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MA in Myth, Cosmology and the

Sacred MMYMA4DSS Dissertation

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**If the Body were not the Soul, what is the Soul?
Questioning embodiment through the Neoplatonic Great
Chain of Being**

Acknowledgements

To Exú, the first to come. To Xangô, my father. To the spirit guides of Umbanda.

To Jan, the best of friends and to Philip, because he asked.

Salve Oxalá.

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Introduction

Writing this dissertation has been a herculean task. I have started to write it a few times without success. There was something that was blocked, and I have thought of giving up more than once. Therefore, I decided that writing about my difficulty in carrying through with the work was the place to start, in order to honour the process that brought me here. It was not easy, and it took a trip to the underworld to come back to this point. So, in a sense this dissertation will be a retelling of the hero's journey¹ that I cannot say has been an individuation process², but that has nonetheless been transformative to the very core.

One of the purposes of this dissertation is to discuss the role of the symbol and imagination and developing on the four-fold levels of interpretation as a hermeneutic way of engaging with symbolic. I will explore a mythopoetic analysis of concepts of soul and the difference between an embodied or ensouled approach to being. I will also be talking about non-discursive knowledge acquired through embodied imagination. Lastly, I will explore the importance of performance and theatre in our daily role-making activities.

The other fundamental dimension of this dissertation is that it is a work of (Neo)platonist philosophy. My main ontological stance has been deeply influenced not only by some of the writers I will be mentioning, but also by my personal religious practice and my work with Neoplatonic theology and theurgy. This being said, this dissertation does not only intend to look at Platonic philosophy (in particular in its polytheist form), but also to meaningfully contribute to forms of modern Platonic philosophy and to a *re-imagining* of some of its most important questions.

Perhaps the most important concept that I will be concerned with within the vast realm of Platonic philosophy is that of the Great Chain of Being, the ontological scheme of most Neoplatonic philosophy. As Arthur Lovejoy explores in his seminal book *The Great Chain of Being* (2001), this is a scheme where reality itself is organised in qualitative hierarchical levels

¹ Cf Joseph Campbell's *Hero of a Thousand Faces*

² Cf Karl Jung "Definitions," CW 6, par. 757.

that are meaningfully different from the other levels. The Chain starts with the One, or God, and descends until it reaches the material world (e.g., cf *De Mysteriis*,1). Each level contains all attributes of the lower levels, plus some attributes exclusive to their own (Lovejoy, 2001, pp.58-59). According to this view, lower levels are more separated from God than higher levels, however they are all meaningfully connected through associations and sympathy. For example, the Moon may manifest as lunar spirits, on the level of daimons, but it may also manifest as the moonfish or silver at the material level (Struck, 2004, p.230).

Methodologically, I will be taking an imaginal and autoethnographic approach to my research. Robert D. Romanyshyn writes that “an imaginal approach is a shift from an ego perspective on research to the soul’s perspective” (2013, p. 82). An important point of this methodology, as defined by Romanyshyn, is to create a personal relationship with the academic work and allowing it to transcend its traditional role of object. Using an imaginal approach, both the researcher and the research are meaningful actors of the work being developed and enrich themselves mutually (Ibid.).

Autoethnography, on the other hand, is the attempt to explore one’s own experiences ethnographically and then relate them meaningfully to larger social (and in this case metaphysical) contexts. Heewon Chang reminds us that the importance of this method lies in that “it is difficult to keep ‘subjective’ feelings and ‘objective’ facts completely separate from each other” (2008, p.95), especially in work that requires the researcher’s interpretation. Thus, autoethnography allows for an academic methodology that brings experience and scholarship together, while allowing for subject and object barriers to be dissolved. As Chang most suitably says, autoethnography is an “interweave stories of the past with ongoing self-discovery in the present” (2008, p.140).

I will be weaving the personal pieces of the work with a pilgrimage through the neoplatonic Great Chain of Being as it is structured by Iamblicus in *De Mysteriis*, much like Penelope weaved her tapestry waiting for Odysseus to return home in Homer’s *Odyssey*. For this, I will dedicate one chapter of the dissertation to each level of the Great Chain of Being starting with the gods. The reason why I decided to start with the Gods, rather than the Platonic One, or God, is that the One is transcendence itself, perhaps more adequate to the minds of mystics and holy men with deeper understandings than my own.

