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**A SOUL FALLEN FROM NOETIC GRACE:
PROCLUS'S TRANSFORMATION OF TANTALUS
(COMMENTARY ON THE CRATYLUS §94, 46.24–47.7)**

MIKOLAJ DOMARADZKI

INTRODUCTION

In his *Commentary on the Cratylus*, Proclus offers a highly original but largely ignored interpretation of Tantalus.¹ Proclus's sophisticated account of the king in the treatise has received very little attention because the overwhelming preponderance of scholars investigating allegoresis in the Lycian philosopher understandably focus on his *Commentary on the Republic*, which is Proclus's—*sit venia verbo*—"programmatically" work on the appropriate approach to Homer's poetry and its perfect consonance with Plato's philosophy.² Accordingly, the purpose of this article will be 1) to discuss the historical and philosophical background of Proclus's account of Tantalus, and 2) to show the novelty of his interpretation as put forward in the *Commentary on the Cratylus*.

While the figure of Tantalus was frequently adduced for the purpose of making various doctrinal points, there were two major versions of the king's torments. In Homer (*Od.* 11.582–92), the malefactor stands in

1 The text is that of Pasquali 1908 and the translation (at times modified) is that of Duvick 2007. To the best of my knowledge, only Buffière 1956.487–89 devotes some attention to Proclus's ingenious interpretation in his groundbreaking study on the development of allegoresis. Regrettably, Kaiser 1964 does not discuss the Tantalus episode in his otherwise excellent and very thorough survey of "Odyssee-Szenen als Topoi."

2 See, e.g., the seminal works by Friedl 1936, Coulter 1976, Sheppard 1980, Lambertson 1986, Bernard 1990, and Pichler 2006.

pool of limpid water overhung by a grove of delicious fruit trees which, however, elude him whenever he tries to quench his thirst and hunger. In contrast, the other version has the king stand underneath a suspended rock which constantly threatens to crush the sinner (e.g., Pind. *Ol.* 1.54–64 and Eur. *Or.* 4–10, 982–88). In line with their specific agendas, some authors utilized the ever-receding sustenance version, whereas others opted for the overhanging boulder. Prior to discussing Proclus’s account, it is advisable to touch upon the most influential earlier uses of Tantalus, since this will allow us to appreciate what is innovative and what is conventional in Proclus’s proposal.

PRE-PROCLEAN ACCOUNTS OF TANTALUS

In his classic study of Pythagorean literature, Armand Delatte interestingly suggested that the Pythagoreans regarded the torments of Tantalus as symbolizing the miserable plight of the profane who, because of their unworthiness, could not partake of Pythagoras’s revelations and thus benefit from his sacred doctrines.³ The scholar based his argument on the famous testimony of Iamblichus, who in *De Vita Pythagorica* 34.245 likens those ignorant of Pythagoras’s profound wisdom to Tantalus: “They suffer, since they are present in the midst of [his] oral teachings, while enjoying nothing” (λυπῶνται παρόντων αὐτῶν ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἀκουσμάτων μηδὲν ἀπολαύοντες).⁴ It is certainly possible (but not provable) that the early Pythagoreans made such a use of the figure of Tantalus to illustrate the advantageous position of the initiated: those who were privy to Pythagoras’s secret knowledge and duly purified by it would have at their disposal an all-encompassing guide for their lives, whereas the unenlightened would have the toothsome fruit of “things heard” (ἀκούσματα) within their reach but could never taste it (i.e., they could listen to the esoteric “oral instructions” but would remain utterly incapable of comprehending their proper meaning). As we shall see, one could argue that this bears a certain resemblance to Proclus’s account (in both cases, the uninitiated end up suffering the agonies of Tantalus), but Iamblichus’s late testimony

3 Delatte 1915 makes this point twice: at 120 (“le symbole de la triste existence des profanes qui n’ont point de part à la Révélation de Pythagore”) and at 135 (“l’image de la triste condition des profanes qui ne peuvent, à cause de leur indignité, recevoir la révélation pythagoricienne et jouir des bienfaits des doctrines sacrées”).

4 Where no English reference is provided, the translation is my own.

is neither an allegorical interpretation itself nor does it allow us to infer that the first Pythagoreans practiced the allegoresis of Homer.⁵ Furthermore, given the encomiastic purpose of *De Vita Pythagorica*⁶ and given Iamblichus's barbarophilic perspective,⁷ one must approach this testimony with the utmost caution.

