

NUMENIUS, PHERECYDES AND *THE CAVE OF THE NYMPHS*

The following excerpt from Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus* appears as Fr. 37 in the edition of the fragments of Numenius by Des Places.¹ It is the aim of this study (1) to ascertain the original place of the fragment in his work, and (2) to show that it belongs to a second-century school of allegorical commentary on the ancient theologians, and particularly on Pherecydes of Syros, of which Numenius will have been one of the brightest luminaries.

I

Some explain [the fable of Atlantis] as representing the opposition between the two parties of daemons, a better and a worse, one superior in numbers, the other in power, one victorious, the other defeated: this was Origen's theory. Others speak (1) of an opposition of souls, the fairer ones who are nurslings of *Athena* against others who are attached to generation, and who belong to the god who oversees generation. The champion of this doctrine is Numenius. Others (2) combine the opinions of Origen and Numenius to produce a conflict between the souls and the daemons, the daemons causing a downward motion, while the souls are led aloft... According to these men, where the theologians (θεολόγοι) spoke of *Osiris and Typhon* or *Dionysus and the Titans*, Plato referred through reverence to the Athenians and the inhabitants of Atlantis. And [the proponent of this theory] says (3) that before they enter solid bodies the souls are engaged in a war with material daemons, whom he locates in the west... This opinion is held by the philosopher Porphyry, whom one would not expect to contradict the tradition received from Numenius (Proclus, *In Tim.* 1.76.30–77.23 Diehl. My numerals and my italics as throughout).

Proclus presents in summary fashion three arguments which he associates with the name of the second-century philosopher and allegorist Numenius of Apamea. The first is that of Numenius himself, the second conflates his thoughts with those of the Neoplatonist Origen, and the third is said or implied to have been borrowed from him by Porphyry of Tyre. In one of his essays in allegory, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, Porphyry makes much use of his Apamean predecessor, and cognates to all the arguments enumerated can be found in passages of this work.

(1) *Athena* is the patroness of *Odysseus*, who seeks the protection of her sacred olive in his flight from the 'marine and material deities' after his outrage upon the Cyclops.² *Poseidon* was the father of the Cyclops, and appears to be the figure whom Numenius styles the 'god of generation'.³ Both Porphyry and Numenius have

¹ É. Des Places, *Numénios: Fragments* (Paris, 1973), pp. 88 and 120–1, where the passage is numbered among those derived from *Opera Incerta*. The same rubric covers Frs 30–6, but Des Places does not indicate whether he takes any two of these to be excerpts from the same work.

I am indebted in this paper not only to the scholarship of Des Places and other students of the period, but also to the copious and perceptive observations of Dr H. S. Schibli on an earlier draft.

² See *De Antro*, p. 80.6ff. Nauck and R. Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian* (California, 1986), pp. 130–1.

³ See H. Lewy, *The Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy* (Cairo, 1956), p. 503; Des Places (1973), p. 88a n. 3. This is no doubt the correct interpretation, since (a) the sea is a constant image of the generated universe in Numenius (Frs 2.8ff. and 18.2ff.; cf. 3.11–12); (b) Plato himself calls Poseidon the god of Atlantis at *Critias* 113c. As Dr Schibli remarks, Porphyry does not name Poseidon or any one divinity as the enemy of *Athena* and *Odysseus*; but the plot of the *Odyssey* is presupposed.

represented the strife between the intellect and the generated universe as a conflict between Athena and Poseidon, between the immutable continent and the roving tides of the sea.

(2) A cardinal notion in Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs* is that souls assume the penitential garments of mortality when they descend through the southern portal of the zodiac, and, after a protracted series of purgative reincarnations, pass as immortals through the north. References to Numenius in Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs* suffice to show that he was Porphyry's source for this pleasant fantasy,⁴ which, when combined with Origen's daemonology,⁵ would inspire not only the concept of a war between souls and daemons, but the location of them respectively in an upper and a lower world.

