

Sonja Weiss
Faculty of Philosophy
University of Ljubljana
Slovenia

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NOETIC MATTER AND THE WORLD SOUL IN MIDDLE PLATONIC AND NEOPLATONIC DOCTRINES

Povzetek: Članek ugotavlja, kako je pojem $\psi\lambda\eta$, ki so ga Platonovi nasledniki od Aristotela dalje povezovali s pojmom “prostor” ($\chi\acute{o}\rho\alpha$) iz *Timaja*, vplival na poznejše nauke o duši, zlasti vesoljni. Ta vpliv odkrijemo tudi v Plotinovih *Eneadah*, predvsem tam, kjer je govor o breztelesni prvi snovi, pogosto pa tudi v odlomkih, ki opisujejo dejavnost vesoljne duše. V preteklosti so se pojavile teorije, ki so opozarjale na dvojno vlogo snovi in skušale dokazati, da se je ta koncept v srednjem platonizmu pogosto prepletal s konceptom vesoljne duše ter se v nekaterih primerih celo poistovetil z njo. Te teorije so bile povečinioma prepričljivo zavrnjene in nobenega dvoma ni, da sta v *Eneadah* koncepta snovi in duše (tako vesoljne kot individualne) strogo ločena. Kljub temu pa vlogi obeh nista vedno jasni. Najbolj sporen ostaja Plotinov nauk o breztelesni snovi, ki je po eni strani absolutno zlo, po drugi pa ima pomembno vlogo v samem emanacijske procesu. Prav tako nejasna je včasih vloga vesoljne duše, predvsem njen odnos do demiurgičnega Uma, saj se včasih pojavlja v paru z njim, drugič pa kar sama opravlja vlogo demiurga in vladarja vesolja. Članek se zato posveča tudi meta-jeziku, ki se uporablja v zvezi z omenjenimi nauki: najprej s pomenljivo podobo „tekoče snovi”, prav tako pa tudi z nekaterimi alegoričnimi interpretacijami mitoloških likov, s katerimi je srednji platonizem podkrepil svoje argumente.

1. The role of primal matter in Middle Platonism and Plotinus

The combination of Plato’s dialogues (*Timaeus* in particular) and what is generally called his unwritten doctrines engendered among his successors the concept of primal matter, which preceded the creation of the physical universe. This “humid and watery” matter, as Iamblichus calls it, was identified with the second principle of Plato’s successors: to Speusippus’ Multiplicity, from which everything takes its origin,¹ and to Xenocrates’ Indefinite Dyad, the cause also of multiplicity and infinitude ($\acute{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\iota\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$).² According to Aristotle’s testimony, Plato’s Indefinite Dyad is com-

¹ Iamblichus, *Comm. Math.* 4.19–23.

² Fr. 68 Heinze.

parable with the recipient of impressions (ἐκμαγεῖον) that gives origin to numbers.³ The same expression is used by Plato in *Timaeus* (50c) to designate the receptacle; at the same time Aristotle explicitly identifies the χώρα from *Timaeus* (52a-b) with matter (ὕλη).⁴ So it happens that matter,⁵ as cause and basis of generation, appears at the top of the hierarchy of being; however, since Plato considered the Dyad the source of evil,⁶ soon a need arose to place both principles (the One as well as the Dyad) above the ethical concepts of good and evil. This tendency is first manifested with Speusippus (Aristotle agrees with him), who did not like the idea of the One being identified with the Good precisely because he refused to consider the second principle as evil in itself simply because of its being the cause of multiplicity.⁷ Middle Platonism, influenced strongly by Neopythagorean ideas, established a doctrine placing above the pair of the two principles (the Monad, representing form, and the Dyad, representing matter) the transcendent One, some sort of supreme Mind or God. This led to the formation of the Middle Platonic triad (God – Idea – Matter), where matter holds an equivalent place at the side of the Monad. Later this caused a schism between the dualist concept of the world, which saw the Dyad as an independent principle existing eternally as opposed to the Monad (so Numenius),⁸ and some sort of Neopythagorean monism, bringing the Dyad out of the Monad and placing a transcendent first principle above both of them.⁹

The doctrines that are particularly relevant to the theme of this article are those that tried to explain the origin of the Dyad by some kind of duality inside the Monad. A testimony shows that the latter was even termed ἀρσενόθηλυς, displaying the double nature of the One uniting the male and the female principle within itself.¹⁰ In this pair of principles, the male one is not the One, but

³ *Metaph.* 988a 1.

⁴ *Ph.* 209b.

⁵ Plato does not use the word in this sense: in his dialogues the word ὕλη has the sense of “wood” or “material constituent” (see des Places 1981, p. 286).

⁶ *Metaph.* 988a (τοῦ κακῶς).

⁷ *Metaph.* 1091b. According to Aristotle, Speusippus' position here differed from that of Plato and Xenocrates.

⁸ Fr. 52 des Places (Chalcidius, *In Tim.*: matter is the Dyad (295), but it is also the principle of evil (296) coming into the world through matter (298)).

⁹ According to Simplicius (*In Ph.* 9, 230, 36ss.), Moderatus first took the One from Plato's dialogues and placed it above the sphere of being; the second One and the third One followed, representing the noetic and the psychic principles. Dillon 1977, p. 347, mentions the dilemma about whether this doctrine belongs to Moderatus or to Porphyry; he himself is inclined to the first possibility.

¹⁰ Nicomachus, *Photii Bibl.* cod. 187, 143a 22. The Monad is “ὡς νοῦς τε εἶη, εἶτα καὶ ἀρσενόθηλυς, καὶ θεός, καὶ ὕλη δέ πως...”

a second One (so Eudorus), which was often identified with the active (demiurgic) Mind.¹¹ This entity was often connected to the World Soul: with Atticus, for example, the Demiurge as an instrument of the supreme transcendent God coincides with Nature and the rational Soul. Since some testimonies imply that Atticus placed the Ideas on the level of the Soul and not in the Mind of the supreme God, it is possible that the demiurgic Mind and the World Soul were two distinct entities manifesting themselves in a pair.¹² Sometimes the World Soul is represented as having its own Mind, which awakens it and helps it to become what it is (i.e. The World Soul): Albinus says that God turns the World Soul towards himself, as he is the cause of her νοῦς.¹³ All this led to apparent difficulties regarding the role of the Dyad as matter on the one hand and as the World Soul on the other. We have a proof of it, albeit uncertain proof, in a fragment of Xenocrates, in which P. Boyancé discovered Orphic influences. According to this testimony Xenocrates represented both principles as two ruling deities, the first one (Zeus) representing the Monad, the male principle and the Mind, while the Dyad is the female principle, the mother of the gods and the World Soul (in some versions the word ‘justice’ (δίκη) also appears next to ‘mother of the gods’).¹⁴ Xenocrates thus seems to have identified the Dyad with the World Soul, which is quite surprising if we remember that the Dyad with him is the principle and origin of evil. It is why Dillon suggested that either there is a lacuna between the ‘female principle’ and ‘mother of the gods’, separating the concept of Dyad from that of the World Soul,¹⁵ or that it was the source that confounded the concepts.¹⁶ In both cases the fragment shows that at least in later Platonism (if not with Xenocrates) the identity of the second principle was not always clear. Even less clear is Plutarchus’ doctrine of matter as revealed in his work *De Iside et Osiride*. There we find, alongside the good and the bad principles (Osiris and Ty-

¹¹ Numenius, Albinus and other Platonists speak about two Gods, the first one turned towards itself and the second one acting outwards. It is the same with Kronos and Zeus in Plotinus’ mythological representation of the contemplative Intellect and the demiurgic World Soul (V 8.12 and 13).

¹² Dillon 1977, p. 256.

¹³ *Didasc.* 10.3.15–17.

¹⁴ Ξενοκράτης> Αγαθήνορος Καλχηδόνιος την μονάδα και την δυάδα θεούς, την μὲν ὡς ἄρρενα πατρὸς ἔχουσαν τάξιν, ἐν οὐρανῷ βασιλεύουσαν, ἦντινα προσαγορεύει καὶ Ζῆνα καὶ περιττὸν καὶ νοῦν, ὅστις ἐστὶν αὐτῷ πρῶτος θεός· την δὲ ὡς θήλειαν μητρὸς θεῶν δίκην, τῆς ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν λήξεως ἡγουμένην, ἥτις ἐστὶν αὐτῷ ψυχὴ τοῦ παντός. (Aetius apud Stob. 1.1.29b.44–50 (fr. 15 Heinze)).

¹⁵ 1977, p. 26.