While in Homer (*Od.* 11.576–600) Tantalus appears along with Tityos and Sisyphus, Plato explicitly refers to the poet's celebrated account in the eschatological myth of his *Gorgias*.⁸ In this dialogue, the three malefactors are briefly invoked (525d2–e2) as “examples” (παράδειγματα) illustrating the eternal torments awaiting those who perpetrate “the greatest and unholy offences” (μέγιστα καὶ ἀνοσιώτατα ἀμαρτήματα). Nevertheless, the Platonic Socrates is only gesturing at the three characters, as he bends over backwards to persuade the unyielding Callicles and his audience that there is a better way of life than the one which the sophists ardently advocate. Crucially, the three figures are not subject to any allegorical interpretation, which is scarcely surprising given Plato's undisguised mistrust of allegoresis (see *Resp.* 378d3–8). Rather, the entire eschatological account (along with all the Homeric motifs) is expressly qualified as merely a μῦθος (*Grg.* 523a2, 527a5). It is worth noting here that Proclus does refer to Plato's treatment of the king and other sinners in his *Commentary on the Republic*, where he points out (1.168.26–169.4) that in the “journey to the underworld” (νέκυια) of his *Gorgias*, Plato himself openly acknowledges that he draws a great deal from Homer.⁹ Otherwise, however, this passing reference to the suffering “Tantaluses” (Τάνταλοι) by Proclus is irrelevant for his allegoresis of the king as expounded in the *Commentary on the Cratylus*.

A far more pertinent and elaborate use of the three malefactors is to be found in Lucretius, who in all probability is aiming at no other than the

5 With regard to the former point, see Buffière 1956.487, who aptly diagnoses: “Simple comparaison . . . plutôt qu'un vrai symbolisme.” With regard to the latter point, see Lamberton 1986.31–43, who extensively discusses the possibility of the early Pythagoreans' allegoresis of Homer and, tellingly, finds the evidence for it to be “slim at best” (43).

6 See, e.g., O'Meara 1989.36 and Staab 2002.208.

7 See, e.g., Athanassiadi 2006.155–59 and Domaradzki 2021.384–88.

8 From the vast literature on this myth, see, e.g., Daniels 1992, Fussi 2001, Brickhouse and Smith 2007, and Catana 2020, with further references.

9 Lamberton 2012.241 ad loc. helpfully points out that Proclus employs the term νέκυια with reference to Plato's eschatological myths. For another brief reference to the three malefactors in Proclus's *Commentary on the Republic*, see 2.166.1–5.

Platonic *Gorgias*.¹⁰ Most generally, *De Rerum Natura* 3.978–1023 demystifies the infantile delusions of men about hell and its alleged punishments: if in Plato the realm of Hades was placed underground, then Lucretius locates it in this world. Thus the horrors of infernal anguish are explained as “projections” of our earthly sufferings. Lucretius makes the objects of his attack clear in the opening (978–79) and closing (1018–23) lines of his censure: those “fools” (*stulti*, 1023), who do not purify themselves from superstitions by means of the Epicurean gospel, fail to understand that all the torments of Acheron exist solely *in vita nobis* (979), which is why they inevitably let their terrified and uneducated minds turn their terrestrial existence into an *Acherusia vita* (1023). Thus the figure of Tantalus is presented (981–82) as embodying our “empty fear of the gods” (*divum metus . . . inanis*). When exploiting the non-Homeric version of the king’s punishment (e.g., Pind. *Ol.* 1.54–64 and Eur. *Or.* 4–10, 982–88), Lucretius caricatures (3.980) this unwarranted superstition as a “mighty rock” (*magnum . . . saxum*) that hangs over Tantalus. While this mocking image harks back to the representation of *religio* at 1.65 as a horrifying creature “standing over” men and threatening them from above (*super instans* → *superstitio* = *religio* = *divum metus*),¹¹ Lucretius labels our dread of the gods as “hollow” (*cassa*, 3.981) and “empty” (*inanis*, 982), because Epicurus has already liberated us from the groundless belief in divine punishment.¹² Hence Lucretius’s vituperative treatment of Tantalus targets both the fear of the gods and the individuals who foolishly succumb to it: the tortures which the king (and other malefactors) must undergo in the underworld

10 Apart from Tantalus (3.980–83), Tityos (984–94), and Sisyphus (995–1002), Lucretius also refers to the Danaids (1003–10), as well as to Cerberus and the Furies (1011–13). The portrayal of the Danaids is presumably a polemical reference to Plato’s *Gorgias* 492e7–494a5 (on which see, esp., Reinhardt 2004.39–43, but also Gale 1994.37 with n. 136 and Kenney 2014.214). The reference to Cerberus and the Furies, on the other hand, is followed by a depiction of the terrors of hell (up till line 1023), which seems to be echoing Democritus’s (Stob. 4.52.40 = DK 68 B 297) explanation of the human trepidation about the afterlife in terms of the dread of retribution for transgressions (on which see, esp., Konstan 2008.66–67, but also Wallach 1976.86–87, Ackermann 1979.73, Gale 1994.37 with n. 133, and Kenney 2014.215).

11 See, esp., West 1969.98, but also Ackermann 1979.65, Gale 1994.38, and Kenney 2014.210.

12 The versified Principal Doctrine I (1.44–49 = 2.646–51) states this in no uncertain terms. In connection with the Epicurean repudiation of Hades, it is also worth quoting here the famous remark by Diogenes of Oenoanda, who scornfully asserts that tales about “those Tityoses and Tantaluses” (τοὺς Τιτυοὺς καὶ τοὺς Τανταντάλους) do not frighten him at all (Smith frag. 73). This is, of course, another rejection of the figures scathingly ridiculed by Lucretius.

represent the unnecessary sufferings to which non-Epicureans injudiciously condemn themselves in this world.