(3) The notion that the west is the seat of daemons is invoked in Porphyry's essay at p. 76.12 Nauck.⁶ If this is, as Proclus intimates, a borrowing from Numenius, it is likely to come from the same work that has been employed as a source in the earlier chapters. We have already quoted Porphyry on the struggle between the soul and material daemons; even if Numenius did not adduce it in explanation of Plato's fable of Atlantis, there is no reason why such a combat should not have had some place in his work, in which the Atlanteans might have represented the common souls enthralled by these seductive adversaries.

Athena is contrasted with Poseidon, a higher world with a lower, east with west. Can it be that Numenius employed the same three antithetical pairs in a discussion of Atlantis and in the prototype for Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs*? It would seem that such consistency is more likely to be sustained within the bounds of a single treatise. Numenius had the dexterity to combine the myth of Er with that of Odysseus' return to Ithaca;⁷ nothing forbids us to postulate a discursive application of the same principle to other Platonic texts. We need merely suppose that as Porphyry's principal benefactor he furnished him, not only with the matter of his treatise, but with its diffuse and capacious form.

II

We may thus suppose that Fr. 37 of Numenius in the edition of Des Places belonged to that unnamed work which became the archetype of Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs*. Between this fragment and those which are admitted to come from this archetype (Frs 30–5), Des Places inserts the following allusion to Pherecydes:⁸

Much was said on this matter [of the generation of the soul in the embryo] by Numenius and the Pythagorean interpreters, who take the [procession of the] seed to be what is signified by the Ameles of Plato, the Styx of the Orphics and Hesiod and the 'efflux' of Pherecydes (Porphyry, cited by Des Places p. 87 = Fr. 36).

The river Ameles we owe to Plato's *Republic* (10, 621a5). The fragment may therefore belong to that interpretation of Plato's Myth of Er which is known to have

⁴ See Frs 31.2 and 33.1 Des Places, i.e. Porphyry, *De Antro Nympharum*, pp. 70.26 and 79.19 Nauck.

⁵ H. Lewy (1956), pp. 504–5, uses this fragment as evidence that Numenius did not recognise the two classes of daemons presupposed by Origen.

⁶ See Des Places (1973), p. 120 n. 8.

⁷ See Fr. 35 Des Places and J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London, 1977), p. 364.

⁸ I have to thank Dr Schibli for bringing this fragment to my attention, and for the further suggestion that the 'efflux' was 'an underworld river that served as a conduit for souls'.

found a place in the Numenian archetype to the *Cave of the Nymphs*. Porphyry cites Numenius here for his knowledge of Pherecydes; in the *Cave of the Nymphs* a late chapter affords a single allusion.⁹

Pherecydes of Syros speaks of cavities, depths, caves, openings and gates, and through these hints symbolically at the birth and return of souls (p. 77.18 Nauck = Pherecydes Fr. B6 DK).

It therefore appears that the elements of Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs* were already present in Pherecydes, though how they were assembled we cannot now ascertain.¹⁰ Nor can we say whether Porphyry knew or made anything of the Cave of the Nymphs which appears in Jacoby's text among the remains of the Athenian Pherecydes.¹¹ Pherecydes of Syros is cited as a cardinal authority by a second-century Platonist for a mythological amalgam closely resembling that which enters Fr. 37 of Numenius under a vaguer attribution to οἱ θεολόγοι.¹²

Pherecydes, he [Celsus] says, composed a myth of two embattled armies, one led by Cronus, the other by Ophioneus... they agreed that whichever should sink down to the Ocean (Ogēnos) would be defeated, while those who overcame and expelled them should possess heaven. He [Celsus] finds the same significance in those mysteries which describe the warfare of the *Giants and Titans* against the Gods, and in the Egyptian myths about *Typhon, Horus and Osiris* (Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI.42 = Vol. II, p. 111.13 Koetschau = Pherecydes Fr. B4 DK).

We need not suppose that Pherecydes either said or was credited with all that is ascribed, in corroboration of Numenius, to the θεολόγοι, but it appears that the

⁹ For the remains of Pherecydes of Syros I quote Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Vol. I 7B, and have profited greatly from M. L. West, 'Three Presocratic Cosmogonies', *CQ* 13 (1963), 157–72 and *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford, 1971), chs 1 and 2, as well as G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 50–72. Pherecydes is usually assigned to the sixth century B.C. The order of the episodes in his work is very uncertain, and I have not thought it necessary to offer opinions here.

