perfectly explainable as a consequence of the fact that with the definite and stabilizing cosmic organization his presence in the lower Nature is no longer required for the purpose of keeping the elements apart, so that he might be said to be released from a task rather than from bonds. There still remains the fact that his communion with the Boulé terminologically parallels that of Man with Nature and that even an "offspring" of this union is mentioned: the "souls" as a product of the Boulé—a striking resemblance to what the Valentinians told of their Sophia (see p. 189). If we then look back to the two entities which we claim to be alternative versions of the same metaphysical principle, God's Boulé and the first Darkness, we observe of course the objection that some of the latter's attributes, such as frightfulness, hatefulness, and its resemblance to a serpent, fit only an original, anti-divine Darkness of the Iranian type and not a divine Sophia however obscured and estranged from its source. But it is equally noteworthy that this Darkness appears *after* the Light and must have arisen *out* of it (contrary to the Iranian type), and further that it "laments": both traits point more in the direction of the Sophia speculation than in that of a primary dualism. We have thus in the body of the *Poimandres*, more by way of an isolated interjection than as an autonomous theme of the composition, a faint reflex of that type of speculation to whose foremost representative we now turn.