Study Four

A NEW SIGN OF THE IMPACT OF THE QUARREL AGAINST THE GNOSTICS ON PLOTINUS’ THOUGHT: TWO MODES OF REASCENT IN 9 (VI 9) AND 37 (VI 8)

I. monoy προς monon, or the Solitary Ascent of the Soul in 9 (VI 9)

Plotinus’ famous statement\(^1\) that we must “escape in solitude to the solitary [φυγὴ μόνον πρὸς μόνον]” (9 [VI 9], 11, 51), which concludes his first truly ‘mystic’ treatise—and his entire corpus according to the systematic order Porphyry forced upon it, who moved it to the very end of the last Ennead—sets the tone for the ascent towards the First principle, as Plotinus conceives it and effectively describes it in Treatise 9. In chapter 4, Plotinus attributes the failure to reach a vision of the First to being weighted down by the sensible and to not being thereby able to elevate oneself alone (οὐ μόνος ἀναβεβηκὼς, lines 22–23) towards him, when in fact one must attempt to “try to depart from all things and be alone [ἀποστὰς πάντων μόνος εἶναι] […]” (4, 33–34) In what follows, in this same treatise, Plotinus goes so far as to suggest some sort of equivalence between the soul being alone and the soul being in the Principle: “but when it is in itself alone and not in being, it is in that [τὸ δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ μόνη καὶ οὐκ ἐν τῷ ὄντι ἐν ἐκείνῳ] […]” (11, 40–41) The ‘solitariness’ argument corresponds moreover to what we have already encountered in Treatise 1, where, referring to a certain initiation rite, Plotinus notes that it is only shedding all that one has put on in the descent that, “passing in the ascent all that is alien to the God, one sees with one’s self alone That alone (αὐτῷ μόνῳ αὐτὸ μόνον ἴδῃ) [1 (I 6),

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7, 9; compare 9, 34), simple, single (10) and pure,” or again in Treatise 10, where we are reminded that we must pray the God “alone to him alone [μόνους πρός μόνου].” (6, 11) The reduplication of the μόνους, as Peterson has indicated,³ is a common linguistic turn in Greek and was used normally to designate a private conversation between two people, but we apparently find a first religious use of the phrase in Thessalus of Tralles⁴ and, then, in Numenius, a first occurrence where the phrase no longer designates simply the act of speaking (to someone or to God) but the act of seeing or encountering the God. The text of Numenius, which likely influenced Plotinus,⁵ insists, as does the Plotinian text, on the abandonment of earthly life implied by the process:

Thus, far from the visible world, must he commune with the Good, being alone with the alone (solitude), far from man, or living being, or any body, small or great, in an inexpressible, indefinable, immediately divine solitude.⁶

Moreover, Plotinus insists on several occasions in Treatise 9 on the dual relation that then exists between the soul and the divine itself and on the personal character, as it were, of the encounter. Accordingly, he will explain, in chapter 9, that

’whoever has seen, knows what I am saying’, that the soul then has another life and draws near, and has already come near and has a part in him [...]. [...] we must put away other things and take our stand only in this, and become this alone [καὶ ἐν μόνῳ στῆναι τοῦτω, καὶ τοῦτο γενέσθαι μόνον] [...]. (9, 46–51)

Becoming this ‘alone’ is one way of stating the idea, but Plotinus will press the point even further and go so far as to claim that one can see the soul as

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² Further below, we will again consider this parallel formulation, found in 38 (VI 7), 34.7–8, a treatise written at a much later date.
³ Peterson, op. cit (note 1), p. 35.
⁴ The text’s authorship (cf. Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum, VIII 3, Boudreaux [Ed.], Bruxelles, In Aedibus Academiae, 1912), wrongly assigned to Harpocration and found at the beginning of his Opuscula de plantis duodecim signis et septem planetis subiectis, would in fact be attributable to Thessalus, as Cumont has already demonstrated (on which, see Peterson, op. cit. [note 1], p. 36, Dodds, op. cit. [note 1], p. 17, and more particularly A.-J. Festugière’s “L’expérience religieuse du médecin Thessalos”, Revue biblique internationale, 48 (1939), pp. 45–77).
⁵ An opinion hold by Dodds and especially Meijer (Plotinus on the Good or the One …, op. cit. [Study 3, note 17], pp. 160–162), who sees Numenius as the true instigator of the phrase’s religio-philosophical career.