Texts and Studies

Escaping Plato's Cave: Some Platonic Metaphors in Symeon the New Theologian

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Summary

This article proposes that the imagery Symeon the New Theologian employs for expressing his mystical experience in several passages of his *Hymns of Divine Love* might have been inspired by the texts of Plato and the Platonic tradition. The *Hymns* showing the traces of St. Symeon's rethinking of the allegory of the Cave, the metaphor of the wings of the soul, and the intellectual Paradise of virtues are analyzed, opening the discussion on the earliest stages of the Platonic revival in eleventh-century Byzantium.

Keywords

Symeon the New Theologian – Hymns of Divine Love – Plato's Cave – wings of soul – Paradise of virtues

The writings of Symeon the New Theologian, particularly, his *Hymns of Divine Love* are strikingly personal works revealing the inner world of the saint, his desires, anxieties, joys, and sorrows in an unparalleled way in the Byzantine mystical and ascetic traditions. Symeon's most brilliant descriptions of both personal communion with God and desperate feeling of abandonment made

him be regarded as the main and typological “mystic” of the Byzantine tradition. This attitude contributed to the shift of Symeon’s texts from the theological and philosophical field to the psychological and literary field, for a long time tacitly justifying a departure from solving complex problems of determining his proper place in the preceeding spiritual and theological tradition of Byzantium and the Eastern Christianity in general due to the uniqueness of St. Symeon’s mystical experience.¹

To some degree Symeon the New Theologian himself fostered this attitude when on many occasions he wrote of his loneliness and solitude, and stressed his personal experience of encountering God as well as the inadequacy of the human language to express that encounter. On the one hand, the corpus of Symeon’s writings is quite sufficient for the study of the literary and spiritual heritage of the saint and his era. On the other hand we can still find a valuable layer in Symeon’s writings if we try to identify the sources that inspired him to use certain conceptual structures and metaphors for expressing his undeniably unique mystical experience. This may help us to better locate him in the spiritual landscape of his time, seeing him not only as a unique spiritual author, a poet, and a theologian, but as a person with an individual personal and intellectual history.

However, a methodological caveat has to be made. Apart from the Scriptures, Symeon the New Theologian does not seem to quote much, and even when he does use other sources, they mostly represent standard monastic literature such as the ascetic writings of Mark the Hermit, John of the Ladder, Diadochus of Photike, Isaac the Syrian, ps.-Macarius, as well as such Christian “classics” as Gregory of Nazianzus or John Chrysostom. More recently, some important pseudo-Dionysian and Evagriian parallels have also been identified.² Yet, the scarcity of the identified sources of Symeon does not necessarily mean that he did not use other sources, which he read, thought over, appropriated, and which in a way became his own words. Paradoxically, the better the author adopted the text of another author, the more difficult it is for us to recognize it.

1 See, for example, F. Bernard, *Writing and Reading Byzantine Secular Poetry, 1025–1081*, Oxford, 2014, p. 157.

2 See P. Argárate, “Simeón el Nuevo Teólogo. *Status quaestionis*. Fuentes e teología,” *Studia monastica*, 55.2 (2013), pp. 269–290; И. Алфеев, *Преподобный Симеон Новый Богослов и православное предание*, St. Petersburg, 42010, pp. 177–191, published in English as H. Alfeyev, *St. Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, Oxford, 2000; I. Perczel, “Denys l’Aréopagite et Syméon le Nouveau Théologien,” in: *Denys l’Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident. Actes du colloque international, Paris, 21–24 septembre 1994*, ed. Y. de Andia (Collection des Études augustinienes. Série Antiquité, 151), Paris, 1997, pp. 341–357; I. Perczel, “Review of: Ed. A. Markopoulos. *Τέσσερα κείμενα για την ποίηση του Συμεών του Νέου Θεολόγου*. Athens: Kanakes, 2008,” *BZ*, 103.1 (2010), ss. 56–57.

In such a case we may not find substantial verbal citations, but only some common imagery, metaphors or conceptual correspondences, and it would be very difficult to detect and, which is even more important for our purposes, to prove the borrowing.

This being said, we should turn to a tradition, for a long time considered alien to Symeon, which might have helped him to formulate his mystical experience, and present some Platonist parallels and allusions in Symeon's writings. Luckily, in our case Symeon the New Theologian himself gives unambiguous clues to his sources.