¹⁶ Dillon 2003, p. 103 and *id.* 2007, p. 33.

phon-Seth) a controversial third entity symbolized by the goddess Isis. Plutarch affirms that, contrary to some assertions, this entity is οὐκ ἄψυχον οὐδ' ἄλογον οὐδ' ἀκίνητον ἐξ αὐτῆς, which means that at least in some measure it has the nature of soul, since it is self-moving (and not ἄψυχον). It is also rational to a certain degree, which is also proved by the fact that it longs for the Good (Osiris) and avoids evil.¹⁷

According to some theories these ideas were based upon Xenocrates' doctrine and were explicitly identifying the World Soul with matter.¹⁸ These theories were later confuted, especially by W. Deuse, who doubts that Xenocrates could have directly inspired Plutarch's concept of matter: the middle position of Xenocrates' World Soul and its double orientation towards the Mind on the one hand and towards matter on the other show that it should not be identified with Plutarch's Isis-matter, since the latter always leans to the Good.¹⁹ Xenocrates' World Soul even seems to occupy a lower position compared to Plutarch's Isis, since it has the possibility and inclination to turn away from the Mind. As to Plutarch's comprehension of matter, Deuse furthermore rejects the idea of Isis having the function of organizer and ruler of the world as well as Krämer's thesis of Isis being the Dyad. More of this will be discussed in the next section; however, the fact remains – which is not denied even by Deuse – that the Isis-matter entity possesses certain characteristics and elements of the Soul.

I believe that traces of these ambiguities can be found in Plotinus' somewhat paradoxical doctrine of the primal matter, which is said both to represent the principle of ultimate evil, devoid of all being, and to feature at the very beginning of the emanatory process as an undefined presence, preceding even the formation of the second hypostasis. Plotinus' early treatises (e.g. II 4 (12)) already discuss the concept of noetic matter which is rooted in the peripatetic tradition and its polemics with the Stoics concerning the physical nature of matter defended by the latter and contested by the former. With Plotinus, the idea of bodiless matter is related to the Middle Platonic doctrine of the Platonic receptacle and the Indefinite Dyad. The two concepts often intertwine, without always appearing under the names assigned to them. In a passage from the treatise entitled *On numbers* (VI 6) the unlimited and the multiplicity proceeding from unity do not represent an evil principle, although multiplicity does occupy a lesser position and “compared with the One, it is worse.” (VI 6.3.6-7) Passage V

¹⁷ 372e-f.

¹⁸ It is the position of Krämer 1964, pp. 93–101, the difference being that he believes the doctrine to be Plutarch's and not Xenocrates'.

¹⁹ Deuse 1980, pp. 30–37.

3.11 is more explicit about the nature of this multiplicity; it is in fact a manifold intellectual principle, something that originates from the One, and is not yet the Intellect, but a ὄψις οὐπω ἰδοῦσα, “an eye that has not yet seen” or “a vision without an object” (Bréhier); it is a state that cannot be defined (ἀόριστως; v. 6), when the Intellect is not yet Intellect but ἀτύπωτος ὄψις (*visione senza impronta*, transl. Radice) and an indefinite yearning (ἔφεσις) directed towards its object. According to Rist, this indefinable state is capable of some kind of unconscious contemplation, and he, directly, calls it matter or Dyad.²⁰ Although these expressions do not appear in passage V 3.11, there are attributes hinting at them, like the adjective ἀόριστον (used twice in the adverbial form ἀόριστως); his pointing out the indefiniteness and infiniteness of whatever it is that comes forth from the One evokes the beginning chapters of the treatise *On Matter* (II 4.2) dedicated to Plotinus’ doctrine of noetic matter. In the treatise *On the Three Primary Hypostases* (V 1) we find an explicit connection between the Dyad and the intellectual world:

“For number is not primary: the One is prior to the Dyad, but the Dyad is secondary and, originating from the One, has it as definer, but is itself of its own nature indefinite; but when it is defined, it is already a number, but a number as substance; and soul too is a number.” [...] Therefore what is called number in the intelligible world and the Dyad are rational principles and Intellect; but the Dyad is indefinite when one forms an idea of it by what may be called the substrate, but each and every number which comes from it and the One is a form, as if Intellect was shaped by the numbers which came to exist in it. (V 1.5.7–10 and 13–17)²¹

The analogy involving the Dyad and the Intellect is not to be understood in the sense that the Dyad is the Intellectual principle; it reminds us, however, of passage V 3.11 and the indefinable state preceding the birth of the second hypostasis.²² In II 4.3 Plotinus explains the presence of this state of indefiniteness at the very beginning of the emanatory process: by placing itself in the position in which it can receive form from what already possesses one, this state or entity is comparable to the Soul offering itself to receive the form of the Intellect. This comparison, or better, ana-

²⁰ 1962, pp. 101s.

²¹ All the quotations from the *Enneads* in this article are taken from the English translation by A. H. Armstrong.

²² Cf. also V 4.2.4-8: “Thinking [νόησις], which sees the intelligible and turns toward it and is, in a way, being perfected by it, is itself indefinite [ἀόριστος] like seeing, but is defined by the intelligible [*sc.* the object of vision / the One]. This is why it is said: from the Indefinite Dyad and the One derive the Forms and Numbers.

logy is based on Aristotle's doctrine of the priority of actuality upon potentiality.²³ According to this hierarchy, adjusted to the doctrine of the three hypostases and included in the emanatory process,²⁴ every level of being is potentially (*δυνάμει*) the one by which it is preceded, and is consequently the material substance and recipient of it:

“That which aspires to receive it [*sc.* the good] prepares its receptive capacity as matter for the form which is to come upon it.” (III 5.9.53–55).

These words likewise explain the passage in III 9.5, in which Soul is matter for the Intellectual principle (*τὴν ψυχὴν... ὕλην οὖν πρὸς νοῦν*), and actually (*ἐνεργείᾳ*) exists in relation to what comes after her.²⁵ Plotinus here follows an actuality hierarchy according to which *τὸ πρῶτον* is not the first in the limits of time and space but possesses the highest degree of actuality.²⁶ Thus the Intellect represents the effective principle that leads the Soul to actuality.²⁷ Without actually identifying matter with any of the hypostases, we can say that it is present when they come into being as a not yet developed condition of what is coming forth; first as the potentially-Intellect and then as the potentially-Soul.²⁸ Lacrosse calls it a hylemorphic relation between the higher and the lower hypostasis, the higher representing at the same time the ideal principle (*εἶδος*) and the formative principle (*μορφή*) uniting the characteristics of the lower hypostasis.²⁹ What matters to Plotinus is that the mere potentiality of being, although not (yet) being, has nevertheless a part in the ontological chain and is existing, as *other* than being.³⁰ The concept of *otherness* is closely related to that

²³ *Metaph.* 1049b 10ss.

²⁴ Cf. II 5.5.1–6: “How, then, do we speak of it? How is it the matter of real things? Because it is they potentially. Then, because it is they already potentially, is it therefore just as it is going to be? But its being is no more than an announcement of what it is going to be: it is as if being for it was adjourned to that which it will be. So its potential existence is not being something, but being potentially everything; and since it is nothing in itself – except what it is, matter – it does not exist actually at all.”

²⁵ Cf. also II 5.3.13s.: “The answer is that the something like matter There is form, since the soul too, which is form, can be matter to something else.” As Inge I 1918, p. 131, pointed out, the term ‘matter’ is purely relative here.

²⁶ Principle of Prior Actuality (PPA): see Hankinson 1998, p. 411.

²⁷ V 9.4.1–8.

²⁸ Cf. Reale 2002, p. 370, n. 74: “La materia non è una disposizione o uno stato, ma la capacità di assumere disposizioni e stati differenti.”

²⁹ 1994, pp. 94s.

³⁰ The principle of differentiation constituting the hierarchical relationship is explained in V 9.4.2s.: the Intellect is, with regard to the Soul, something dif-

of potentiality, as shown by the following example: bronze, which is only potentially a statue and is as such a matter to the statue, is not (yet) a statue and is *other* than the statue.³¹ Matter is thus defined as otherness par excellence; it is not only other than being but even other than itself. The possibility of being X is not actually X; as potentially being, matter represents the final link in the chain of being, different even from itself.³² Otherness and primal movement are, according to Plotinus, the generative principles of matter in the noetic world.³³

There are other passages showing that matter occupies an important place in the hierarchy of being: in these passages her being (only) potentially is described in the brightest terms. This, of course, has not escaped modern scholars – Rist observes that the Dyad (or matter) is able to retain a shadow of the unity of the One; but the most important factor is that matter stands higher than the ideal forms produced by the Intellectual principle already formed: *there* (ἐκεῖ) it is everything simultaneously and there is nothing it does not possess.³⁴ Rist sees the superiority of matter over the ideal forms in its *potentially* being everything, while the ideal forms already have their prescribed and delimited existence.³⁵ Rist's opinion is partly supported by Plotinus' words in the same treatise, where the divine matter, as he calls it (as opposed to the other, lower matter), already has a noetic and defined existence (ζωὴν ὀρισμένην καὶ νοερὰν ἔχει; II 4.5.16).

