Wisdom, wrote Origen, "not only mixes her wine in the bowl; she also supplies fragrant apples in plenty, so sweet that they not only yield their luscious taste to mouth and lips but keep their sweetness also when they reach the inner throat."¹

This remark will come as something of a shock to lovers of the austere Origen, denigrator of the flesh and devotee of realities solely spiritual. For here is a statement of obvious sensuous delight, rivalling New Testament images of the simple splendors of the natural world. Why this shock? That is, why has the aesthetic sensibility of Origen been passed over and his supposed spiritual flight away from the realm of the senses emphasized instead?

That the interpretative tradition has not favored the aesthetic dimension of Origen's thinking can be seen as early as the fourth century. Objectioning to Origen's ideas about the soul's bestial bodies, Jerome says:

At the end of the book (i.e., Book I of the De principiis), he argues at great length that an angel, a human soul, or a demon—he affirms that they share the same nature, but are diverse in will—can become a beast through its great negligence or its folly, and that, rather than suffer the torments of punishments and the intense heat of fire, it may prefer to be an animal which lives in the sea or some other species of beast: thus we have to fear receiving not only the body of a quadruped but of a fish as well!²

Jerome offers his reading of Origen's suggestions concerning the bestial potential of the soul as proof of Origen's belief in "Pythagorean metempsychosis."³ Yet his comments also reveal his own horror at the thought that nature, the realm of the beasts, might be ensouled. The idea that a soul might be "fishy" strikes Jerome as quite disgusting. Further, his rendition of the "bestial body" is thoroughly literal: like Origen, Jerome equated the beast with the irrational (alogos); unlike Origen, however, Jerome refuses to imagine that metempsychosis might
be an *imaginal* journey through the depths of *pathos*, a seeing with the eyes of the beast, and not a literal brutish fall.4

As we shall suggest, Origen subscribed to a *poiesis* of nature which enabled him, like the modern poet, to "turn the world to glass."5 Origen, we might say, saw "the flowing or metamorphosis" by "following with his eyes the life" and using "the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature."6 One of Origen's real concerns was what Emerson called "the passage of the world into the soul of man,"7 and this concern enabled him to imagine the reality, if not the beauty, of a fishy soul with a perspective rather different than that expressed by Jerome in his letter.

Jerome's literal reading of Origen's comments on the bestial bodies, which understood connections between soul and nature to be distasteful and heretical, has found its way into modern readings of the fate of the sensuous world at the hands of Late Antiquity's thinkers. E. R. Dodds, for example, situated Origen squarely within the "madness" of physical torment which he found to be endemic in Late Antiquity. And the madness of self-abuse is itself placed within the context of gross devaluation and denigration of the natural world.8 Working out of the perspective for which Jerome is emblem here, Dodds has carried forward a supposed Late Antique hostility to the created world as an opaque prison.

In its modern guise, this perspective presents us, not with an heretical Origen, but rather with an Origen made in the image of his old antagonist: a self-castrator, a proponent of the sinful origins of the cosmos. But what of the Origen who could find Wisdom herself in the sweetness of an apple? What of the man who could use as figure for the entire cosmos an ensouled beast, immense and enormous?9

If Dodds has continued the tradition of the unrelenting dislike of the sensuous, Charles Singer has maintained the literalist perspective, especially concerning the relation of Late Antique thinkers to the world of the beasts. "With edification always in view," he wrote about Patristic authors, they "produce moralised and sometimes illustrated animal stories which exhibit no intelligent observation and are often childish to the verge of imbecility."10 So much for the Fathers and the animals! Yet a thinker like Origen could imagine with ease how Wisdom lurks within "the natures of animals and the rages of beasts."11 Origen, who was probably not an imbecile, knew an aesthetic which is entirely at odds with Singer's approach, and it enabled him to write about the