In a lengthy passage of the *First Ethical Discourse* Symeon describes a prisoner who has been kept in a dark and gloomy cell since his very birth. The lamp gives him some ideas of his surrounding cell but he is completely unaware of the sun shining outside, and the rest of the world. Symeon explains that this prisoner is any person basing his knowledge of the cosmos solely on sense perception and remaining ignorant of divine works. When an opening is made in the roof and is gradually enlarged, the prisoner first sees the sky, and then a great light, from which the amazed prisoner cannot remove his gaze, coming to realize his confinement but still unable to truly understand the vastness of the world around until he is released. Then Symeon goes on to explain the simile:

...picture this whole world as being in fact a dark and lightless prison, and the light of our sun as like that of a little lamp, while outside there lies the inexpressible and ineffable light of the Sun in Three Persons, the light which transcends word and thought and every created light. The things in the world which are lit by that sun are both invisible and unknowable, ineffable and unreachable, for everyone who inhabits our prison <...> In seeing heaven both day and night, the soul is taught from it, and every day learns from it that it is without evening, infinite, and inexpressible. Returning to this prison again the soul no longer desires the world, but longs to see once more that other place and that which it contains.³

The parallel to the famous simile of Plato's Cave from the *Republic*, VII has been noted by the translator of the passage A. Golitzin and has been analyzed in some detail by C. Barber.⁴ However, there is much more to it for St. Symeon

3 *Ethical Discourse* I, 12; Syméon le Nouveau Théologien. *Traité théologiques et éthiques*, ed. J. Darrouzès (SC, 122), Paris, 1966, p. 298.364–302.415; trans. A. Golitzin, *St. Symeon the New Theologian, On the Mystical Life: the Ethical Discourses*, vol. 1, Crestwood, NY, 1995, pp. 76–77.

4 Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 1, p. 74, n. 5; C. Barber, *Contesting the Logic of Painting: Art and Understanding in Eleventh-Century Byzantium* (Visualising the Middle Ages, 2), Leiden

than the metaphorical use of the philosophical *simile* for rhetorical purposes. The above description of spiritual and epistemological progress is based on Symeon's personal experience closely paralleled in the description of the revelation of the pillar of light descending upon him from above, while sitting in a dark cell in *Hymn* 25.⁵ Both texts should be read together. Symeon explores Plato's message of the relationship between the sensible and the intellectual worlds as image and truth one step further within his genuinely Christian universe.⁶ The rethinking of mystical experience in terms of Plato's Cave allows Symeon to expand it into various levels – the dark cell simultaneously represents the immediate state of soul when it is immersed in earthly sense perceptions, the chronologically preceding state of Symeon's spiritual life before receiving divine enlightenment, and the state of all mankind which may and should get to know God just as St. Symeon did.

The importance of the simile of Plato's Cave and its adequacy for expressing Symeon's spiritual experience is confirmed by its recurrent usage in his writings. The *Hymns* contain several clear allusions to the allegory of the Cave in addition to the passage from the *First Ethical Discourse*. The most extensive treatment of the allegory can be found in *Hymn* 30, where Symeon writes:

He sees himself in hell, I say, in the shining of light. For none of those sitting there can know themselves before being illuminated by the divine light, but are ignorant about the darkness, decay, and death, which restrain them. But the soul I speak about sees the light and understands that the whole of it was in most terrible darkness under the strongest confinement of profound ignorance... It sees herself bound, with hands and feet fettered, withered and polluted... Truly, the one who sees all that, would groan and weep, and would want to follow Christ, who lit that light.⁷

– Boston, 2007, pp. 35–43. Hannah Hunt mentions Plato's simile of the Cave in relation to the contrast of light and darkness in the writings of Symeon without detailed elaboration (H. Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief: Tears of Contrition in the Writings of Early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers* (The Medieval Mediterranean, 57), Leiden – Boston, 2004, p. 206).

5 *Hymn* 25, 1–50; the numbers of the hymns and their lines are given according to the edition: *Symeon Neos Theologos. Hymnen*, Hrsg. A. Kambylis, Berlin – New York, 1976. For the biblical background of St. Symeon's visions, see J.A. McGuckin, "The Luminous Vision in Eleventh-Century Byzantium: Interpreting the Biblical and Theological Paradigms of St. Symeon the New Theologian," in: *Work and Worship at the Theotokos Evergetis 1050–1200*, eds. M. Mullett and A. Kirby (Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations, 5.2), Belfast, 1997, pp. 90–123.

6 See *Hymn* 22.98; *Hymn* 50.7; *Hymn* 51.70; *Hymn* 57.1.

7 *Hymn* 30. 206–51.