2. The World Soul

At the same time, when matter found its way up to the realm of the first principles, it appears there was a degradation in the concept of the Soul, the World Soul in particular. The two tendencies are not necessarily connected; as Dillon shows us, the disappearance of the World Soul from the Triad of the principles

ferent and better (ἕτερον καὶ κρεῖττον); as such it by nature is prior (φύσει πρῶτον). Cf. at VI 8.17.9–12 Plotinus' explanation of the word πρόνοια suggesting the same hierarchy, since the word must not be taken as an expression of a pre-understanding, but as revealing the primacy of the Intellect over everything else (see Lanzi 2000, p. 242; see also Schroeder 2000, p. 306, pointing out the frequent use of compounds with πρὸ in the *Enneads*).

³¹ II 5.1.1.

³² Cf. V 8.13.19–22: being ugly is equal to not being oneself or being unaware of one's own nature.

³³ II 4.5.28ss.

³⁴ II 4.3.13–15.

³⁵ Rist 1962, pp. 103–106.

is also a consequence of the Stoic distinction between the first god as a transcendent and contemplative entity and the second one as an active Demiurge.³⁶ Platonism thus inherited two different entities, deriving the first one from the Good in the *Republic* and the second one from the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*. Also as a consequence of pairing the Dyad-matter with the Monad-intellect, and representing the Soul as something originating from that pair, the latter soon began to appear at lower levels: as early as in Speusippus, we find the Soul occupying the fourth place after the One, transcending the Monad and the Dyad.

The origins of this doctrine lie in Plato, who, according to Aristotle, distinguished mathematics (defined as intermediate entities because they are somewhere between the intelligible Forms and sensible objects) from Forms (εἶδη).³⁷ The former were supposedly related to the Soul, which consequently occupied the role of a medium between the world of ideas and the world of senses. But the real degradation of the Soul, if compared to the status of the Dyad-matter, came with its connection to evil, which became clearer as the connotation was taken from the concept of Dyad. After all, according to Aristotle, Plato held the Dyad to be the principle of evil, while Speusippus is said to have denied it; with him, in contrast, evil sprouts only at the fourth level (i.e. the level of the Soul), not as an active principle, but as a weakness and the incapacity to control the lower nature.³⁸

In Middle Platonism we often find the Soul in conjunction with the second God, the demiurgic Intellect, as something irrational and in need of the Intellect to wake her up and give her sense. That is how she is represented by Albinus, who claims that the supreme God that is the Intellect does not create the Soul; he merely wakes her up as from a kind of slumber, from which she turns to him.³⁹ Consequently, the connotation of evil in this doctrine is more pronounced, since it is supported by a passage from the *Laws* (896e–897d), where Plato speaks of the evil World Soul as the source of the irrational movement of the universe. What we have here is an active entity, which among Plato's successors gave birth to the doctrine of a double orientation of the Soul, sometimes reformulated in the doctrine of two souls. Plato is the authority referred to by Plutarch in the *De Iside et Osiride* (370e–f), where Osiris and Typhon respectively represent the good and the

³⁶ 1977, p. 46.

³⁷ *Metaph.* 987b.14. Cf. *De an.* 429a.27, where the Soul is called the place (τόπος) of forms.

³⁸ Iamblichus, *Comm. Math.* 4.104–107 (about Iamblichus as source, see Dillon 1977, p. 14).

³⁹ *Didasc.* 14.3.4ss.

bad World Soul, who are the principles of good and evil in the world. Plutarch's doctrine of the World Soul is more extensively represented in *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*, although, in some points, this doctrine is incompatible with the one in *De Iside*. If we are surprised to find that, for Plutarch, matter (represented by the figure of Isis) possesses some sort of psychic (οὐκ ἄψυχον) nature, his explanation of the divisible substance of *Timaeus* is even more interesting: in *De anim. procr.* (1014d–e) this substance is said to be the essence of the soul or the Soul in itself (καθ'ἑαυτήν), which, in cooperation with the Intellect (representing Plato's indivisible substance), gives birth to the World Soul. This primordial Soul, being ἄλογος and ἀνόητος, is the cause of the unorganized movement of matter, and is only recalled to order and sense by the Demiurge. She is identified with the evil World Soul from the *Laws*. Together with the Demiurge and matter she represents the Triad of the principles, each one of them enjoying an independent and eternal existence. The above mentioned incongruity is displayed by Plutarch's explanation of the concept of ὕλη in both treatises. In *De Iside* ὕλη is symbolised by the goddess Isis, identified with Plato's receptacle in *Timaeus*, endowed with a psychic nature and motion that carries her towards the Good: she is a kind of *materia animata*, a symbiotic mixture of soul and matter. In *De anim. procr.* the concept of ὕλη is separated from the evil primordial Soul, which gives to the former her chaotic and irrational movement.⁴⁰

In Plutarch's description of what precedes the generation of the universe, we find two components respectively revealing the corporeality and irrationality of this pre-cosmic chaos (ἀκοσμία): one seems to be matter⁴¹ and the other is the "Soul that has not reason" (1014b). In light of this, it seems impossible to me that Plutarch identifies, as Dillon⁴² says, the divisible substance of *Ti-*

⁴⁰ About Plutarch's controversial doctrine of matter, see Cherniss 1976, and his extensive notes to the text. For one thing, there is no conclusive explanation as to the degree of corporeality of her nature. In 1013b-c he asserts that the world consists of both a corporeal and an intelligible part, of which the former is provided by matter or substrate (ὑποκείμενον). In 1014c he explicitly identifies the substance (οὐσία) of the body as "none other than what is called by Plato to the omnirecipient nature, abode and nurse of the things that are subject to generation" (transl. by Cherniss). He, as expected, identifies χώρα with ὕλη, but he points out that she is without quality and potency of her own (1014f). Thus her being "the substance of the body" may not necessarily imply a corporeal nature after all, since in 1013c he makes it clear that ὕλη only becomes perceptible by participation in the intelligible.

⁴¹ Although Plutarch does not use the term ὕλη here – denoting it "amorphous and incoherent corporeality" – there is the attribute ἄμορφος, which points to Plato's receptacle (*Ti.* 50d–51a); see Cherniss 1976, note a *ad locum*.

⁴² See Dillon 1977, p. 208.

maeus, and consequently the irrational and evil World Soul, to the entity represented by the figure of Isis, who is neither ἄλογος nor evil. The attribution of evil to the primal Soul is not irrelevant.⁴³ later in the same treatise, Plutarch describes the soul as “not god’s work entirely,” but “with the portion of evil inherent in her (σύμφοτος)” (1027a). Since the soul’s evil portion must be related to the evil nature of the irrational primal Soul, the latter appears to me much closer to the Indefinite Dyad represented in *De defectu oraculorum* as “the element underlying all formlessness and disarrangement” and called infinity. The same term (ἄπειρία) is applied in the *De anim. procr.* (1014d) to the οὐσία of the soul (or the Soul in itself or the primal irrational Soul). Moreover, the Dyad of *De defectu* is said to accept limits and definition from the One, and similarly the soul in *De anim. procr.* is “arranged by god, who with the one bounded her infinitude” (1027a). The similarity to the Indefinite Dyad would therefore bring the primal Soul closer to the figure of Typhon-Seth than to Isis. It reflects Plutarch’s dualistic concept of the world as well as of the soul.