The various levels will therefore be gods, daimons, heroes, and souls. In each chapter I will make a small introduction to the relevant concepts regarding the level of the chain I am discussing.

Elizabeth Tisdell, American educator and researcher in the connections between transformative learning and spirituality, argues in her 2017 chapter called “Transformative Pilgrimage - Learning and Spirituality on the Camino de Santiago” that the idea of pilgrimage can be a model to explain the transformative process of learning. Taking Cousineau (1998) as a point of reference she states:

“... the longing (to move into a new way of being); the call (listening to one’s inner longing to make a change); the departure (the preparation and actual leaving); the pilgrim’s way (the journey itself); the labyrinth (following one’s inner journey as well as the outward walk or movement); the arrival (at a particular physical place); and the coming home (the return and the sense of integration.). Cousineau describes these somewhat literally though there are also obvious metaphorical parallels which are noted in the parenthetical clarifications” (p. 343)

The pilgrimage dimension of the work will therefore be what gives it the most transformative potential, and what brings it to the uncomfortable borderline between academic and philosophical work and the sacred relationship between the personal and the divine. What the finished work will be I may never know, for the completion of this dissertation is not the end of the work and I suspect that instead of Penelope’s ten years, I will weave it for a lifetime.

The Four-fold God

The first stop in our pilgrimage is the level of Gods, those who come immediately after the One in the Great Chain of Being. For Iamblichus, the gods are wholly good, “they are impassive and unchanging” (*De Myst.* I.18) even when penetrating the material world and are exempt of any evil. Iamblichus description of the gods is as follows:

Thus, then, the entities visible in heaven are all gods, and all in a certain way incorporeal. In your next question, you ask, “How is it that some of them are beneficent, and others maleficent?” This belief is derived from the casters of horoscopes and is completely at odds with reality. For in fact all alike are good and causes of good and looking towards one single good they direct themselves unitarily to the Fine and Good

alone. Nonetheless, the very bodies subject to them possess a vast array of potencies, some themselves firmly established in the divine bodies, others proceeding from them into the nature of the cosmos and the actual cosmos, descending in order through the whole realm. (Ibid.)

Eros, or desire, has been associated with lack in the Platonic tradition ever since the Symposium, and Iamblichus statement that the gods are impassive and unchanging suggests the idea that they are whole, despite being multiple manifestations of the ultimate One. They are fully good and self-contained but penetrate into the world so they can imbue it with their creative powers and goodness. For this reason, Iamblichus claims that “the only true good is union with the gods” (Clarke et al., p. Lii 2003).

The purpose of this section, therefore, is to explore my own relationship with the gods, how this has affected me in moments of great importance in my life and how this may relate to larger metaphysical questions of symbolism and hermeneutics.

I have often been told that one should not make sweeping statements when writing an academic article, so I will start this section with one. Everything can be a symbol or is passive of being symbolised. Plotinus says that “all teems with symbol; the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another, a process familiar to all of us in not a few examples of everyday experience” (*Enneads*, II.3.7). That is, if one adopts a mythopoetic view to life. John Dirkx (2000) says that a mythopoetic approach is based on images and symbol; it facilitates a way of knowing that is essentially imaginative. Making an argument for a mythopoetic approach to transformative education, Dirkx states that this approach allows for emotions and images to be heard and expressed and “such approaches allow learners to become aware of and give voice to the images and unconscious dynamics that may be animating their psychic lives within the context of the subject matter and the learning process” (Ibid., p. 2). A mythopoetic approach is not only valuable for educational purposes, but also for the understanding of spiritual experience. In Neoplatonic understandings there are “three planes of reality, the divine intelligible realm, the material realm, and linking them a mediating dimension which partakes of both: a spiritual body or celestial earth.” (Voss, 2013, p. 429). Symbols and images are the language used by the spirit to allow for the mediation to occur. Robert Murray (1988) says that, traditionally, the first correlative of the symbol is revelation, and the second is metaphysics. The symbol is the medium through which the ineffable can be transmitted. Murray goes on to argue that “in mystical symbolism one does not exchange one meaning for another, but one adds to the common,

revealed meaning a revelation of its own internal hidden mystery.” (Ibid., p.5) Through a symbolic understanding, we can explore our experiences with the numinous without losing its meaning and create a connection with the divine, holding together both the sensible and suprasensible world.