¹⁰ Though Damascius, *De Principiis* 124, hints that five cavities contained five elements, perhaps earth, air, water, fire and spirit: see West (1963), 158–9. The title of Pherecydes' work, however, implies seven cavities: West (1963), 157.

¹¹ For Pherecydes of Athens see F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*, Vol. i (Berlin, 1923), pp. 58–104. The reference here is to F16a, from the scholiast on Apollonius Rhodius 4.1936. There is room for doubt as to the attribution, since: (a) the scholiast never shows that he knows of two authors named Pherecydes or cites his source under any more precise appellation; and (b) the *Suda* attributes to Pherecydes of Syros a *Theogony* (T1 Jacoby), and this is the only title which the scholiast gives to the work of his own Pherecydes (F54 Jacoby).

Fr. B8 DK appears in Jacoby as Fr. F109; Fr. B13a DK as F177 Jacoby; Fr. B11 DK as Hecataeus F360 Jacoby. Here we have some instances of the difficulty which besets the assignation of these texts. The *Suda* (T2 Jacoby) indicates that Porphyry maintained the chronological priority of Pherecydes of Syros over all other Greek prose authors, but does not show that he recognised two authors of that name. Even if Jacoby's attribution is correct, confusion would be frequently occasioned by the resemblance between the two ancient sources. At F16a Jacoby the scholiast speaks of the marriage of Zeus and Hera, which (allowing for Celsus' harmonisation of names with contemporary nomenclature) is the event described at Fr. B2 DK. For the purposes of this study it may be relevant to observe that the scholiast refers (F16 and F17 Jacoby) to the victories of Heracles over giants who were the offspring of marine deities and denizens of the far west.

¹² Cited by Des Places (1973), p. 120 n. 1. On the place of this cosmic battle in the whole work see Kirk, Raven and Schofield (1983), pp. 71–2 and West (1963), 162–3, where he notes that Ophion, like Nereus, was sometimes deemed identical with the Ocean. For the name Ogēnos, some proof of the authenticity of the references to Pherecydes in Celsus, see West (1971), p. 50 and n. 2.

The fact that Proclus echoes and cites Pherecydes only in his commentary on the *Timaeus* seems to corroborate the hypothesis that such use of him had already been made by one of the informants whom he names in his discussion of Atlantis.

defenders of Numenius must have had before them the text that Celsus knew. From the evidence of Proclus quoted above it appears that one god in particular, Dionysus, was exposed to the animosity of the Titans. This is no doubt the common Orphic tradition, and Pherecydes need not have been the object of any particular allusion for this detail. But the protagonist upon whom Celsus dwells is the same Athena whom Numenius makes the author of the victory of Athens over Atlantis:¹³

Such, he [Celsus] says, is the meaning of the *peplos* of *Athene* which is beheld by all spectators at the Panathenaic procession. For what it depicts, says he, is the victory of the stainless and motherless daemon over the audacity of the *Giants* (Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI.42 = p. 112.30 Koetschau = Pherecydes Fr. B5 DK).

The allegory to which Celsus here purports to offer the key is imputed by him to Pherecydes:

Interpreting Homer's words, [Celsus] says that Zeus's words to Hera [*Iliad* 1.590–1 and 15.18–24] are those of god to matter, signifying obscurely that he took it in its inchoate and turbulent state and gave it beauty and bound it as with chains, banishing such of the indwelling daemons as were insolent *by the road hither*. He says that this was Pherecydes' interpretation of Homer when he said: 'Below this region is that of Tartarus... where Zeus casts such of the gods as are insolent' (*Contra Celsum* VI.42 = p.112.20ff. Koetschau = Pherecydes Fr. B5 DK).

Matter, if not itself malignant, is the home of malignant forces. By 'the road hither' Celsus must mean to indicate the descent to the corporeal home of man, always reckoned the dregs of a material universe in which only the heavens were truly beautiful. The banishment of the daemons could be the consequence of another such war as Proclus and Celsus remembered from the works of Pherecydes; but the presuppositions are also those of Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs*.

