CHAPTER THREE

MICHAEL PSELLOS: SEEING THROUGH PAINTING

Therefore on one occasion he set up her [the Theotokos’s] icon before him and having looked at it earnestly, he spoke to her with the voice of the Archangel saying both parts of the “Hail.” And in this manner he shaped a rhythmic song of praise, so that while he looked at the divine icon (and now trembling and astonishment have seized me) she changed completely into her fleshly nature. And then when she first gazes upon him with her eyes, O awesome countenance and voice and such gracious eyes, she speaks gently, whispering softly through her lips: “Hail you as well, father!” With a calm soul he said: “Hail! For I see you, the cause of joy!”

If someone does not believe these things, I might not argue. But, if one might be disposed to accept this [account], one should not stop at this [acceptance]. Rather, [one should] imitate the virtue of the man and yearn for his dispassion, with which, or by means of which, one might achieve these things. For the struggle and exertion better enable one to conquer nature, to rise up above struggles of all kinds until one sees the divine visibles. When this has been achieved, one speaks with the higher things, for then while the mind has contemplated the unchanging, the corporeal eyes have received the manifestations of the divine.

There is nothing that spirits embedded in matter are more anxious about than being separated from matter (which is the outcome of these actions). Hence, they that come near and act spitefully to us are clothed in the complete darkness of matter. For as long as we are in the flesh we are in the middle of extremes, the material and the intellectual, and are neither purely intellectual nor purely material; for something is contributed to us by each of these. As we are a mixture of the intellectual and the material it is necessary that our actions be in accordance with God. For if we cease to act in this way, then we will not achieve the city of the living God, and shall be cast into the furnace of fire. But if we are satisfied with ignorance, we might see light, but replete with deceptions and trickery. Rather, we ought to be in divine darkness whence the light without dissimulation and the truth shine. For the intellect has revealed that what is in the body is neither wholly natural nor material, for the burdens that are united to this [body] disclose the assaults, like the stalk and the husks and the beard [disclose] the corn. The devil does not remain distant from spiritual vision. For the devil knows that that which is in the material, is that from which he gains his power.1

1 Ἀπάξ τοῖνυν τὴν ἐκείνης εἰκόνα προσθέεις καὶ ἄτενώς ἐνιδών, τὴν τοῦ ἄρχαγγέλου
The above text is taken from an *Epitaphios* written by the philosopher Michael Psellos for Nicholas, the deceased Abbot of the Monastery of the Beautiful Source on Mount Olympus in Bithynia. The text perhaps dates to 1055, when Psellos endured a brief and unhappy monastic life on Mount Olympus. This *Epitaphios* is much more than a commemoration of the deceased abbot, as it also serves as a kind of manifesto for Psellos’s belief that philosophy could be brought to bear on Christian theological problems and practices and thence lead to a more intellectually rigorous monasticism. As such, his thought and writings stand in marked contrast to those of Symeon the New Theologian. When Psellos states: “But if we are satisfied with ignorance, we might see light, but replete with deceptions and trickery” we should understand this to be a reiteration, in opposition to Symeon, of his belief in the value of intellectual preparation for a proper understanding of spiritual experience.

The story of Nicholas’s prayer can also allow us to begin to define how Psellos’s accounts of icons exemplifies his wider intellectual project. The story occurs in the part of the text that discusses Nicholas’s first