Lucretius's approach should not be rashly labeled as "allegorical" because the poet does not assume conscious allegory on the part of the authors of the myths and unveils no covert sense.¹³ Interestingly, though, Cicero's highly comparable interpretation of Tantalus's rock is closer to allegoresis, since the account he puts forward not only excavates a latent meaning from underneath the story but also credits the ancient poets with a purposeful figurative composition. In his *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero has Marcus explain (4.35) the *saxum* looming over Tantalus as symbolizing the *terror* that hangs over those whose minds turn away from reason: the uneducated are forced to cower beneath the overhanging boulder of irrational fears. Importantly, the poets are expressly said to make the stone of Tantalus signify what it does: *significantes poëtae . . . faciunt* (4.35). Before leaving these accounts of Tantalus's torments, we should observe that the τόπος of the suspended rock was usually employed non-allegorically. Thus the impending boulder is compared to superstitious fear by Plutarch (*De Superst.* 11.170f), to the tyrant's fears by both Xenophon (*Oec.* 21.12) and by Dio Chrysostomus (*Or.* 6.55), and to death, again, by Cicero (*Fin.* 1.60). As will be seen, Proclus also alludes to the overhanging stone, which, however, he takes to be an allegory of incarnation.

Additionally, the story of Tantalus was also invoked in denunciations of such vices as greed, overindulgence, and the like. These accounts of Tantalus build on the moralizing use of the king by Teles, who exploited the ever-receding water and food version of the myth rather than the suspended rock. In his *On Poverty and Wealth* (Stob. 4.33.31 = Hense 34.9–35.5), the Cynic quoted Homer's depiction (*Od.* 11.591–92) of Tantalus's agony to illustrate how the "stinginess" (ἀνελευθερία) and "despondency" (δυσελπιστία) of certain individuals toss the wine, food, and fruit not up into the clouds but towards various markets and taverns so that "they taste nothing, while craving" (ἐπιθυμοῦντες οὐδενὸς γεύονται). For Teles, the

13 As is stressed by Konstan 2008.62 n. 66: "Lucretius' explanation of how the idea of hell's torments arose is not allegory in the traditional sense, for no intention is ascribed to the inventors of the tales, nor are they seen to convey a hidden meaning to be decoded by the audience" (see also Konstan 2005.xvii–xviii). In a similar vein, Neumeister 1997.25 refuses to characterize the Acheron interpretation as an instance of allegoresis. For scholars who view this passage as (in one way or another) allegorical, see, e.g., West 1969.97–103, Wallach 1976.85–89, Ackermann 1979.62–74, Gale 1994.36–38, 94, Reinhardt 2004, and Kenney 2014.209–18.

king is the incarnation of avarice and covetousness, whose unquenchable insatiability sentences the malefactor to the torments of permanent discontent. This moralizing explanation unearths no ἀλληγορία but merely utilizes the poet to make a doctrinal point.¹⁴ Hence it is best to categorize Teles' use of Tantalus as an instance of simile rather than allegoresis. Importantly, the Cynic's account of the king as the epitome of parsimony and rapacity is echoed in Phaedrus (*App.* 7.7–9), Horace (*Sat.* 1.1.68–72), Petronius (82.5), Lucian (*Tim.* 18, *Dial. mort.* 17, *Char.* 15), and Maximus of Tyre (33.4d), for whom Tantalus is a pathetic miser and/or desperate hedonist incapable of satisfying his exuberant desires.¹⁵ The last case is particularly interesting for our analyses, as it foreshadows the Neoplatonic uses of the king by Macrobius and Proclus. In his *Oration* 33, the Middle Platonist Maximus interprets (4d) Tantalus as symbolizing:

δίψα διηνεκῆς ἀνδρὸς φιληδόνου, καὶ ἡδονῆςνάματα
προσιόντα καὶ ἀπιόντα αἴθις, καὶ παλίρροια ἐπιθυμιῶν,
καὶ λῦπαι πικραὶ ταύταις ἀνακεκραμέναι, καὶ ταραχαί,
καὶ φόβοι.

The continuous thirst of a hedonist, the streams of pleasure advancing and retreating again, the ebb and flow of desires and bitter pains mixed with these, the disorders and fears. (trans., modified, by Trapp 1997.264)

Maximus evidently utilizes the Cynic τόπος but gives it a Platonic flavor: the malefactor is not simply the personification of meanness but—first and foremost—of “pleasure” (ἡδονή) and “desire” (ἐπιθυμία).¹⁶ It is worth noting here that *Oration* 33 is a part of Maximus's vehement onslaught against Epicurean ethics: the pursuit of pleasures and desires leads to excruciating suffering rather than any meaningful happiness. Thus Tantalus is deciphered as a mindless hedonist who turns out to be impoverished

14 Pace, e.g., Gale 1994.37–38 with n. 137 and Kenney 2014.210, who are inclined to regard Teles' use of Tantalus as allegorical. Fuentes González far more accurately—in my opinion—classifies Teles' use of Tantalus as a commonplace (1992.177: “un lugar común” and 1998.382: “un lieu commun”). See also the next note.