This dualism is more explicit in the thought of another philosopher who, not incidentally, was considered Pythagorean rather than Platonic. Numenius of Apamea seems to have brought the concepts of soul, Dyad and matter very close to one another. Matter (*silva* in the Latin text of fr. 52 des Places) is said to be the Dyad and an independent principle eternally co-existing with the Monad in a state of indefiniteness (ch. 295 in the fr. 52). Ch. 297 could even suggest the idea that Numenius has identified matter, which he sometimes called the Dyad, with Plato’s evil World Soul: *animas duas...unam beneficentissimam, malignam alteram, scilicet silvam/silvae*; it is a real pity that the text is corrupted here, for the difference in sense is great. Further reading, however, partly confirms the second option (*silvae*): he speaks of the co-existence of matter and soul (*quae [sc. silva]... vivat et anima convegetetur necesse est*), which implies that they are two separate realities and that *anima maligna* is not *silva* (matter) but *silvae* (of matter). Consequently, we have here the same chaotic co-existence of evil soul and matter as in Plutarch. We find even stronger proof of this in the next chapter, where the expression *silvae anima* appears, denoting something that resists the activity of the Providence. Moreover, the beginning chapters of fragment 52 discuss the concept of matter without mentioning the evil World Soul; the latter appears only when the activity of matter is in question, which evidently depends on something driving it from

⁴³ Deuse 1980, pp. 16s., ascertains that with the Soul in itself, Plutarch is introducing an evil principle into the Triad, while Dillon’s opinion (*ibid.*) is that she may be the cause of evil but is not evil in itself.

within. The animation of matter, however, starts the question of its being evil in itself: the Chaldean Oracles, an important source of Numenius, represent matter as the dwelling place of evil demons and as a kind of aggressive and therefore active entity. This seems to have been also the opinion of Numenius himself;⁴⁴ one can therefore rightly doubt whether matter would still be evil in itself, if it were not for the presence of these demons (which evidently contribute the living component of matter, i.e. its “soul”). For Numenius, matter is evil in itself and the principle of evil, even after it appears, embellished by God, as the mother of the world and in conjunction with Him. It is her *naturale vitium*, which God cannot and would not efface, because he would thereby erase matter itself (chapters 298 and 299). This, however, proves that Numenius was at least tempted to identify the evil World Soul with matter and, consequently, the Dyad.

3. The meaning of movement (κίνησις) in the expression “fluid matter”.

In these theories, the reconciling element of the concepts of matter and the soul is motion. When related to matter, motion has the connotation of instability and mutability; when connected to the soul, however, it is a bearer of life. Plato himself denoted motion as a source of life, while inactivity was a cause of destruction.⁴⁵ Although motion belongs to the world of the senses and, consequently, to the appearance of being, it is for Plato nevertheless something that lends life and vigour both to the soul (encouraging the soul’s love for knowledge and training its memory) and to the body. It is by no means the only example of Plato’s doctrine by which he surmounted the abyss which was dividing the Eleatic world of immobile Being from the changeable, sensible world of motion and appearances, by defining motion as one of the five categories of Being.⁴⁶ In the very first doctrines related to the mo-

⁴⁴ Or at least of those who combined Numenius’ explanation of the Atlantis myth with Origen’s interpretation of the legend. See. fr. 37 des Places: Numenius considered the soldiers of Atlantis to represent the less noble souls serving the god who presides over generation (Poseidon). Although Numenius himself makes no reference to material demons, his allegorical interpretation was evidently used to draw a parallel between this myth and the myths interpreted in the same way: the Egyptian myth of Osiris and Seth, the myth of Dionysus and the Titans, as well as Plato’s myth of the battle between the Athenians and the Atlantians, where the evil character(s) evidently represent(s) τοὺς ὑλικοὺς δαίμονας (v. 21).

⁴⁵ *Tht.* 153a.

⁴⁶ See *Sph.* 254e: Being, Motion, Rest, Same and Other.

vement of the sensible world, we find the metaphor of flow,⁴⁷ which also appears in Plato's dialogues: the attribute ῥευστής is normally used in connection with the sensible world and generation. For full comprehension of this term, it is very important to know how Plato felt about Heraclitean theories of movement, arguing for the utmost mutability of the sensible world and its "fluid" nature. In *Theaetetus* (156a) we find a critique of extreme doctrines teaching that movement is everything; in *Timaeus* (43a) the nature of the material world is said to flow and move according to the principles of the immovable world of ideas: the body continually receives instances of flux, only to see them flow away again, and by so doing, imitates in its structure the unity of the immobile world. It is clear that Plato differentiates between sensible movement and motion as an absolute principle. Flux as the ultimate form of movement thus becomes a metaphysical principle certainly necessary to the genesis of the sensible world, though it is not its inherent characteristics. With Plato's successors, the expression "fluid matter," connected to the metaphysical principle of generation assumes an important role in the generation of the universe: Xenocrates allegedly maintained that the universe (τὸ πᾶν) takes its source from the One (τοῦ ἑνός) and from the Ever-flowing (τοῦ ἀενάου);⁴⁸ this doctrine was applied to Plato's doctrine of "space", i.e. the receptacle of *Timaeus*, although the latter is not represented as fluid or in motion, but rather as some sort of medium between the sensible coming-into-being and the noetic being.⁴⁹ It was then naturally identified with the Dyad, by which the theory of flow exceeded the limits of the sensible world, making the flowing mobility typical of the metaphysical principle of every movement.⁵⁰

Middle Platonism provides an interesting illustration of this metaphysical principle of movement; we find it in Plutarch's allegoresis of the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris. The latter symbo-

⁴⁷ For a fuller consideration of the problem, see Decleva Caizzi 1988 (for the cosmic metaphor as the "source of ever flowing nature", see Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.94–95). The expression ῥευστή ὕλη is said to have been used by Tales and his disciples, as well as by Pythagoreans and Stoics (for the latter, see *SVF* 2, fr. 305).

⁴⁸ Aetius 1.3.23, p. 288 Diels (fr. 28 Heinze). Other testimonies confirm the identification of the ever flowing principle with matter: Ξενοκράτης δὲ ὁ Χαλκηδόνιος ἀέναον τὴν ὕλην, ἐξ ἧς ἅπαντα γέγονε, προσηγόρευσε (Theodoretus, *Graec. affect. cur.* 4.12.2). Cf. also Stobaeus 1.10.12.20–21.

⁴⁹ There are, however, many expressions related to the flux; together with metaphors of flowing river, wave etc., they describe the sensible world and specifically the creation of man (*Ti.* 43a–b).

⁵⁰ Decleva Caizzi 1988, p. 443, warns against confounding the sensible concept of the flow with the theory of that flow which derives the origins of the sensible world from the two principles (the one and the multiple).

lizes the intellectual principle which appears within the World Soul as its higher part (i.e. νοῦς), while earth, water, stars (i.e. the creation) are said to be the “flowing away” (ἀπορροή) of Osiris-Intellect into the universe (*De Is. et Os.* 371a). Matter, represented by the goddess Isis, fills itself with the fluxes coming forth from Osiris, and that is how the universe is generated. The generation of the world is therefore a dynamic process and the Isis-Matter itself is a mobile (οὐκ ἀκίνητος) entity (*ibid.* 374e).⁵¹ Plutarch also mentions a version of a myth about Zeus stuck in the desert and unable to walk because his legs have grown together. Only after having them detached from each other by Isis could he “step forth” – all of which Plutarch understands as a hint that the divine Intellect could proceed to the generation only by way of movement (ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ νοῦς καὶ λόγος ... εἰς γένεσιν ὑπὸ κινήσεως προῆλθεν) enabled by matter, which with Plutarch, as we know, has no negative attributes. The negative pole in Plutarch’s dualism is represented by Typhon (the Egyptian Seth) disturbing the creative activity of the good principle: although not completely blocking it, he tries to direct it towards himself, thus hindering the freedom of the good principle (*ibid.* 376b). Plutarch derives the meaning of the word κακίον (‘evil’) from the verb εἶναι (‘to go’): κακ-ίον; similarly, he explains the name of Isis as that of an intermediate nature which is ever carried (ἴεσθαι) towards the God.

In the *Enneads* we find different kinds of motion described by the word κίνησις. At the very beginning of the emanatory process, Plotinus mentions a primal movement which precedes even the generation of the second hypostasis. It is not a bodily movement, of course, but a movement in the sense of change or otherness.⁵² This otherness and movement are something indefinable,⁵³ which clearly implies the connection with the Indefinite Dyad and the indefinable noetic matter. Moreover, there is a lack of cognoscibility related to this movement, which Platonism normally ascribed to the world of the senses and which, when Plato’s χῶρα

⁵¹ Plutarch is probably arguing against the Stoics here (*SVF* 2, fr. 311).

⁵² See II 4.5.28ss.: it is the otherness that brings forth matter in the noetic world. This otherness (ἐτερότης) is the principle of matter and the primal movement (κίνησις ἢ πρώτη).