After the ascent to Christ, when the Lord completely healed Symeon's wounds, loosened his bonds, and illuminated his entire flesh with glory, He brings Symeon down "to the sensual and bodily tabernacle," confining him to the sensual and the visible world. Christ commands Symeon "to live and cohabitate with those sitting in darkness..., better to teach them, to lead to the knowledge of what wounds they are inflicted with and what bonds restrain them."⁸ At times of frustration with his spiritual disciples, the darkness of the Cave for Symeon symbolizes the spiritual state of some of his monks who are paralleled to the prisoners in Plato's Cave, willing to kill the guide after his return from the light and attempts to lead them out of darkness.⁹ In another Hymn, the dark Cave is the place, or rather the state, where Symeon hides at times unable to withstand seeing the unbearable glory of God.¹⁰ The Cave is also an interior state of the soul covered by the veils of ignorance,¹¹ failing to gather the "oil" of virtues for being lit by God and remaining unenlightened by the divine light.

The richness of Plato's simile allows Symeon to explore a whole variety of states and meanings: epistemological with the Cave as a representation of the world of the senses and of the becoming,¹² ethical with the Cave as a representation of the fallen state of delusion and spiritual ignorance,¹³ polemical against the official "discursive theologians," who substituted a living knowledge of God with theoretical knowledge about God,¹⁴ or personal and biographical.

In his *Hymns* Symeon the New Theologian over and over again returns to his ascetical "conversion" and narrates his spiritual biography using various conceptual languages. In Hymn 41 he tells the story of his spiritual upbringing and nourishment by Christ using the imagery from 1 Cor 3:2 and Heb 5:12–14 on spiritual progress as a passage from milk to hard food.¹⁵ In *Hymn* 18 Symeon tells the same story using the imagery of the Israelites' escape from the yoke of the Pharaoh,¹⁶ while in *Hymn* 37 Symeon again speaks of the same experience

8 *Hymn* 30. 335–349.

9 *Hymn* 43.41–65.

10 *Hymn* 11.79–95. In his *Ennead* VI.9.3 Plotinus in very similar terms describes the same feeling of ultimate and painful frustration from trying to grasp the formless, and a retreat to the realm of the sensible.

11 *Hymn* 21.1–9.

12 *Hymn* 57.1.

13 *Hymn* 24.216–239.

14 *Hymn* 52.91–138.

15 *Hymn* 41.51–71.

16 *Hymn* 18.161–172.

but already using the language of the dynamics of epistemological enlightenment from Plato's *Republic*.¹⁷

Once we have a key text it is not difficult to see the correspondence to the stages of spiritual growth in knowledge of God that Symeon experienced and Plato's narrative on the gradual enlightenment. The whole of *Thanksgiving* 11 thus appears to be the retelling of the Cave allegory in terms of stages of progress in the knowledge of God by Symeon himself.¹⁸

At this point we need to question whether the use of Plato's allegory in Symeon the New Theologian is a singular case or whether we can detect more Platonic allusions in his *Hymns*? Scholars have already noted some striking parallels in the description of the One God revealed as light as described as the Sun in Symeon and metaphors of the Sun (ultimately going back to Plato's *Republic* 507d) and light as applied to the One in Plotinus,¹⁹ and, although this topic deserves a more detailed analysis, we will not dwell on it here due to the restraints of time. I propose looking at two other sets of parallels: Plato's metaphor of the wings of the soul, and the Philonic description of the Paradise of virtues.

In the *Hymn* 27, 95–120, Symeon uses the allegory of the Cave perhaps in the most “Platonic” way, describing the longing for God of a loving soul bonded to the body. When released from the bond it is elevated “on the wings of love” and is united to God:

Now they are only deficient in that they are held, covered, and hidden by the body, and, woe is me, as prisoners in a dungeon, seeing the sun and its rays which penetrate through the hole, but unable to comprehend or behold it all being outside of the prison or clearly see it, peeping into the air. And this is what saddens them that they do not see the entire Christ, and even if they do, they cannot get rid of the bonds of the body, although they are freed from all passions and addictions; even though they are freed from many of them, they are still retained by one. For the one who is bound by many bonds, does not expect to be released from them; while he who could break many of the bonds and is (still) held by one, grieves more than others and always diligently seeks to get rid of that one [bond] to be able to become free and thus to walk in joy and eagerly go to the one

17 *Hymn* 37.16–32.