15 All these uses of Tantalus—as Hense 1909.34 ad loc. astutely points out—derive from the Cynics.

16 Trapp 1997.264 n. 17 stresses that Maximus's interpretation of Tantalus resembles Plato's account of the Danaids in *Grg.* 493a1–c3.

and dejected by his futile hunt for bliss. One should also point out that in his clearly allegorical interpretation, Maximus employs (33.4d) the word “riddle” (αἴνιγμα), which was the standard technical term in the early allegorists’ vocabulary.¹⁷ As has already been observed, a similar use of Tantalus crops up in the Neoplatonist Macrobius.

In his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, Macrobius puts forward (1.10.9) an allegorical interpretation which identifies the underworld with our “very bodies, incarcerated in which, the souls suffer a horrible imprisonment in darkness, terrifying with filth and blood” (“ipsa corpora, quibus inclusae animae carcerem foedum tenebris horridum sordibus et cruore patiuntur”).¹⁸ While Macrobius’s allegoresis brings to light the eschatology of Plato and Cicero, hell is, again, situated on earth, that is, in our mortal bodies: our terrestrial existence is, in fact, death, since true life consists in liberation from this carnal prison. The punishments in Hades are thereby an allegory of the terrible anguish which the soul experiences when it is entrapped in the body. More specifically, those souls that lose sight of the divine and are beguiled by things of this world have to descend from their celestial abodes and become entombed in flesh. They transform into living sepulchers that are doomed to undergo frightful torments in the corporeal realm. Macrobius adduces Tantalus (along with Tityos and Sisyphus) to illustrate this carnal inferno. Thus the king is said (1.10.13) to represent:

quos magis magisque adquirendi desiderium cogit praesentem copiam non videre; et, in affluentia inopes, egestatis mala in ubertate patiuntur, nescientes parta respicere, dum egent habendis.

Those whom the desire to acquire more and more compels not to see [their] present abundance, [those who are] poor in affluence and suffer the evils of destitution in [their] plenty, not knowing how to look back at what

17 See, esp., Struck 2004.39–50 and 171–79, but also Buffière 1956.48–49, Ford 2002.72–76 and 85–87, and Most 2016.54–55. With respect to Maximus’s expression (33.4d) “the riddle of Tantalus” (τὸ τοῦ Ταντάλου αἴνιγμα), Brumana 2019.797 n. 30 rightly points out that this phrase “é da intendersi nel senso metonimico ‘il significato allegorico [del mito] di Tantalò.’”

18 This conception—as Ramelli 2007.37 emphasizes—is “ispirata alle posizioni orfico-pitagorico-platoniche.” For an excellent discussion of Macrobius’s sources, see Elferink 1968.

they have [already] gained, as they [still] lack that which is to be owned.

Tantalus symbolizes here the ravenous craving for possessions. The king's punishment is an allegory of the perpetual distress and torture to which the souls imprudently condemn themselves when they forget their divine origin and divine destination. Put in Platonic terms, the malefactor stands for the irrational "appetitive part" (ἐπιθυμητικόν) of the soul, which has to be fought against tenaciously lest the soul repeatedly suffer the misfortune of embodiment. The idea that the soul is enticed by the evils of this world and has to pay the penalty of incarnation will be of paramount importance for Proclus's account of Tantalus.

Before concluding our survey of pre-Proclean uses of Tantalus, we should emphasize that, curiously enough, Tantalus is conspicuously absent from the major allegorical treatises of the Hellenistic period. Cornutus does not even mention him in his *Compendium Theologiae Graecae*, and neither does Pseudo-Plutarch in his *De Vita et Poesi Homeri*.¹⁹ Tantalus appears twice in Heraclitus's *Quaestiones Homericae*,²⁰ but, astonishingly, the king is not subject to any allegorical interpretation: rather, the malefactor is invoked for a purely rhetorical purpose, namely, as a stock example of loathsome impiety. The Allegorist begins his passionate apology of Homer with the assertion (1.1) that the poet "was completely impious, if he meant nothing allegorically" (πάντα . . . ἡσέβησεν, εἰ μηδὲν ἡλληγόρησεν), upon which he elaborates (1.3) that if Homer spoke "without any philosophical theory" (ἄνευ φιλοσόφου θεωρίας μηδενός) or "underlying allegorical trope" (ὑφεδρεύοντος ἀλληγορικοῦ τρόπου) then he would be a Salmoneus or a Tantalus. While the obvious point here is that only an allegorical interpretation of the poet can reveal his hidden theology, the blasphemous figures are adduced to amplify the vituperative effect: those who fail to unravel the poet's ὑπόνοιαι are bound to reduce the treasure trove of his epics to sacrilegious fables. To illustrate how misguided such

19 For the argument that the preferable title of Pseudo-Plutarch's tract is actually *De Homero*, see Kindstrand 1990.xii and Hillgruber 1994.2 n. 8.