⁵³ Movement and otherness are explicitly related in Xenocrates’ doctrine of the soul (see Plutarch *Proc. An.* 1012e–f), which is based on Plato’s dialectical categories (cf. *Ti.* 351 and *Sph.* 254e). Though motion only appears at the level of the soul (the soul being a self-moving number), it is also related to the concept of otherness: the number originates from the Monad and the Dyad, but it is not yet soul; it needs the further addition of the elements of sameness and otherness, the first providing stability and the second mobility and mutability of the soul.

came to be identified with matter, entered the intelligible world: in VI 6.3. Plotinus says that infinity (ἄπειρον; the concept implies the lack of limits as well as of definition; ἄπειρον is also ἀόριστον here) is neither in motion nor at rest, since both imply space, which is subsequent to infinity; but it can become one or the other. It is in motion, however, in the sense of *recoiling* from the very idea of limit; but since there is no place to which it can withdraw, it is, in the same sense, at rest.⁵⁴ The word κίνησις (also in the verbal form κινεῖν) normally appears in connection with the body and the soul's sensitive abilities, which disturb the soul and keep it away from cognition of truth. The soul does, however, possess a proper form of movement that Plotinus somewhere denotes as its own life (I 1.13.5ss). The latter is proper to the individual intellect as well, since the soul is “intellective (νοηρά),” except that the act of the intellect (νόησις) represents a higher form of life and consequently of movement.⁵⁵

For Plotinus, as for Plato, the metaphor of flux is most frequently related to the body as opposed to the soul; the bodily substance is ἀεὶ ῥέουσα (II 1.2.5), which makes it “evade” the real Being (I 8.4.5). There are other passages in the *Enneads* revealing the influence of the Heraclitean doctrine of the eternal flux,⁵⁶ but it is significant that the metaphor turns up even in the description of what happens at the highest level, i.e. of the emanatory process. Although Plotinus does not use a single expression which would fully justify the use of the word ‘emanation,’ the term is nevertheless accepted and used by most modern scholars.⁵⁷ As for

⁵⁴ Cf. also III 6.7.14: matter “is static without being stable.”

⁵⁵ We learn more about this form of movement in the 14th treatise (II 2), entitled *On the Movement of Heaven*, where Plotinus first discusses the movement of the Soul and its act of animating the world body, deriving his arguments mostly from a passage of *Timaeus* (34a) and from Plato's doctrine of seven types of movement. The movement of the Intellectual principle is at the same time a stationary act (II 2.3), since it is always turning upon itself, which also brings the soul to move everywhere around it.

⁵⁶ Cf. V 1.9.5, where Plotinus directly refers to Heraclitus (cf. DK 22 A 1) asserting that the bodily forms are subjected to an eternal process of generation and flowing. Cf. also II 1.1.24, II 1.2.6 and IV 3.20.50.

⁵⁷ Reale 2004, pp. 189–95, as well as in his excellent commentaries on Radice's translation of the *Enneads* (2002, *passim*, see for example pp. 759–61 or the introduction to the treatise III 8), strongly opposes the use of this term. For a different opinion, see Sinnige 1999, p. 12. Without disregarding all these arguments, I nevertheless find it necessary to question Reale's assertion that Plotinus' doctrine itself denies the term “emanation,” making it only metaphorically acceptable. The objection seems the more justified in light of Reale's later statement that Plotinus' *processio* does in fact unite the elements of emanationism, pantheism and Jewish creationism (p. 192), of which the latter two, as terms, are just as unsuitable as the first one. Reale, instead, uses the word *processione*,

the origins of emanation theory itself, Armstrong points out the importance of the Stoic metaphor of the sun⁵⁸ as well as that of the Stoic doctrine of the incorporeity of the light and other “solar theologies” of the time.⁵⁹ Among these we should mention the Hermetic doctrine⁶⁰ representing sunlight as the recipient of the noetic Being and as an area where the physical and the spiritual meet. It is, in fact, a sort of a medium used by Plotinus to establish the Neoplatonic hierarchy of Being. When discussing the omnipresence of what is always simultaneously one and the same (VI 4.22), he resorts to the well-known metaphor of sunlight, by which he tries to demonstrate how not only the One, but also the Intellect and the Soul are inexhaustible sources and never dwindling – similar to the sun, whose light is everywhere and always belongs to the same immobile sun.⁶¹ No less famous is the comparison of the One to the ever flowing spring supplying other rivers with water and never running dry itself.⁶² Both metaphors point out firstly the absence of source and secondly the inexhaustibility

whose advantage over the word *emanazione* consists principally in its being the most accurate translation of the word πρόοδος used frequently by Plotinus. The problem is, however, that it does not do justice to the complexity of the emanation process, which really consists of two phases, since the proceeding from the One is necessarily followed by a turning back (ἐπιστροφή) to It. The same objection goes for the term emanation, of course (see. Reale 2002, p. 761), but it is precisely its metaphorical use, acknowledged also by Reale (and, moreover, supported by the well known metaphor of the source), that broadens the meaning of the term which, with Plotinus, acquired a new significance, without depriving him of his originality regarding the comparable emanation theories, which held an important place in the contemporaneous philosophical milieu.

⁵⁸ Cf. also V 1.6.29s.

⁵⁹ See Armstrong 1937 and 1967, pp. 55–58. Though the metaphor of the sun, representing the illuminating Intellect, is Plato’s (see. *R.* 508b), its popularity with Platonic schools was also due to the cult of the sun, maturing in the 3rd. c., especially under the reign of Aurelianus, when it actually became the official cult of the Empire. It is worth mentioning, however, that Armstrong 1937, p. 63, saw Plotinus’ emanation theory as a deviation from his generally unequivocal rationality, bringing his thought to the level of the superficial arguments of those of his contemporaries, which are otherwise beneath his own. See also the opinion of Fuller 1912, pp. 69-70, who called Plotinus’ “analogy of emanation,” as he termed it, one of the greatest analogies of philosophy, “magnificent,” “clever,” while at the same time “false” and “mischievous, because of its dominance, in its falsity.”

⁶⁰ *Corp. Herm.* 16.6.

⁶¹ VI 4.10.24–28. Another source of Plotinus’ emanation theory is proposed by Lloyd 1990, pp. 99ss., who derives it from Aristotle’s physical causality (*Phys.* 202a 13–202b 29): the establishment of a new hypostasis is the second act (*actus secundus*) of the actualized first potency (*prima potentia*), corresponding to the first hypostasis.

⁶² III 8.10.5–10.

of what gives itself away. In this sense, the comparison to the sunlight is less striking than the metaphor of the fount (πηγή), which seems to challenge the connotation assigned to the concept of flux, of mutability, usually attributed to material and corporeal nature. This may be the reason why Plotinus avoids using the verb ῥεῖν: it is used to describe the flow of the rivers, (yet even here he prefers the word προέρχεσθαι, to describe their flowing from the Source), while the Source gives (δοῦσα) itself to the streams without being consumed (ἀναλωθεῖσα) by them, for it remains still (ἡσύχως μένουσα). The verb ῥεῖν is excluded also at the level of the Soul:

“For if it flowed, it would reach as far as it was able to flow, but as it does not flow – for it could not, and has nowhere it could flow to: for it has taken hold of the All, or rather it is itself the All – [...] it would reasonably be considered to give little of itself to the [perceptible] All.” (VI 4.5.8–11)

There is, however, an expression in the line preceding the quoted passage, which again relates Plotinus’ metaphorical language to the Platonic doctrines of the flux: the soul is ἀένναος, ... οὐ ῥέουσα, which means that it is (similarly to the One) a sort of everflowing source, knowing nothing of fluid mobility in the sense of changeability, which would diminish its nature. Although the word is not easy to translate, there is an obvious reference to the concept of flux, particularly if we consider the fact that the same expression is found in the fragments of Xenocrates, referring to the Dyad-matter from which everything comes into being (see above); nor is the influence the Pythagorean image of the cosmos as “fountain of the ever flowing nature”⁶³ irrelevant, although it refers to the sensible world. No matter how inadequate the word “emanation” may be to express fully the idea of proceeding from the One, there is no denying the fact that the image of the flux, together with others, such as the metaphor of the sun or the tree, is decidedly present in Plotinus’ doctrine of the three Hypostases.

4. The double symbolism of flux and water

The reason for the double symbolism of flux, indicating at once changeable and perishable nature and referring to the eternal being that imbues everything else, lies in the double symbolism of water, which not only represents a source of life and generation due to its purifying powers, but is also a symbol of the corporeal, destructible and destroying.

⁶³ Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.94.5.