18 For the parallels, see the Appendix.

19 Г. Зяблицев, “Плотин и святоотеческая литература” [G. Zyablitshev, “Plotinus and patristic literature”], *Богословские труды*, 31 (1992), pp. 289–292, V. Hladký, “Světelná metaforika v Hymnech Symeóna Nového Theologa a její role v Plótinově filosofii” [“The metaphor of light in the Hymns of Symeon the New Theologian and its role in the philosophy of Plotinus”], *Parrésia*, 4 (2010), pp. 11–32.

he loved and for whose sake he endeavored to be released from the bonds. Thus, let us also look for that One who can free us from bonds; let us love Him whose beauty astonishes every mind, strikes every heart, inflicts every soul and, lifting it as if on wings to love, tightly binds and connects with God forever (ἐκείνον, οὗ τὸ κάλλος πᾶσαν ἐκπλήττει ἔννοιαν, πᾶσαν ἐκπλήττει φρένα, πᾶσαν τιτρώσκει τε ψυχὴν καὶ πτεροὶ πρὸς ἀγάπην καὶ συγκολλᾷ καὶ συνενοῖ τῷ θεῷ ἀεννάως).²⁰

This passage was likely to have been inspired by Gregory of Nazianzus' *Panegyric on His Brother Caisarius*:

I believe the words of the wise, that every fair and God-beloved soul, when, set free from the bonds of the body, it departs hence, at once enjoys a sense and perception of the blessings which await it, inasmuch as that which darkened it has been purged away, or laid aside – I know not how else to term it – and feels a wondrous pleasure and exultation, and goes rejoicing to meet its Lord, having escaped as it were from the grievous poison of life here, and shaken off the fetters which bound it and held down the wings of thought (τὸ τῆς διανόιας πτερόν), and so enters on the enjoyment of the bliss laid up for it, of which it has even now some conception.²¹

Indeed, on many occasions when we see Platonic echoes in Symeon the New Theologian, it may be the adoption of already Christianized Platonic *stratum* through Gregory of Nazianzus or Dionysius the Areopagite, and a detailed analysis of its both textual and conceptual transmission to Symeon still remains a *desideratum*.²² Thus, the Platonic metaphor of the wings was adopted by the Fathers since the early period of Christian exegesis. Gregory of Nyssa perceived the Platonic wings through the lens of the Scripture which uses the imagery of the wings, for example, in the Psalms or in the Song of Songs.²³ However, in our case it is interesting to observe that in addition to introducing the motif of the Cave-prison in his paraphrase of Gregory of Nazianzus,

²⁰ *Hymn* 27.95–120.

²¹ *Oration* 7, 21; Grégoire de Nazianze, *Discours* 6–12, ed. M.-A. Calvet-Sebasti (SC, 405), Paris, 1995, pp. 232.2–234.12.

²² For the Platonist influences in Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, see К. Морескини, *История патристической философии* [C. Moreschini, *History of Patristic philosophy*], Moscow, 2011, pp. 628–716. For pseudo-Dionysius the literature is immense.

²³ For a broad analysis of the ways how the Christian theologians adopted the Platonic metaphor of the wings of the soul, see, for example, J. Danielou, "La colombe et la ténèbre dans la mystique byzantine ancienne," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, 23 (1954), pp. 397–400.

Symeon seems to go back to the original source of the metaphor in Plato's *Phaedrus* 246. In Gregory, as in Symeon, the body represents the fetters of the soul. The human soul in Plato is likened to the chariot driven by a pair of winged horses, and in his use of the metaphor as applied to the earthly body holding down the wings of rightful thoughts about God, Gregory seems to focus on the negative bonds of bodily existence (another motif of Plato from *Phaedo* 67d), restraining the mind, while Symeon changes the metaphor into the positive meaning of wings: the souls of the righteous, having been released from the bonds of the body are carried up on the wings of love to be united with God. In *Phaedo* Plato speaks about the philosophers (or the "lovers of wisdom") who do not have a fear of death, longing for wisdom just like some people willingly follow their deceased beloved to the other world, whereas further in *Phaedrus* 248d Plato qualifies that the highest kinds of souls are those which "have seen the most"; such souls "shall enter into the birth of a man who is to be a philosopher or a lover of beauty or one of a musical or loving nature" (φιλοσόφου ἢ φιλοκάλου ἢ μουσικοῦ τινος καὶ ἐρωτικοῦ). The connection of the perfect soul, attracted to God as a Supreme Beauty on the wings of love is absent in Gregory, but is present in Symeon, indicating his probable direct use of Plato as the original source.

The fact, that the reference to the winged chariot was not accidental but implied a particular understanding of the wings of the soul as love and longing for God, is confirmed by two other references in the *Hymns*. In *Hymn* 21, Symeon instructs his readers to imitate the virtues of various animals. After mentioning a deer, escaping the hands of hunters, Symeon gives advice to spread one's wings like a beautiful bird and pass over all traps. He adds, "understand the wings as holy love, without which there is no escape (πτέρυγας νόει τὴν ἀγίαν ἀγάπην, ἥς ἄνευ οὐδαμοῦ διαβήσῃ)."24

In *Hymn* 50, using the metaphor of wings, Symeon seems to explore yet another aspect of Plato's allegory of the chariot, namely, how different ranks of souls, depending on their closeness to contemplating the truth, are placed in bodies to produce various ranks of people. Symeon inverts the story to eliminate the Platonic idea of the pre-existence of souls; however, he retains something important for his doctrine of virtues: it is one truth – God – Who unfolds Himself in a variety of virtues and in a variety of their magnitudes:

The saints, as we have said, each rising on the wings of their virtues, will go out to meet the Lord, each according to his merit how he prepared

24 *Hymn* 21.422–423. St. Symeon's source of likening the virtues to various animals was probably Gregory of Nyssa (see, for example, the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 13; PG 44, col. 1044A).

himself, of course, closer or farther from the Creator (τῶν ἀρετῶν ἕκαστος πτεροῖς ἀρθέντες εἰς ἀπάντησιν καὶ οὗτοι τοῦ δεσπότου ἀναβήσονται ἕκαστος κατ' ἀξίαν· ὡς ἑαυτὸν τις προευτρέπισε πάντως ἐγγύθεν ἢ πόρρωθεν ἔσται τοῦ κτίστου).²⁵

Virtues are immanent actions of the transcendent God remaining undivided in His Self and revealed in His multiplicity according to the capacities of individual human souls as particular acts of grace, reflecting the goodness of One God, just like many mirrors reflecting the image of the same Sun.²⁶ In *Hymn* 47, Symeon asks God to plant the Tree of Life in him and unite the Holy Spirit with his soul:

Blessed are You, o Lord, blessed are You, blessed are You, the One, the most blessed and merciful, who gave the light of your commandments to my heart, and planted Your Tree of Life in me! You showed me to be another Paradise in the visible things; rational in the senses; rational in the sensible. For you united to my soul another, Your divine spirit which has indwelled in my inner parts. This Tree of Life is truly one. The land on which it is implanted, the human soul in whose heart it takes root, soon is transformed into Paradise, wonderfully adorned with various beautiful plants, trees, and fruits, splashed with flowers and fragrant lilies. These are humility, joy, peace, gentleness, compassion, crying, rains of tears and extraordinary delight in them, the light of Thy grace, shining to all those in Paradise.²⁷

Symeon here seems to follow the tradition of Philo of Alexandria,²⁸ who in his exegesis on the Book of Genesis juxtaposed the inanimate trees of our present life with the animated and “rational” trees of Paradise:

²⁵ *Hymn* 50.335–340.

²⁶ See I. Perczel, “Saint Symeon the New Theologian and the Theology of the Divine Substance,” *Acta Antiqua Hungarica*, 41 (2001), pp. 138–139. Cf. Plotinus: “...would not this make virtue a state of the Divine also? No: the Divine has no states; the state is in the Soul. The act of intellection in the Soul is not the same as in the Divine: of things in the Supreme, Soul grasps some after a mode of its own, some not at all” (*Enneads* I, 2, 3).

²⁷ *Hymn* 47.1–19. The doctrine expressed here by Symeon the New Theologian that one Tree of Life gives origin to all other plants of the Paradise – various virtues, may be an echo of a similar Philonian cosmological doctrine of God as Gardener, who first plants one tree, out of which all other living beings originate from *De plantatione Noe*, 3. Further, in *De plantatione Noe*, 36–38 Philo goes on to explain that Paradise needs to be understood allegorically as the paradise of virtues in the human soul.

²⁸ Incidentally, Philo is mentioned by Nicetas Stethatos in his introduction to St. Symeon's

While the man still lived the solitary life... it is reasonable that a garden, dissimilar to those which exist in our world, should be planted by God. For the matter of our gardens is soulless, full of all kinds of trees... but it occurred such that in the divine garden, all trees are animated and rational, and they bring virtues as fruits.²⁹

In spite of the shared idea of the spiritual garden of Paradise growing in the souls of a virtuous person, the underlying doctrines of both authors are entirely different.³⁰ Philo's allegorical interpretation of Paradise was intended to reconcile the Biblical account of the Book of Genesis with the Platonic ontological framework, where God – the Platonic One – and matter were on the opposite poles of the universe, whereas, in contrast, in *Hymn* 22, Symeon calls the virtues of the soul “a kind of matter,” serving as a substrate for the divine Light of the Spirit.