20 The text along with the translation (at times modified) are those of Russell and Konstan 2005. For useful overviews of Heraclitus's general purpose in the tract, see, e.g., Pépin 1976.159–67, Blönnigen 1992.43–50, Dawson 1992.38–52, and Ramelli and Lucchetta 2004.403–45. For a brilliant discussion of the treatise's specific rhetoric, see Russell 2003. It may not be superfluous to note here that among the three aforementioned allegorists, Heraclitus is uniquely apologetic, on which see Domaradzki 2020.217–18.

a literal approach to Homer is, Heraclitus also quotes (1.3) Euripides' portrayal of Tantalus (*Or.* 10), where the king is said to have displayed "an unbridled tongue, a most disgraceful sickness" (ἀκόλαστον γλῶσσαν . . . αἰσχίστην νόσον). Subsequently, the same line from Euripides is quoted again at the end of *Quaestiones Homericae*, where Heraclitus launches a fervent assault on Plato (76.6–79.1). Not only does the Allegorist accuse Plato, along with Epicurus, of having shamelessly plagiarized Homer (4.1–4, 17.4–18.1, 79.2–79.11), but he also sharply opposes the poet's noble, godly and edifying discourse to both philosophers' doctrinal decadence. It is in this context that Heraclitus passes the harsh judgment (78.5) that Plato's words against Homer show the philosopher to have had "an unbridled tongue, a most disgraceful sickness" (ἀκόλαστον . . . γλῶσσαν, αἰσχίστην νόσον) like Tantalus or Capaneus. One more time, then, these abominable characters are invoked to magnify the psogistic effect and to ridicule the superficial reading of the poet. While the figure of Tantalus was similarly employed in various epideictic treatises (see, e.g., Aphthonius 36.4–6), these rhetorical uses of the malefactor are derivative and commonplace, not to say hackneyed.

It is now time to analyze what is arguably the most sophisticated and elaborate of the ancient accounts of Tantalus.

PROCLUS'S ACCOUNT OF TANTALUS

In his *Commentary on the Cratylus*, Proclus puts forward (§94, 46.24–47.7) the following interpretation of the story of Tantalus:

“Ὅτι τὸ κατὰ τὸν Τάνταλον διήγημα αἰνίττεται ψυχὴν
 τινὰ ἀναχθεῖσαν μὲν διὰ θεωρίας εἰς τὸ νοητὸν (τροφὴ
 γὰρ θεῶν τὸ νοητόν), ἀποπεσοῦσαν δὲ τοῦ νοητοῦ τόπου
 εἰς γένεσιν κατενεχθῆναι καὶ τῷ πλήθει τῆς ἀλογίας
 κοινωνῆσαι τὴν νοερὰν αὐτῆς ζωὴν νεοτελῆ μὲν οὖσαν
 (διὸ καὶ παῖδα λέγεσθαι Διός· πᾶσα γὰρ ψυχὴ νεοτελής
 ἐκ τῆς τοῦ Διὸς ἀύλης εἰς τὴν γένεσιν κάτεισιν· διὸ
 καὶ πατήρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε ὁ Ζεὺς), συγγενομένην δ'
 εἰδώλοις ἀντ' ἀληθῶν καὶ ἀναπληθεῖσαν τῶν ἐνταῦθα
 κακῶν ἐν Ἄιδου τίνειν δίκας, πολὺ μὲν ἔχουσαν
 ἐπηρτημένον αὐτῇ τὸ γεῶδες καὶ βρῖθον καὶ ἔνυλον,
 ὑφ' οὗ τὸ νοερὸν αὐτῆς κατοράρκεται, πάντων δ' οὖσαν
 ἐν ἐνδείᾳ τῶν θείων καρπῶν, καὶ φαντασίας μὲν αὐτῶν

ἴσχουσαν ψιλᾶς, διαπίπτουσαν δὲ τῆς ἀληθοῦς καὶ ἐναργοῦς αὐτῶν ἀντιλήψεως.

The tale of Tantalus hints enigmatically that a certain soul, which was elevated through contemplation into the Intelligible (for the Intelligible is the nourishment of the gods), but then fell away from the Intelligible region, was carried down into the [realm of] generation and [thus] joined its intellectual life, which was [only] newly initiated, with the multitude of irrationality; (and this is why [Tantalus] is called a son of Zeus: for every newly initiated soul descends into the [realm of] generation from the hall of Zeus; and this is why Zeus is “Father of both men and gods”); but because [this soul] associated with phantoms instead of true [things] and was filled with the evils of this world, it pays the penalty in Hades; for because it has much that is earthy, heavy and material hanging over it, by which its intellectual aspect has been buried, [this soul] is in want of all the divine fruits, and while it possesses bare representations of them, it falls short of [reaching] the true and clear apprehension of them.

Proclus expounds the tale of Tantalus as an allegory of the soul’s divine origin, its fall from grace, its punishment of incarnation, and its return to the noetic home. Thus the story of the king depicts the struggle of a human soul to catch a glimpse of true Being. Prior to incarnation, the soul was pure and disembodied as it enjoyed the state of epistemological bliss in the vicinity of the gods. But it was expelled from the Intelligible region and hurled into the sublunary realm of unstable Becoming because it had been lured by the evils of this world: the soul failed to strive for a vision of reality proper and chose deceptive appearances over true things (i.e., the Forms).