Going through a genealogy of the concept of symbol, Peter Stuck says that

In its earliest instances, the Greek word σύμβολον does not have anything like the literary sense that it has for Porphyry, nor does it have the breadth of its current English equivalent. Up to about 300 b.c.e., except in a few specialized contexts, a symbol has nothing to do with figurative or suggestive language. Formed off the verb σύνβάλλειν (put together), a symbol is one half of an object—usually a piece of cloth, wood, or pottery—that is deliberately split in two and then allocated to the parties to an agreement. It is reassembled at a later time to verify the deal (2004, p. 72).

The symbol is therefore something that is divided but has the potential to completeness. It implies that there is an exchange going on, an agreement. It becomes whole by the fulfillment of a covenant. Entering the realm of the symbolic is accepting to be in relation with the other part, an ongoing conversation where meanings are not static and can be, as I have argued, amplified. It needs to be, however, a willing conversation. As Struck argues,

“the symbol itself, precisely in its being a symbol, generates a passion, an inquiry, an investigation, an examination, or, to employ a term that embraces both lack and desire, the symbol operates according to want” (Ibid., p. 79).

If one does not want to engage with the symbol, it will not unfold any of its meanings. A symbol, like the broken piece of pottery, can only have value to us if we attribute value to it from the start. That does not mean that the ontological stature of what the symbol represents is dependent on what we allow it to be. Just as I believe that I have an independent existence beyond others’ perception of me, I also believe that the thing behind the symbol, in the case of spiritual experience the divine, God, the numinous and so on and so forth, has an independent existence beyond myself. The symbol is the gateway through which I can reach this existence and understand it, enter a dialogue with it. It is there for me to see it, but I can choose not to. In order to exemplify this, I will tell an episode I had with the Orixá Xangô³.

When my Babá⁴ told me I was a daughter⁵ of Xangô⁶, I was disappointed. I had no connection to the god, and he would have been my last guess. I did not understand why Xangô

was my patron god, or what characteristics I had that would make me affiliated with him. My Baba read a long list of traits children of Xangô have, but I felt like they were generic or really did not apply to me. Even the myths associated with the Orixá did not particularly move me. I always identified more with the underdogs, like Omolú⁷, not with the kings, like Xangô. For a very long time I rejected Xangô in my heart, it did not feel right. Archetypically, Xangô is everything I always thought I was not: he represents royalty, good humored people, extroverts. He is jovial, glutinous and luxurious even, but ultimately a god of justice. He is a fiery god, the

³I chose to use the Brazilian orthography. The anglicised version tends to be Orisha and Shango.

⁴Babá means father and is the title of a priest in Umbanda, an african-derived brazilian religion that I practice.

⁵Within the context of my religious tradition all practitioners have a patron deity that is conventionally referred to as “father” or “mother”. This is a matter of great importance for the practice because it contains the “archetype” that we are to manifest in the world. The patron god or goddess is not chosen, rather it is attributed to you by a priest who reads the Ifá, the Yourubá divination method that in Brazil consists of several shells being scattered across four quadrants. All of this knowledge has been transmitted to me through direct religious teaching, but relevant literature may include (Saraceni, 2007).

⁶Xangô is the god of Thunder, Justice and Life (Saraceni, 2007).

⁷The Orixá of pestilence, abandoned by his own mother as a little child (cf. Prandi, 2000)

thunder belongs to him. He carries an axe with which he brings justice to the world. He is an Alafin⁸ of Oyó. He has several wives, including Oxum, the Orixá of beauty and love.

I only completely accepted Xangô as my patron when I open heartedly engaged with two of his myths. The first myth tells the story of Xangô as the king of Oyó, an ancient kingdom of Nigeria, and how he was defeated by an adversary and in order to keep his honour was forced to hang himself (Prandi, 2000). The second myth is about his quest to the underworld in order to retrieve his dead daughter and bring her back to life, despite Xangô being utterly terrified of the spirits of the dead and death in general (Sàlámi, 1990). The first myth is the one I want to explore regarding forming a relationship with the symbol.