It is called according to the substrate of matter since it has no proper name among men (αἱ ψυχικαὶ γὰρ ἀρεταὶ ὑπόκεινται ὡς ὕλη, ἐν αἷς περιδρασσόμενον φῶς τοῦ πνεύματος θεῖον κατὰ τὸ ὑποκείμενον τῆς ὕλης καὶ καλεῖται ἰδίον γὰρ οὐ κέκτηται ὄνομα ἐν ἀνθρώποις). Thus, when man is seized by sorrow and weeps, then the Spirit is also called ‘water’, because it cleanses and united to tears, it washes away all dirt; when compunction quenches the anger of the heart with the assistance of the Spirit, this is called ‘meekness’; and again, when man becomes enflamed against impiety, this happens through the Spirit and is called ‘zeal’. Again it is called ‘peace’, ‘joy’, and benignity, since it gives all three to the one who mourns, and it makes joy gush forth like a fountain in the heart.³¹

A concluding remark to our brief presentation of several Platonic parallels in Symeon the New Theologian has to be made. In the very end of his *Enneads*, describing the ultimate goals of the soul which has managed to liberate itself from the earthly bonds, Plotinus thus calls for reaching the goal of the journey in the transcendent realm:

Hymns as authority in support of a rare and unusual genre of non-liturgical hymns of his teacher (*Proem.*, 11; *Symeon Neos Theologos. Hymnen*, hrsg. Kambylis, S. 20.170).

29 Philo, *De opificio mundi*, 153–154; *De opificio mundi*, eds. R. Arnaldez, J. Pouilloux, and C. Mondesert, vol. 1 (Les oeuvres de Philon d'Alexandrie, 1), Paris, 1961, pp. 242–244.

30 For the overview of the exegesis of Paradise see J. Daniélou, “Terre et paradis chez les pères de l’église,” *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, 22 (1953), pp. 433–472 and a recent collection: *Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views*, ed. M. Bockmueh, and G.G. Stroumsa, Cambridge, 2013.

31 *Hymn* 22.176–89; trans. Perczel, “Theology of the Divine Substance,” p. 138.

This is the life of gods and of the godlike and blessed among men, liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of earth, the flight of the alone to the Alone (μόνου προς μόνον) (VI, 9, 11).

In the Introduction to his *Hymns*, Symeon picks up exactly where Plotinus has stopped his discourse: "Come, the Alone to the alone (ὁ μόνος πρὸς μόνον), for I am alone, as You see! Come, the One Who separated me from everything and made me alone on Earth!"³²

Thus it seems clear that Symeon the New Theologian knew not only the Platonic tradition, but also the texts of that tradition, which he might have studied during his young years of preparation for a civil service at the court.³³ Symeon's willingness to use Plato's allegories for translating his own mystical experience make us think that he might have considered them to be reflections of genuine although necessarily partial truth. This, however, does not make St. Symeon a Platonist (even with a qualification epithet of "Christian") in the manner of Evagrius of Pontus. Not endowing Greek philosophy with a divinely-inspired status nor deriving from it conceptual templates for his theological doctrines, Symeon used the imagery of the Platonic tradition to wrap the unspeakable mystical experience into human words and concepts, coming both from his heart and memory. He appears to us not only as an outstanding God-seer in the whole of Byzantine tradition and not as an anti-intellectualist visionary, but as a person of his time and a witness of a renewed interest in Plato which came into the fore at the time of Michael Psellus, the younger contemporary of Symeon.³⁴

The prominence of the allegory of the prison-Cave in the *Hymns* as the most personal of Symeon's writings may perhaps give us a glimpse into how he might have perceived his earthly path, and may it possible to harmonize two disparate images emerging from his writings and from his *Vita*. The life of

32 *Symeon Neos Theologos. Hymnen*, ed. Kambylis, S. 452.18–20. Symeon the New Theologian uses modifications of the Plotinian phrase in *Hymn* 15.136; 23.426; 27.73; 28.1–2; 35.38; 29.260–265; 30.166. Some of these parallels have been identified by I. Perczel in his review in *BZ*, 103.1 (2010), ss. 56–57. On the ascetical background of the doctrine, see K. Corrigan, "Solitary' Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius," *Journal of Religion*, 76 (1996), pp. 28–42.

33 *Life of St. Symeon*, 2; Νικήτα τοῦ Στηθάτου Βίος καὶ πολιτεία τοῦ ἐν ἀγίοις πατρὸς ἡμῶν Συμεῶν τοῦ Νέου Θεολόγου, ed. archim. Symeon Koutsas, Νέα Σμύρνη, 1994, σ. 48.8–13.

34 See F.L. Lauritzen, "Psello discepolo di Stetato," *BZ*, 101/2 (2009), ss. 715–725; idem, "Psellos and Neoplatonic Mysticism: The Secret Meaning of the Greek Alphabet," in: *Platonismus und Esoterik in byzantinischem Mittelalter und italienischer Renaissance*, ed. H. Seng (Bibliotheca Chaldaica, 3), Heidelberg, 2013, ss. 29–45.