Obviously, this allegoresis of Tantalus is inextricably connected with the lemma on which Proclus comments. At *Cratylus* 395d3–e5, Plato explains that the king was given his name “correctly and in accordance with nature” (ὀρθῶς καὶ κατὰ φύσιν), because the name Tantalus derives from the “balancing” (ταλαντεία) of the stone over the malefactor’s head and from his being “most wretched” (ταλάντατος). While the idea that a personal name can be descriptively “significant” (ἐπώνυμος) is to be found already in Homer (e.g., *Il.* 9.562–64, *Od.* 19.407–09) and Hesiod (e.g.,

Theog. 144–45, 281–82), the name Tantalus—as David Sedley (2003.80) aptly notes—wonderfully fits the king's predicament. Since Plato points here to two coeval and complementary meanings that underlie the origin of Tantalus's name, his etymology clearly creates the premise for uncovering a complex philosophical message concealed beneath the veneer of the particular letters and syllables. Interestingly, however, Proclus departs from Plato in two crucial aspects: on the one hand, the Lycian philosopher focuses predominantly on a different version of the Tantalus story and, on the other, he places Plato's etymologies in a much broader Neoplatonic context.

While Plato alludes to the suspended boulder of Tantalus, Proclus utilizes primarily the ever-receding water and food version of the king's torture as canonized in *Odyssey* 11.582–92. The pool of water in which the king is immersed represents the realm of generation into which the soul descends as it takes on an earthly body and journeys through this sublunary world of ever-changing matter. The grove of trees, whose fruit always eludes the malefactor, represents the realm of eternal and immutable Being: the suffering Tantalus craves this noetic sustenance but it remains forever out of his reach. Thus the king is forced to make do with mere appearances, as he fails to attain a clear grasp of true reality: the divine fruits of contemplation. Nonetheless, Proclus also hints at the overhanging rock version. At §94, 47.3–4, he mentions the “earthy, heavy, and material” (γεώδες καὶ βρῖθον καὶ ἔνυλον), which the soul has “hanging over” (ἐπηρτημένον) it. This is clearly a nod to the suspended stone, which other authors prefer (e.g., Pind. *Ol.* 1.57–57b and Eur. *Or.* 6–7, 982–83).²¹ Thus the soul crouches down beneath the impending danger of incarnation. Presumably, Proclus took into account the non-Homeric version(s) of Tantalus's torments, because the poet describes only the king's punishment and not his crime (see *Od.* 11.582–92). However, Pindar, for example, specifies (*Ol.* 1.60–66) that the malefactor stole nectar and ambrosia from the gods, gave them to his human companions, and was therefore punished by the immortals: although Tantalus had been granted the honor of sharing a table with the gods (e.g., Eur. *Or.* 8–9), they banished him to the earth as retribution for his betrayal (e.g., Pind. *Ol.* 1.65–66). According to Proclus's allegoresis,

21 In his otherwise brilliant analysis, Buffière 1956.487–89 seems to overlook this aspect of Proclus's allegoresis. For scholars who correctly identify here a reference to the other version of the Tantalus story, see, e.g., Abbate 2017.616: “Allusione alla pena di Tantalo, su cui, secondo il mito, incombe anche un enorme masso che minaccia continuamente di cadergli sul capo.”

this exiled king symbolizes a soul which, owing to contemplation, was able for some time to feed on the noetic food—until it sinned miserably and fell into a body on earth.

Tantalus was also a son of Zeus (e.g., Eur. *Or.* 5, Pind. *Ol.* 1.57), and Proclus's fallen soul is likewise a child of Kronion, for—as the Lycian philosopher elucidates (§94, 46.29–47.1)—every soul descends onto the earth from the “court” or “hall” (αὐλή) of the “Father of both men and gods” (πατήρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε). While both these expressions are Homeric (see, e.g., *Od.* 4.74 and *Il.* 1.544, respectively), the former—as Robert M. van den Berg (2001.177) helpfully explains—later became a Chaldaean technical term: in his *Commentary on the Chaldaean Oracles* (des Places frag. 1, 206.3–6), Proclus clarifies that the “courts” (αὐλαί) are the “eternal orders” (ἀίδια τάξεις) where the divine beings dwell, and that there is also a “court open to all” (πανδεκτική αὐλή) where the elevated souls are received by the Father. Hence the hall of Zeus is the place from which the souls descend to their earthly exile and to which they ascend when they have liberated themselves from their bodily prisons.