For Porphyry's Cave is said to represent matter (p. 59.3 Nauck) or the world that partakes of matter (59.2) insofar as this is dark and full of mists (59.19). Elsewhere (61.1) he alludes to a Cave by the Ocean, in which Cronus confined his children. For Porphyry, as for Numenius, such allegories signify that the world is the unwelcome destination of fallen souls (60.2): if Pherecydes spoke of the road to Tartarus as the road hither, then he maintained that despairing estimate of the material universe which caused Numenius to apply the same name to all that falls within the seven spheres (Fr. 35.10 Des Places).

The above interpretation of Pherecydes would be resisted by most modern commentators, who rely less upon the doxographic context than upon the usage of Hesiod and Homer, so that the region below which Tartarus lies is taken to be Hades or the earth.¹⁴ That Celsus is disingenuous or mistaken is not impossible;¹⁵ but we are concerned in this study with the meaning read into Pherecydes by one who was both a contemporary of Celsus and a Platonist as Celsus appears to have been.

We may thus conclude with the following observations.

(1) Proclus quotes opinions of Numenius which, though they are advanced in elucidation of Plato's fable of Atlantis, recur in his disciple's treatise *On the Cave of the Nymphs*.

¹³ The *peplos* is known to have represented Athena's feats against the giants on the Phlegrean plain: scholiasts on Euripides, *Hecuba* 468 and Aristophanes, *Birds* 827. At 824 Aristophanes indicates the locality of the battle and at 830 the prominence of Athena.

¹⁴ West (1963), 169 and West (1971), p. 26 believes that Hades and Tartarus were distinguished *more Homeric*; Kirk, Raven and Schofield (1983) believe that the upper region is the earth.

¹⁵ So Dr Schibli notes that, if the higher region is supposed to lie above a terrestrial 'underworld', it may imply a belief in a spherical universe which an author of so early a date can scarcely have entertained. Note, however, West's interpretation (1971, p. 24) of Fr. B13a DK.

(2) Proclus in the same passage alludes to a mixture of allegories a version of which was quoted by a man of the school and century of Numenius as a key to ancient thought.

(3) In the extended version of this amalgam which Origen preserves in his *Contra Celsum*, Pherecydes of Syros is the only authority cited and is interpreted on principles which are known to have been adopted by Numenius both in Fr. 37 and in the archetype for Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs*.

(4) Numenius is known from Porphyry's testimony to have cited Pherecydes in a passage which compounds his thought with that of Plato and Hesiod (Fr. 36 Des Places).

(5) Porphyry himself quotes the cosmology of Pherecydes of Syros as a precedent for those features of his allegory (the Cave, the gates, the descent of souls) that Numenius is known to have employed.

It seems probable that Porphyry, Numenius and Celsus have all applied the same interpretation to Pherecydes. Since Celsus is never quoted by the Platonists as an original philosopher, and Porphyry indicates in Fr. 36 Des Places that he received some of his knowledge of Pherecydes from the sage of Apamea, the architect of this interpretation will no doubt have been Numenius himself.

His argument might have proceeded somewhat as follows: 'The Cave of Pherecydes, like that of Homer's Ithaca, accommodates the descent and return of souls. The contrast between the two destinies is illustrated in Plato's Myth of Er, which, like the Caves, presents an image of the world. An allegorical symbol of the earthbound soul is furnished in Pherecydes by the sons of Ophioneus, whom the victorious gods confined to the nether waters. It thus appears that water is the symbol of the material and generated: souls addicted to this are aptly represented in Plato's story of Atlantis, which is said to have been the demesne of Poseidon himself. These souls are harassed and bound (and often controlled) by material daemons, whose mythological seat (the Tartarus of Homer and Pherecydes) is, like Atlantis, in the west. The enemy of these daemons and Poseidon's is Athena, the same goddess under whose patronage Odysseus emerged from the Cave.'

The exegesis of Homer, Pherecydes and Plato's dialogues will have been corroborated wherever possible by analogies drawn from Egypt, the Orphics and sacred iconography. Whether the Numenian treatise professed to begin by interpreting the *Odyssey*, the myths of Plato or Pherecydes himself we cannot determine; but when the quarry provided such materials it would hardly be surprising that the result should be an even more rococo structure than Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs*.