Symeon the New Theologian was a constant trip in and out of the Cave. Torn by the desire to be with God and his too often tiresome and frustrating duties of an abbot guiding his restive flock,³⁵ he restlessly organized and decorated the monasteries he was heading, for making the hole in the ceiling a little wider for the prisoners so they could better see the heavens. Symeon managed to make his life path a connecting link between the brightness and truth of the intellectual Sun – the Holy Trinity – and the darkness of the Cave, being the human condition of imperfection and dim shadows of the truth. By his life and writings St. Symeon announced the divine light, and helped his readers to find the way from the darkness which he himself knew too well.

Appendix

Table of possible correspondence between the allegory of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*³⁶ and the dynamics of spiritual enlightenment from Symeon the New Theologian's *Thanksgiving* 11³⁷

[514ab] "Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern... Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads."

« ...dans la fosse et la fange de l'abîme des mes pensées et actions honteuses et, arrivé à ce point, j'ai succombé aux (brigands) cachés dans les ténèbres dont, (je ne dis) pas moi tout seul mais le monde entier lui-même à la fois n'eût pas su me faire remonter ni m'arracher à leur mains » (p. 332, 41–334, 46).

[515e–516a] "and if," said i, "someone should drag him thence by force up the ascent which is rough and steep, and not let him go before he had drawn him out into the light of the sun, do you not

« ...t'es incliné sur cette fosse très profonde et vers moi, enfoui et assis tout au fond de la boue, as tendu ta main immaculée et, sans que je te visse – comment donc en effet l'aurais-je pu,

35 On the problems of spiritual leadership, which St. Symeon had to face, see H.J.M. Turner, *St. Symeon the New Theologian and Spiritual Fatherhood*, Leiden, 1990, pp. 219–246.

36 Trans. P. Shorey, *Plato: The Republic, Books 6–10* (LCL, 276), Cambridge, MA – London, 1942.

37 Symeon le Nouveau Theologien, *Catecheses 23–34. Actions de grâces 1–2*, éd. archevêque B. Krivochéine, vol. 3 (SC, 113), Paris, 1965.

think that he would find it painful to be so haled along, and would chafe at it, and when he came out into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see even one of the things that we call real?"

[516e–517a] "Now if he should be required to contend with these perpetual prisoners in 'evaluating' these shadows while his vision was still dim and before his eyes were accustomed to the dark – and this time required for habituation would not be very short – would he not provoke laughter, and would it not be said of him that he had returned from his journey aloft with his eyes ruined and that it was not worth while even to attempt the ascent?"

comment aurais-je seulement trouvé la force de lever les yeux, recouvert et étouffé comme je l'étais sous la boue? – tu m'as pris par les cheveux de ma tête, tu m'as arraché de force et tiré de là » (p. 334, 58–64) « mais après m'avoir enlevé et placé sur le sol, tu m'as confié à ton serviteur et disciple, complètement sale, les yeux, les oreilles et la bouche obstrués par la boue, et même ainsi je ne voyais pas qui tu étais » (p. 334, 68–336, 73).

« ...mais pour les fréquentes discussions avec ceux qui me suggéraient, qui me répétaient quotidiennement : « A quoi bon perdre ta peine, c'est agir en fou ! à quoi bon suivre ce trompeur, ce charlatan, dans l'attente vaine et mutile de recouvrer la vue? Impossible à l'époque actuelle ! Pourquoi le suivre, pour te heurter et t'ensanglanter les pieds ? Pourquoi ne pas aller trouver plutôt des gens pitoyables qui t'inviteraient à te reposer, à te nourrir, à bien te soigner ? Car il est impensable que tu te débarrasses de la lèpre de l'âme ou qu'à l'époque actuelle tu recouvres jamais la vue. D'où sort-il donc ce charlatan, ce nouveau thaumaturge, qui te promet ce qui est impossible à tous les hommes de la génération actuelle ? Malheur à toi : d'un côté tu vas perdre les soins que t'offrent des gens compatissants qui ont l'amour du Christ et de leurs frères, de l'autre tu vas supporter les afflications et tribulations à quoi tu t'exposes pour de vaines espérances, sûrement tu en déchanteras des promesses que te fait ce trompeur,

cet imposteur. Qu'est-ce qu'il peut bien faire ? Tu as donc besoin de nous pour te rendre compte, tu ne peux pas réfléchir un peu tout seul ? Comment ? et nous, nous n'y voyons pas clair ? ou bien si, comme te l'affirme cet égaré, nous sommes tous atteints de cécité ? En réalité nous y voyons clair, tous, et ne t'y laisse pas prendre : il n'existe pas une autre vision (qui serait) meilleure que celle-ci ! » (p. 338, 100–120).