Furthermore, Proclus also says (§94, 46.27–29) that this fallen soul joined its “intellectual life” (νοερὰν ζωὴν), which had been only “newly initiated” (νεοτελής) into the realm of the Intelligible, with the “multitude of irrationality” (πλήθει τῆς ἀλογίας). This Platonic view that incarnation is closely correlated with the soul's loss of rationality permeates Proclus's works. Thus, for instance, in the *Elements of Theology*, the soul's descent is explicated (§209, 182.16–20) in terms of the “addition of garments increasingly material” (προσθέσει χιτῶνων ἐνυλοτέρων) and the “acquisition of irrational lives” (ἀλόγους προσλαβούσα ζωάς).²² In the *Commentary on the Timaeus*, which offers the most extensive discussion on the topic, Proclus specifies (3.236.31–237.14), among other things, that the Demiurge creates the “highest pinnacles” (ἀκρότητες) of the irrational life, upon which the young gods fashion the mortal extension of this irrational existence.²³ Although there is a plethora of deities involved in the task of weaving the corporeal tunics of our irrational lives, Proclus assigns

22 The text along with the translation (at times modified) are those of Dodds 1963. Due to space limitations, the issue of the soul's “vehicles” (ὀχήματα) will not be addressed here. For a discussion of this matter, see Domaradzki 2022.420–23, with further references.

23 The text is that of Diehl 1906, and the translation (at times modified) is that of Tarrant 2017. On these “jeunes dieux,” see Opsomer 2003. On Proclus's complex views on the “Irrationalität der Seele,” see Opsomer 2006.

a prominent place in the process to Circe, who is said to preside over the realm of generation in both the *Commentary on the Cratylus* (§53, 22.7–8) and the *Commentary on the Alcibiades* (257.13–14). Thus Proclus's allegoresis of Tantalus sits very well with his account of Circe. In the former case, the fallen soul descends into the sublunary world of fluctuating matter and joins its intellectual life with the multitude of irrationality, whereas in the latter case, the enchantress produces the fleshly vestures of our irrational existence and governs the cycle of metempsychosis.²⁴ This means that the fate of Tantalus is similar to that of Odysseus's companions, since, in both cases, the heavenly noetic paradise is ill-advisedly traded for the irrational of here below.

In addition to *Cratylus*, the philosophical background for Proclus's allegoresis is provided by *Phaedrus* (esp. 246a3–249d3), which allows the etymological analyses of *Cratylus* to be placed in a much larger Neoplatonic context.²⁵ For the present considerations, the most relevant aspects of the celebrated *Phaedrus* myth are the following. Originally, the soul was perfectly winged, travelled above the earth with the gods, and lived a divine life among them. But no human soul is able to continually follow after the heavenly procession of the immortals: eventually each is inevitably weighed down by its innate irrationality until it loses the wings and descends into an earthly body. According to this account, which, again, is explicitly qualified as a μῦθος (253c7; cf. also 265b8–c1), the purpose of the wings is to enable the soul to ascend to the place where the gods dwell. At 247c3 the place is famously labeled as the “region above the heavens” (ὑπερουράνιος τόπος) and at 248b6 as the “plain of truth” (ἀληθείας πεδίον). It is on these supercelestial pastures that the soul grazes, as its wings are nourished by contemplating the realm of Forms and true Being (the sight of which is precisely the sustenance for the soul).

24 For an analysis of Proclus's account of the sorceress, see Domaradzki 2022. On Pseudo-Plutarch's transformation of the Circe episode into an allegory of the round of reincarnation, see Domaradzki 2020, with further references.

25 Buffière 1956.488 rightly stresses the importance of the *Phaedrus* myth for Proclus's allegoresis of Tantalus. For illuminating commentaries on this grand myth, see, e.g., Rowe 1986, Brisson 1989, Heitsch 1993, Reale 1993, and Yunis 2011, with further references. Van den Berg 2008.128–31 offers an excellent discussion of the broader Neoplatonic context in which Proclus develops his account of Tantalus (see also Abbate 2017.63–65). While Proclus frequently and explicitly refers to *Phaedrus* in his *Commentary on the Cratylus*, van den Berg 2006 usefully examines the relevance of this dialogue for Proclus's *Commentary on the Cratylus* and his *Platonic Theology* (on the latter, see also Sheppard 2000).

Naturally, there are numerous verbal correspondences and echoes between the *Phaedrus* myth and Proclus's allegoresis of Tantalus in the *Commentary on the Cratylus*. Thus, for example, in Plato (246d6), the function of the wings is to "lift upwards" (ἄγειν ἄνω) to the region of the divine, and in Proclus (§94, 46.25), the soul is also "elevated" (ἀναχθεῖσα) to the Intelligible. In Plato, the soul's "plumage" (πτέρωμα), its "intellectual capacity" (διάνοια), and the "nature of the wing" (τοῦ πτεροῦ φύσις) are "nourished" (τρέφεται) by contemplating the Forms in the Realm of Being (246e2, 247d1–4, 248c1–2), whereas in Proclus, the Intelligible is likewise the "nourishment" (τροφή) of the immortals (§94, 46.26). In Plato (248c7), the descending soul is "filled with forgetfulness and evil" (λήθης τε καὶ κακίας πλησθεῖσα),²⁶ while in Proclus (§94, 47.2), it is similarly "filled with the evils of this world" (ἀναπληθεῖσα τῶν ἐνταῦθα κακῶν). Finally, we should note that the term "newly initiated" (νεοτελής) appears both in Plato (250e1) and in Proclus (§94, 46.28). Of course, other dialogues are also alluded to. Thus, for instance, when Proclus says (47.3–5) that the soul's intellectual aspect "has been buried" (κατορώρκεται) by the "earthy, heavy, and material" (γεῶδες καὶ βρῖθον καὶ ἔνυλον), one could point to *Republic* 363d5–7 and *Phaedo* 81c8–9. In the former passage, Musaeus and his son "bury" (κατορύττουσιν) the impious and unjust in the mud of Hades, whereas in the latter, the corporeal is characterized as "heavy, burdensome, earthy, and visible" (ἐμβριθὲς δέ γε . . . καὶ βαρὺ καὶ γεῶδες καὶ ὄρατόν).²⁷ Hence, as has already been observed, Plato's *Cratylus* and its etymologies are put in a much wider ethical and eschatological context.