The change that I experienced came as I was telling these two myths to friend, when we were discussing a health crisis through which I was going. It was just before I was admitted to a hospital and we were talking about where I could find the strength to overcome the situation. I immediately turned to my religion and acknowledged that the one who would help me was my Orixá, Xangô. But how could I square my tribulated journey through the underworld with being a daughter of the Orixá of life? Then I remembered that Xangô is called The One who Never Hanged Himself, according to an Itan⁹. The Itan says that Xangô hanged himself after being defeated by Gbaca due to the humiliation, but that his body was never found. The people of his kingdom believe that they could not find the body because Xangô was transformed into an Orixá, literally achieving apotheosis in his hour of greatest despair. In death he found his ascension from king to god. He is an Orixá of life and he has experienced death. He is an Orixá of life *because he has experienced death*.

James Hillman talks about how suicide is a soul's urge towards transformation. The soul desires death because only by dying it can trigger the changes that it wants to carry out (1988). The suicide of Xangô divinised him. The impulse for transformation was successfully acknowledged through his death and lead him to overcoming death itself. He died in the lowest point of his human life, but because a radical change was bound to happen, he ascended to the heavens as a divine being. Realising this made me change the perspective through which I was

⁸ Alafin means king in Yoruba (cf. Sàlámi, 1990).

⁹ Itan means story, myth.

seeing my situation. The process I was experiencing could be seen not as bodily ailment, but a radical quest for meaning. Hillman says that “the organic death has no power over soul” (Ibid., p.62) just like the organic death of Xangô did not prevent him from turning into a Orixá.

In order to reach Xangô, I had to openly engage with the symbol expressed by the Itan. I had to want it in order to understand it. I had heard, read and retold the myth several times before. But only in a state of passion (pathos) could I finally relate to it. I now think it is a sensible religious move to believe that this Itan was the broken piece of pottery that Xangô was giving me in order for me to enter a covenant with him. However, I had to realise a meaning that did not derive from reason, but from a mythopoetic approach to the Itan. Gregory Shaw says that “it is not by our knowing, calculating or predicting that we ascend to the gods, but by the intensity and quality of our longing” (2005, p.6). It was in a situation where I was truly longing for life, for Xangô, that I could enter the world of the spiritual connection with the divine intelligible world that Voss spoke regarding neoplatonic imagination.

The mythopoetic attitude so far described is quite wild in the sense that it depends on a *spontaneous* revelation that derives from a longing of the soul or an extreme, ego-displacing situation. However, there are some approaches to myth, in particular hermeneutic approaches that allow us to explore these themes from a perspective that is more methodologically contained. This may be equally fundamental to establish a meaningful relationship with divine through symbols. Paul Tillich argues that “both symbols and signs point beyond themselves to something else” (1955, p. 189). The hermeneutic process which we choose is the one through which we go in order to reach that “something else”. Struck says “in most standard reference works, a symbol is a deeply resonant literary image thought to have some special linkage with its meaning: the word “organic” frequently appears in its various definitions” (2004, p.1). One such method that can be used to interpret the “deeply resonant literary image” is the hermeneutic approach called the four levels of interpretation, developed in Christian theological circles.

That symbolic images can be interpreted through levels is already implicit in Platonic thinking. Tim Addey (2002) suggests the dialogues of Plato go through three phases. First, they state the accepted truth, the status quo opinion regarding the subject. Addey compares this first stage of an initiation into the mysteries, where the iniciant states that there are indeed mysteries,

but does not know of what they are comprised. Second, they rationally examine the original thesis through a dialectical process. In the mysteries this is when we cease to receive outside information and discover truths by turning inwards. Third comes the telling of a myth, because the myth unifies the several parts that were picked apart during the dialectical process. Addey argues that Plato uses myth in this stage because “myth is a moving thing to which the soul responds”. It is the act that dissolves the separation between subject and object and unifies. In the mysteries, Addey adds, this is the part when the initiate understands that she is an indivisible part of the universe.

Despite this understanding of symbolic reality being present in Plato and the whole of the pagan Neoplatonic tradition, it was the Christian theologians who developed it as a formal method.