Considering the connection between the concepts of flux and water and the corporeal element, we should not forget, as F. Decleva Caizzi points out, that mobility theories do not only go back to Heraclitus, but to the old and deeply rooted symbolism of the sea, which was considered a mobile and unpredictable element inhabited by the sea gods, who were seen as voluble creatures.⁶⁴ The most famous is the Homeric god Proteus,⁶⁵ whom the allegoric tradition connected to the creation of the world. Later, this conception acquired further depth, for the figure of Proteus had an important role in the arguments with which the monists established plurality. The voluble god with a name lending itself to etymological explanation was a popular object of the Orphic and (Neo)Pythagorean allegorical interpretation,⁶⁶ according to which he usually represents the Monad, uniting in itself the possibilities of all numbers.⁶⁷ This plurality was displayed by the diversity of forms he was able to assume. Plurality and the lack of the determinability of the forms probably added to the general conception of the figure of Proteus as a symbol of the formless matter (with the Stoics, for example).⁶⁸ According to the sources of Eustathius, Proteus represents the primal matter, receptacle of forms, and is none of them actually, but all of them potentially.⁶⁹ The expressions Plotinus uses for matter strongly resemble those of Eustathius, especially since there seems to be a reference to Proteus also in the *Enneads*, albeit in a different context.⁷⁰ The allusion is found in the treatise *On the Kinds of Being* (VI 1), where matter, always changing to the point of being able to become anything, is compared to the dancer who, when dancing, actually becomes what he recreates through his movement.⁷¹ Since the sources des-

⁶⁴ 1988, p. 431.

⁶⁵ See *O.* 4.351–92.

⁶⁶ Delatte 1974, p. 125. It is an Orphic allegoresis, according to Drews 1913, p. 157. The opinions of the tradition of allegorical interpretation in the ancient Pythagoreanism differ. Although it is ascertained that Pythagoreans used to read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with particular emphasis on specific passages (see Iamblichus, *VP* 25 [111] and Detienne 1962, p. 18–81), the theory of a methodic interpretation remains unproved (Lamberton 1989, p. 31–36).

⁶⁷ Iamblichus, *Theo. Arithm.* 7.10–13.

⁶⁸ Cf. also Heraclitus, *Quaestiones Homericae*, 66.7: ...ἄμορφον ὕλην Πρωτέα καλεῖσθαι.

⁶⁹ *Ad Od.* 1, 174, 21.: ...φάμενοι Πρωτέα τὴν πρωτόγονον εἶναι ὕλην, τὴν τῶν εἰδῶν δεχάδα. Τὴν ἐνεργεῖα μὲν οὐσαν μηδὲν τῶν εἰδῶν, δυνάμει δὲ τὰ πάντα. Cf. Plotinus, *II* 5.5.1–6, and his peripatetic sources, e. g. Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Περὶ νοῦ* (106.19–26).

⁷⁰ Cilento 1960, p. 287.

⁷¹ Cilento here compares the Homeric expression πάντα δὲ γινόμενος (*O.* 4.417) with the words in the *Enneads*: πάντα δύναται γίνεσθαι *VI* 1.27.19). Cf.

cribe Proteus as an Egyptian dancer known by his mimetic arts,⁷² Plotinus' allusion to Proteus seems very probable.

The symbolism of water as matter or the Dyad (sometimes even Monad), representing the principle of generation, echoes teachings of different cosmogonies – both Eastern (Indian, Babylonian, Phoenician)⁷³ and Western (Ocean in the Homeric poems,⁷⁴ or the first principle of Thales), where water is conceived as the source of life and generation. At the same time, this conception was acquiring a metaphorical meaning; the Pythagoreans are said to have used the metaphor of the universe as “the spring of ever flowing nature.”⁷⁵ The words “world” and “universe” generally referred to the sensible world, and therefore the water element was naturally related to corporeality. The concept of humidity is consequently present in Numenius' description of the union of the soul and the body,⁷⁶ and from what Porphyry says, it is obvious that it is an ancient conception, one that is present in the Egyptian religion as well as in the Biblical tradition. However, since neither the incorporeal primal matter nor the bodily matter can by themselves be the source of authentic being, water is very often represented as sterile. Plotinus mentions the paradox of comparing matter (as some philosophers do) to a mother because of its role as receptacle and nurse;⁷⁷ this is the paradox of attributing the fertility of the earth to it and referring to it by the names of the great goddesses Rhea and Cybele.⁷⁸ The receptacle does nothing but re-

also III 6.7.14–17: “It [*sc.* matter] is invisible in itself and escapes any attempt to see it, and occurs when one is not looking, but even if you look closely you cannot see it. It always presents opposite appearances on its surface, / ... /”

⁷² Lucianus, *Salt.* 19.

⁷³ The Vedas and the Upanishads relate the generation of the world as born from the great Flood; the Babylonian myths mention the Archetypal Water; and with the Phoenicians, the First God is always represented as the marine god, equated with the Homeric Proteus by the Greeks.

⁷⁴ *Il.* 14.201 in 246.

⁷⁵ See Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.94–95.

⁷⁶ Porphyry, *Antr.* 10–12.

⁷⁷ Plato, *Ti.* 50d.

⁷⁸ III 6.19. For Rhea symbolizing the world of Matter see also V 1.7.32. In Plato's works (*Cra.* 402b) there is a connection of the myth of the two divine ancestors (Kronos and Rhea) with the Heraclitean theory of the flux; their names are supposed to hint at the words κρουνώς (well) and ῥεῦμα (stream). Since the two gods feature also in the Plotinian allegoresis, we are tempted to connect it to *Craylos*; the only problem is that Plotinus does not even mention the fluid nature of matter here, probably because of the fact that the explanation of Kronos' name (the still and self sufficient nature of the Intellect (νοῦς ἐν κόρῳ; see also V 1.4.10)) fits the context much better. For the symbolism of the figure of the Phrygian goddess Cybele, see John Lydus, *Mens.* 4.63. Plato, however, does

ceive the seed, and it is, by itself, incapable of generation of any kind. Although Plotinus does see the feminine principle in it, he primarily considers it as a receiver of the seed.⁷⁹ Matter itself is sterile (ἄρσος), which is clear from the presence of the eunuchs in the procession of the Great Mother. The elements of earth and water are both considered as forming the primordial chaos devoid of the life that was given to it by the soul:

“Before soul it was a dead body, earth and water, or rather the darkness of matter and non-existence.” (V 1.2.26).⁸⁰

Moreover, it was an old conviction, introduced in Platonism by the Pythagoreans, to consider the bodily generation as having seriously damaging effects on the soul. Hence the negative symbolism of the Plotinian metaphor (alluding to Narcissus (or Hy-las)), showing the dangers of the pursuit of beautiful images reflected on water:

“For if a man runs to the image and wants to seize it as if it was the reality (like a beautiful reflection playing on the water, which some story somewhere, I think, said riddlingly a man wanted to catch and sank down into the stream and disappeared) then this man who clings to beautiful bodies and will not let them go, will, like the man in the story, but in soul, not in body, sink down into the dark depths where intellect has no delight, and stay blind in Hades, consorting with shadows there and here.” (I 6.8.8–15)

Here, to ‘sink down’ clearly means to lose the soul in corporeality and, consequently, to experience spiritual death.

Water is, however, not deprived of the higher and more spiritual symbolism that was known to Gnostic and Hermetic writers, who often presented it as a feminine counter-part to the creative masculine principle. There is a well known passage from *Poiman-*

not mention Cybele in *Timaeus*; he speaks of “the mother”, so the connection of the Platonic receptacle as “Mother of all things” with the cult of Cybele is added by Plotinus.

⁷⁹ This idea entered the philosophical thought through the general conviction of the secondary role of the female in the generation process; see Plutarch, *De Is. et Os.* 374f.