Indeed, in his account of the names of the members of the house of Tantalus, Proclus forcefully emphasizes (§90, 45.23–24) that "in his etymologies Plato despises matter but adheres most to the Form" (ἐν ταῖς ἐτυμολογίαις ὁ Πλάτων τῆς μὲν ὕλης καταφρονῶν, τοῦ δὲ εἶδους μάλιστα ἀντεχόμενος).²⁸ This makes it possible for Proclus to show that Plato's analyses of names have a clearly identifiable ethical and salvific underpinning. The Lycian philosopher insists (§89, 45.14–15) that Plato's

26 The term λήθη—as Yunis 2011.144 points out—pertains here to the soul's forgetfulness of the Forms and true Being.

27 In connection with the latter reference, see also *Phaedrus* 246d6–7, where the wings raise aloft "that which is heavy" (τὸ ἐμβριθές).

28 Interestingly, the word ἐτυμολογία (and its cognates) is attested solely in Proclus's *Commentary on the Cratylus*, where it is employed synonymously with ἐτυμολογία (see LSJ s.v.).

linguistic investigations into the “matter” of a name (i.e., its letters and syllables) serve primarily the purpose of revealing “the thing in itself” (ἐφ’ ἑαυτοῦ τὸ πρᾶγμα) that is under consideration. This means that Plato’s main focus is epistemological and soteriological rather than simply grammatical: his aim is to discover the true nature of the referent as expressed in the particular linguistic signs and, thereby, to salvage the soul from its bodily prison through knowledge of the Forms. Hence the name of Tantalus indicates the ethical obligation to seek the Intelligible, which is the proper nourishment of the soul. Tantalus symbolizes a soul that has lost hold of the noetic and plummeted into the sublunary realm of matter: as it became seduced by the evils of this world, this deplorable soul has foregone the divine fruits of contemplation and must now pay the penalty of incarnation. Needless to say, the sole remedy is to turn away from matter and towards the Intelligible: the salvation of the soul consists in its deliverance from the shackles of the corporeal and the return to its divine origin. Thus according to Proclus’s account, etymological inquiry leads to the spiritual ascent to the gods, while the story of Tantalus is a cautionary allegory of the soul’s heavenly origin, earthly tribulations, and divine destination.

CONCLUSIONS

In his *Commentary on the Cratylus*, Proclus puts forward an allegorical interpretation of the story of Tantalus which perfectly instantiates what Robert Lamberton (1986 and 1992) aptly terms “the spiritualization of Homer.” On this—*sit venia verbo*—“anagogic” reading, the tale of the king is an allegory of the soul’s celestial origin and its divine destiny of re-entering the heavens. Unsurprisingly, the most important background for this ingenious allegoresis is provided by Plato’s philosophy: his ethics, eschatology, epistemology, and metaphysics. Notwithstanding this, Proclus is also prepared to deviate from Plato whenever his Neoplatonic agenda requires it. Thus he concentrates primarily on the ever-receding sustenance version of the Tantalus story and only alludes to the overhanging boulder. Furthermore, the linguistic analyses of *Cratylus* are merely taken as a point of departure for exploring the latent ethical lessons of Plato’s etymologies: examining the name of Tantalus teaches us to strive solely for the divine fruits of contemplation and thereby take care of our soul. This admonition pushes further what other Platonists have made of Tantalus. The Neoplatonist Macrobius interprets the king as an allegory of the soul that became enamored of earthly things, lost the sight of the

divine, and has therefore been ensepulchered in flesh. The Middle Platonist Maximus, on the other hand, interprets Tantalus as the symbol of unreflective hedonism, which is equated with Epicurean ethics and viewed as the best recipe for chronic unhappiness. As we have seen, these accounts of the malefactor can be traced back to Teles, who, however, does not interpret Tantalus allegorically and, obviously, uses the figure in accordance with the ideals of Cynic ethics. Lucretius's "deistic" account of Tantalus is utterly irreconcilable with the profoundly teleological perspective of Proclus: although both philosophers invoke the suspended rock, the former identifies it with the superstitious fear of the gods, whereas the latter with the divinely ordained punishment of incarnation. Finally, we should also note that Iamblichus's (rather than Pythagoras's) use of the king might be seen as bearing some resemblance to Proclus's account, since in both cases, the uninitiated suffer the torments of Tantalus, while the privy and purified enter the supercelestial noetic paradise.

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