[516ab] "...and when he came out into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see even one of the things that we call real?" "Why, no, not immediately," he said. "Then there would be need of habituation, I take it, to enable him to see the things higher up. And at first he would most easily discern the shadows and, after that, the likenesses or reflections in water of men and other things, and later, the things themselves, and from these he would go on to contemplate the appearances in the heavens and heaven itself, more easily by night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than by day the sun and the sun's light."

« ...un jour, j'étais en route et accourais à la source, quand, à nouveau, toi-même qui naguère m'avais tiré de la boue, tu es venu à ma rencontre sur le chemin. Alors, pour la première fois, tu as ébloui mes faibles regards de l'éclat immaculé de ton visage et, même ce que je croyais avoir de lumière, je l'ai perdu, incapable de te reconnaître : et comment en aurais-je été capable, quand je n'ai pas eu la force de voir l'éclat de ton visage, ni de l'apprendre ou de le comprendre, – (comment), toi-même, te voir ou connaître qui tu pouvais bien être ? Dès lors donc, plus fréquemment, tandis que je me tenais tout au bord de la source, loin de dédaigner, toi le Sans-orgueil, de descendre (jusqu'à moi), au contraire, tu t'approchais et tu me saisisais d'abord la tête, tu la baignais dans les eaux et me faisais voir de façon plus claire la lumière de ton visage. Mais aussitôt tu t'envolais, sans me permettre de concevoir qui au juste tu étais, toi qui faisais cela, d'où tu venais et où tu retournais, car tu ne me l'avais pas encore permis. Mais tout en venant ainsi pour un temps et en t'en allant,

peu à peu, tu réapparais toujours mieux, tu m'inondais de ces eaux et me faisais la grâce de mieux voir une lumière plus pure » (p. 340, 129–342, 146).

« Après t'être à nouveau fait voir de la sorte à maintes reprises, et t'être à maintes reprises caché de nouveau sans me parler en échappant totalement à mon regard, – mais je voyais les éclairs et l'éclat de ton visage, qui à nouveau, comme auparavant dans les eaux, à maintes reprises, brillaient autour de moi, et tout à fait incapable de les retenir, je me rappelais où, jadis, je t'avais vu en haut, et soupçonnant dans ma folie qu'il s'agissait d'un autre, je cherchais avec larmes à te voir de nouveau. Ainsi donc, dans une grande douleur, affliction et angoisse, je m'accablais moi-même, m'oubliant et oubliant avec moi le monde entier et tout ce qu'il y a au monde, n'ayant de pensée ni pour une ombre, ni pour quoi que ce soit qui existe ou qui puisse jamais exister de visible, – quand toi-même, toi invisible tous, impalpable et insaisissable, tu m'apparus et il me sembla que tu purifiais mon intelligence, dilatais la vision de mon âme et me permettais de voir de mieux en mieux ta gloire, ou plutôt comme si c'était toi qui grandis et te dilates en augmentant d'éclat, et à mesure que se retirait l'obscurité c'était toi que je découvrais en train d'approcher et d'arriver » (p. 344, 186–202).

« Écoute un peu, m'as-tu encore dit, Maître, de même que tu vois le soleil dans les eaux, mais que ce n'est

absolument pas lui-même que Tu vois, surtout quand tu te penches, de même représente-toi, je t'en prie, ce qui se passe en toi. Prends des précautions et tâche de me contempler sans cesse⁵ de façon pure et claire, comme le soleil dans les eaux pures, au-dedans de toi : après quoi, comme je t'ai dit, tu seras jugé digne de me voir et de même après la mort » (p. 352, 286–292).

[516b] "And so, finally, I suppose, he would be able to look upon the sun itself and see its true nature, not by reflections in water or phantasms of it in an alien setting, but in and by itself in its own place."

« De même en effet qu'un aveugle qui recouvre progressivement la vue remarque la silhouette humaine, et se représente peu à peu ce que c'est, non que cette silhouette sous son regard se transforme ou se déforme, mais c'est plutôt la vision de ses yeux qui, en s'éclaircissant, voit la silhouette telle qu'elle est, les traits s'en imprimant pour ainsi dire tout entiers en sa vision et à travers elle pénétrant, se modelant et se gravant, comme sur une tablette, dans la partie intellectuelle et la mémoire de l'âme, – ainsi de ton côté t'es-tu fait voir, après avoir, par la lumière du Saint-Esprit, dans la clarté, intégralement purifié mon intelligence : et, son regard (ainsi) purifié et éclairci, c'était toi qui me semblais sortir de quelque part et apparaître avec plus d'éclat, toi qui me donnais le moyen de voir la silhouette d'une forme sans forme. Alors tu m'as mis hors du monde... Tu as donc resplendi et t'as fait voir, semble-t-il, tout entier à moi qui tout entier y voyais vraiment clair » (p. 346, 208–348, 224).