⁸⁰ Cf. the Biblical passage on the generation of the world (*Gen.* 1.2) and a passage of the gnostic treatise *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II 5 and XIII 2.100) speaking about the “matter of chaos, which had been expelled like an aborted fetus – since there was no spirit in it. For all of it was limitless darkness and bottomless water,” pointing out the absence of spirit and life in the primordial chaos. Cf. *Corp. Herm.* 1.4. describing a darkness “of a moist nature.” These words bring to mind Homeric verses pointing out the infertility of the sea by giving it (in the *Iliad*, but even more frequently in the *Odyssey*) the attribute ἀτρύγετος.

dres describing not only the Archetype seeing itself reflected in the water, but also its loving union with its own reflection:

“He in turn beholding the form like to himself, existing in her, in her Water, loved it and willed to live in it; and with the will came act, and [so] he vivified the form devoid of reason. And Nature took the object of her love and wound herself completely around him, and they were intermingled, for they were lovers.” (*Corp. Herm.* 1.14; transl. by G. R. S. Mead)

There is another one from the *Apocryphon of John*, where the first principle (the Father) sees himself in the light that surrounds him and is called, by the writer of the apocryphon, “the source of the water of life,” and later also “the source of the Spirit.” The act of self-contemplation, performed by the Father, is accompanied by the appearance of the “Virgin Spirit”, the “First Thought” and the “Image of the Father” (5.5), which is at the same time the feminine counter-part of the androgynous primal being, his creative and fertilizing principle and “the womb of all things” (*NHC* II 1, III 1, IV, 1.4-5 and BG 8502, 2). A similar example from the Gnostic writings is found in *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (*NHC* II 4), although it probably dates later than the *Enneads* (from late 3rd cent. or even later): the Incorruptibility casts its gaze on to the waters below, producing almost instantly a reflection seen by the forces of Darkness, which fall in love with the reflection and want to seize it. The passage shows, among other things, that the water element does not represent the evil counter-pole to the spiritual element, since the latter is represented by the Archons; it is, in fact, very close to the concept of the Platonic receptacle and its image of a nurse. The spring of the water of life in *The Apocryphon of John* contains a seed of an intellectual and spiritual nature, which gives to the water element an unexpected ambiguity comparable to the double nature of the Aristotelian noetic matter. In the Bible also, the closeness of Spirit and water is characteristic of the primordial chaos.⁸¹

The spiritual symbolism of the water warrants a closer look into the work of Zosimos of Panopolis; although somewhat posterior to Plotinus, he ingested many ideas of the period in a city which, like Alexandria, was open to various influences. Among his works is an essay entitled Περὶ ἀρετῆς; in this treatise we come across the concept of a “divine water” (τὸ θεῖον ὕδωρ). The very beginning of the treatise reveals that it is not water in the ordinary sense of the word, since the author speaks of the “composi-

⁸¹ “The spirit of God, floating over waters” (*Gen.* 1.2). Cf. also the passage from the treatise *On the Origin of the World* (quoted above, n. 79), where the watery chaos is lifeless when the desire of Pistis Sophia first creates Yaltabaoth to rule over matter.

tion of the water” (θέσις ὑδάτων) which, in the alchemists’ language, hints at a liquefying procedure of the elements (metals especially) whose purpose is to achieve some sort of primal amorphous state.⁸² We can find the same expression in the following pages relating a vision of Zosimos in which an altar formed like a bowl appears to him: it is filled with boiling water, and men, simmering, exit still living. They merely change, and this change is explained by Zosimos’s mystic guide as a purification of the physical and an acquisition of the spiritual nature. There is the idea of death and destruction as a means of returning in a primal chaos and through this to a new life (that is why the divine water is simultaneously the destroyer and the bearer of life), with this life being superior and of a spiritual nature in Zosimos’s case. But there is more to the θεῖον ὕδωρ than that. In order to be the instrument of the transformation from the corporeal to the spiritual, it must itself possess a double nature. Jung, who devoted some of his works to the interpretation of Zosimos’s writings,⁸³ discovered the link between the two natures in the evaporation process of water that boils and re-boils our corporality. At the same time the epithet θεῖος has a double meaning since it can also mean ‘sulphuric’, thus adding fire to the watery nature of the divine liquid. The fire is an element that symbolises the first principle to which every single being returns in the final act of self-ignition.⁸⁴ According to Jung this “sulphurous water” represents God hidden in the cosmos, the world soul captive in the matter or the spirit in the primal matter otherwise symbolised by water alone.⁸⁵ The expression “sulphurous water” also reveals the androgynous nature of the divine liquid. Jung describes it also as the Mind descended to Nature which had clasped and swallowed him up in its turn (an interpretation strongly resembling the quoted passage from *Poimandres*).

Among the preserved works of Zosimos there is also a short fragment which is thought to have been a part of the *Περὶ ἀρετῆς*. This fragment directly describes the divine water hidden behind the demonstrative τοῦτον:

⁸² Tonelli 2004, p. 58. The liquefaction of metals in the alchemy symbolised the cosmogonical activity of the alchemist – the Demiurge (*ibid.*, p. 84).

⁸³ His conclusions are summarised from Tonelli’s introduction essay to *Περὶ ἀρετῆς*.

⁸⁴ The symbolism of sulphur is connected to the fire representing the active male principle, in contrast to the silver (mercury or quicksilver in alchemy!) representing the passive – female – watery nature. This corresponds to the description of the androgynous divine water in the fragment below. In the sulphur-silver pair, the former represents the procreative and at the same time destructive principle. It is also a symbol of guilt and punishment, which is why it has been used in purifying rituals (see Chevalier-Gheerbrant 1994, p. 726.)

⁸⁵ See Jung 1967, p. 101–104.

“From it everything arises and by it everything is. Two natures, one essence: one draws the other, and one dominates the other. This is the silver water, the ever evasive male-female which is attracted to that which is proper / apart. It is the divine water that was unknown to everybody. It is difficult to contemplate on its nature. It is neither metal nor ever-running water nor a bodily object: it cannot be dominated. It is alpha and omega / essence of all things. It has life and spirit and is a destroyer. He who understands these words, possesses gold.”

The fragment is interesting because it briefly sums up the characteristics of this divine liquid: its androgynous nature (symbolised by sulphur and silver), its life-giving and destructive quality, the presence of the spiritual element. At the same time the fragment at some point lends itself to a comparison with what Plotinus wrote of the noetic matter: it is invisible to the spiritual as well as to the physical eye. Although it is nothing in reality, it is everything in possibility. It is because of these infinite possibilities of coming into being, which never realize themselves, that the matter is utterly inconceivable and uncontrollable.

5. The mythology of the World Soul

It has already been observed that matter, like the Dyad, often figures as a female principle which, together with her male counter-part, contributes to the generation of the world and its order. Such a pair of two principles frequently found its personification in divine couples: we have an old, albeit incomplete, testimony of the above quoted fragment of Xenocrates, where Zeus represents the male principle, the Monad, while the identity and the role of the female principle remains somewhat obscure due to a lacuna; she is, however, called “the mother of the gods.”⁸⁶ A later and more concrete example is provided by Plutarch’s allegoresis of the couple of Osiris and Isis, the first symbolizing the divine Intellect and the second the primal matter in movement, transmitting the Intellect into the world. It is very probable (and Plutarch’s Isis provides a good example of this) that allegories of this kind contributed to the change of roles in the case of primal matter and the World Soul, since the latter was regularly paired with

⁸⁶ For a different explanation, see P. Boyancé, whose reconstruction of the fragment reveals an Orphic motive with the goddess Dike seated by the side of Zeus (see above, n. 14); see also Dillon’s suggestion (2003, pp. 103s.) that the original text might have paired Zeus with Rhea, who, in the Orphic tradition, is both mother and daughter to Zeus and mates with him as well. The suggestion is tempting, since Rhea is etymologically connected with the verb *ῥεῖν* and would correspond perfectly to the attribute *ἀένναος* of the Dyad.

the demiurgic Intellect which, with the Platonists, was hardly conceivable without the collaborating soul.⁸⁷ However, if the Soul, in Middle Platonism, risked losing its status of the illuminating entity, this was not the case with Plotinus. It is nevertheless true that its relation to the demiurgic Intellect is not always transparent, and we shall consider an example of his allegoresis to demonstrate this. In accord with the Middle Platonic tradition, Plotinus distinguishes between a contemplative, self-centered primal God and the second, active one. The two entities in fact correspond to the second and the third hypostasis, but as for the latter, it is not the hypostasis of the Soul, following the example of the Intellect in contemplating the One, but the World Soul projecting itself “outside,” into the world. We find this doctrine in the allegory of Hesiod’s divine triad, featuring Ouranos as the One, Kronos as the self-sufficient and still-standing Intellect, and Zeus as the active World Soul. While Kronos swallows his offspring, thus shutting himself away, Zeus manifests himself outwards. This act leads to the birth of the sensible world, with Zeus being its creator and ruler. Zeus thus represents the Demiurge and king of the world, as well as the World Soul, which is its life-giving principle.⁸⁸ The soul as the creator of the universe is discussed by Plotinus in Treatise 10: Chapter 2 emphasises the creative role of *all* souls, which each give life to its own creature, just as the World Soul creates and gives life to her own universal creature, the world.⁸⁹ Zeus represents the soul’s intellectual element, by which the soul governs the cosmos. At the same time, her role is also to “descend” without losing contact with her source, projecting the latter into the sensible world. Thus the World Soul can be the Demiurge by becoming the conductor, *logos*, of intelligible truths. This is also the role of Zeus in Hesiod’s triad: the ideas enclosed within the Intellect – Kronos – enter through Zeus into the sensible cosmos.

It is significant that the Plotinian allegory identifies the World Soul sometimes with Aphrodite, sometimes with Zeus. Plo-

⁸⁷ See, for example, Plato, *Phlb.* 30d.

⁸⁸ IV 4.10; in the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge is a creator of the World Soul, (30b), but cf. above *Phlb.* 30d.

⁸⁹ There are, however, several passages in the *Enneads* that do not support the idea of the World Soul as the Demiurge: see, for example, II 3.18.15, where the Demiurge is *νοῦς*, with the Soul appearing only later; see also II 1.5.5 and IV 3.7. There is actually no way that we can deny a discrepancy with earlier treatises; the only explanation is provided by the Plotinian doctrine of the double orientation (active and contemplating) of the soul. The tendency of identifying the World Soul with the Demiurge or the divine Providence and seeing it as a single force, governing this world, is particularly characteristic of some Middle Platonic thinkers (Dillon 1977, p. 252).

tinus thus draws near to many earlier and contemporary notions of an androgynous archetype, the symbol of a unified primary nature in which all opposites coincide.⁹⁰ On the one hand, the Soul as hypostasis came into existence later than the Intellect; on the other, the two form a collaborating team in which she represents the female conductive principle. Therefore Aphrodite is both the daughter and consort of Zeus.⁹¹ The wedded couple Zeus – Hera (Aphrodite) symbolises the union or merging of the World-intellect with the soul. As a result of this union, the World Soul, whose movement governs and sets the world in motion, is “wise” (ἐμφορον).⁹² This epithet points to another female figure, briefly mentioned by Plotinus as Zeus’ companion and helper. Describing the life *there*, ἐκεῖ, in his Treatise *On Intelligible Beauty* (V 8.4. 35ss.), he calls it wisdom, σοφία. This is not a wisdom conditioned by reason; it is the primary wisdom, which is itself an οὐσία, existence in its own right, not merely an attribute of such existence as in the phrase “to be wise”. This perfect wisdom or knowledge, to which Plotinus applies Plato’s term αὐτοεπιστήμη, “has its throne beside Intellect” (πάρεδρος τῷ νῶ), just as Dike is throned besides Zeus.⁹³ The harmony of wisdom and intellect is reflected in contemplation, which is highly reminiscent of the description of Aphrodite gazing at her father. A similar motif is found in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, who often refers to a female principle endowed with all the characteristics of the stepmother and nurse in Plato’s *Timaeus*. In one of Philo’s passages, this princi-

⁹⁰ Brisson 2002, pp. 72ss. Androgyny is a frequent characteristic of the pleomorphic world in the Sethian gnosis as well as with the Valentinians (Filoramo 1983, p. 97ss.). In the *Trimorphic Protennoia* the Primal thought presents itself as an androgynous entity, the Father and the Mother, comprehending all things and giving them life like a womb, (*NHC* XIII 1.45); similarly, Ireneus mentions (*Adv. haer.* 1.1.1) the androgynous pairs of eons, in which the female part receives the definition and consequently the limit from the male one.

⁹¹ III 5.8.11-24. Plotinus mentions the tradition which identified Aphrodite with the Zeus’ wife Hera. (cf. Pausanias 3.13.9; cf. also Aristotle, *Mu.* 392a). The blending of the roles of wife and daughter is also typical for the Egyptian mythology (for a thorough comparison, see Lacrosse 1994, p. 54). The motive is frequent in the Orphic theogony, where the multiple role of mother, wife and daughter is a symbol of the continuous and cyclic proceeding from the first principle and returning into it (for the androgynous archetypes in the Orphism, see Brisson 2002, pp. 85-101).

⁹² V 1.2.24. See also II 9.1.31s.: when the soul is moving towards the Intellect, there is a *logos* descending to it and rendering it “intelligent” (νοεῖσθαι).

⁹³ V 8.4.41. It is said to be an ancient Orphic motive (Proclus, *In Alc.* 220.1; see also the Orphic hymn to Dike (fr. 23 Kern). Cf. also Plato, *Lg.* 715e; although Plato does not actually speak of Zeus, but he refers to a God in which all things have the beginning and the end; his words do, in fact, correspond to the message of the fragments of the Orphic hymns to Zeus (fr. 21 Kern). Cf. also Proclus, *In R.* 2, 144s.

ple is expressly named Sophia.⁹⁴ The Jewish motif of Divine Wisdom, who sits by His side, has evidently merged in Philo's thought with the traditional image of Dike sitting next to Zeus. In keeping with the Stoic interpretation given by Cornutus, Philo understands Dike as a manifestation of God's power. At the same time, however, she is the force which orders the world by its prudence and metes out justice. The above reconstruction of Xenocrates' fragment proposed by Dillon suggests, among other things, that Dike (World Soul) should be associated with the figure of the goddess Athena, who in the Platonic tradition represents the wise Soul, projecting into this world the Forms sprung from the Intellect. Dillon's suggestion is supported by a passage from Philo (*De op. mundi* 100) featuring the motherless Victory (νίκη) and Virgin (πάρθενος), who is parallel to the Pythagorean leader of all things.⁹⁵

The Plotinian merging of the female principle of Aphrodite-Hera with the figure of Dike-Sophia is no coincidence either. Its source is again Philo, who occasionally casts Abraham's wife Sarah, usually a symbol of virtue (ἀρετή), in the role of prudence (φρόνησις; *De migr. Abr.* 126) or even wisdom (ἄρχουσα σοφία; *Leg. alleg.* 2, 82). The treatise *De ebrietate* (59-61) unites the symbolism of wisdom and virtue in the term φιλόρετος διάνοια, which bears Sarah's name. Interestingly, this passage describes her as ἀμήτωρ:

“She is not born of that material substance perceptible to our senses, (...), the material which is called mother or foster-mother or nurse of created things (...); she is born of the Father and Cause of all things.”

Philo emphasises that he is not talking about the female principle of matter but about something that “soaring above the whole world of bodily forms, will count as a matter for laughter those anxious cares of men, which are expended on human affairs, whether in war or peace.” The term ἀμήτωρ is likewise applied by Plotinus to Aphrodite – of course not to Aphrodite-Hera, the sister, wife and daughter of Zeus, but to the “Heavenly Aphrodite”, the motherless daughter of Kronos (or Ouranos, see above, III 5.2.32):

“The heavenly one [sc. Aphrodite], since she is said to be the child of Kronos, and he is Intellect, must be the most divine kind of soul, springing directly from him, pure from the pure, remaining above, as neither wanting nor being able to descent to the world here below, since it is not according to her nature to come

⁹⁴ *Quod det. pot. insid. sol.* 115ss. This version represents Sophia as a generative principle, through which all things come to being (cf. *De fuga* 109).

⁹⁵ Dillon 2003, pp. 105–106.

down, since she is a separate reality and a substance without part in matter – for which reason they spoke of her riddlingly in this way, that she was ‘motherless’.” (III 5.2.19–25)

The version alluded to is the one presented by Hesiod, according to which Aphrodite was born of the sea-foam produced from the severed member of Ouranos. By choosing this version, Plotinus emphasizes her independence of matter in the tradition of Philo; moreover, in this account she is not coupled with a male principle.

Conclusions:

The article has attempted to convey the variety of those Platonic doctrines which explain the origins of the cosmos by assigning a special role to the female counter-pole of an androgynous archetype. This female figure represents either matter (as in Plutarch) or soul, the moving principle of the universe which exemplifies the wisdom of the male principle (as in Philo and Plotinus). The passages quoted reveal a preference – expressed by dualistic concepts of the world – for the idea of a synergy between matter and soul and, consequently, between soul and evil: this is the case with the *materia animata* and the evil soul in Plutarch and Numenius. In strict monism, the idea is much less acceptable and strongly opposed by Plotinus, whose doctrines place the bodiless primal matter as the ultimate evil on the last rung of the emanatory process, while the soul retains one of the highest positions in the hierarchy. Nevertheless, even the *Enneads*, excluding as they do the metaphysical evil from the Triad of Principles (One-Intellect-Soul), do not deny the presence of *the other*, which necessarily accompanies the activity of the One. Furthermore, within the very process of emanation – whether we accept the term or not – there is the analogy of “the flux”, which inherently implies the idea of change. This is an idea which even Plotinus cannot and does not refuse, since it is necessary for the generation of the Universe from the One.

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