Origen in the 3rd century B.C. stipulates three different levels of meaning that one can read in the scriptures: literal, psychic and pneumatic, which, respectively, relates to body, soul and spirit (McGinnis, 2018, 145). As a great allegorist, Origen brought to Christianity the tradition of reading the scriptures through multiple senses “and firmly fixed the nature of Scriptural exegesis for succeeding centuries. From a double division of *sensus historicus* or *literals*, and *sensus spiritualis*, he developed a trichotomous scheme: the literal; the moral; and the spiritual” (Caplan, 1929, p. 285).

St Augustine in the 4th century is very concerned about rhetoric and hermeneutics, which is based on the study of the discrepancy between what is written and what was the writer’s original intention. Kathy Eden argues that “*De doctrina* contributes to Augustine’s efforts throughout his writing to secure a bond between the act of interpretation and all other action. The one must be qualified, like the other, according to the disposition of the agent’s will or intention, his *voluntas*” (1990, p. 47). Because his hermeneutics is based on intention, Augustine argues that there are two levels of meaning that can be found in a text: the semantic, i.e. what the word means, and the dianoetic, i.e. what the author meant by using those words. For Augustine the latter is most important when analysing scriptures (Ibid., p. 49). Like Origen, Augustine also “upholds the spiritual {*spiritualis*) reading over the carnal or corporeal {*carnalis*, *corporalis*) reading and identifies the body or flesh of the text with the letter, the corporeal reading with the

literal” (Ibid., p. 51). The true reading is a reading of the spirit, following the famous quote by St. Paul in 2 Corinthians “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (3:6). On the other hand, a second layer that can be used in interpretation is the literal/figurative dichotomy. Whilst many readers conflate the literal reading with the carnal and the figurative with spiritual, Eden argues that “although Augustine invariably encourages his reader to interpret spiritually, that spiritual reading is not invariably a figurative reading; sometimes it is quite literal (*propria*)” (Ibid., p.61). Whilst the reader might be warned against reading literally in the sense of carnally, she must also know how to distinguish if the author’s will is to express something literally or figuratively. This distinction will be clear to the reader that is treating the text spiritually, being able to understand the author’s *voluntas* (Ibid., p. 63).

Thomas Aquinas’ hermeneutics in the 13th century postulates the four senses of interpretation:

Senses are multiplied in four ways: (1) according to the *sensus historicus* or literalis, by a simple explanation of the words; (2) according to the *sensus tropologicus*, which looks to instruction or to the correction of morals. (...) (3) according to the *sensus allegoricus*. Exposition by this sense is exposition by a 'sense other than the literal. (...) With (4) the *sensus anagogicus*, used mystically or openly, 'the minds of the listeners are to be stirred and exhorted to the contemplation of heavenly things (Caplan, 1929, p. 283).

This hermeneutical interpretation was very popular in the Middle Ages and was applied to an array of disciplines, the moral or tropological being of particular interest to preachers (Ibid., p. 284). Aquinas argues that the several levels of interpretation does not bring confusion or cause ambiguity because “these interpretations are not multiplied because one word signifies several things; but because the things signified by the words can themselves be types of other things.” (Summa Theologica, i, art. 10, Reply obj. 3).

Whilst these thinkers were constructing their hermeneutics in relation to the holy scriptures of the Christian tradition, Dante brings the four senses of interpretation to poetry. Richard Hamilton Green states that Dante, however, makes a distinction between allegory in theological terms and the allegory that he applies to the *Divine Comedy*. He says that “the force of the distinction, then, is to affirm that in the *Convivio* Dante is using the terms *allegoria* and

allegorica interpretatio in the older and wider sense in which they were applied to poetry as well as Scripture.” (1957, p. 121). Because Dante was aware of the efforts of Aquinas to bind the four senses of interpretation to the scriptures only, Dante makes use of the poetic allegory and theological allegory in order to emphasise “the discovery of figurative meanings in poetry in a way which would be easily understood by contemporaries aware of the subtle analogies and radical differences between poetic fiction and divine revelation” (Ibid., p. 122). The fact that the treatment of literature is, as Dante writes, " poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, and figurative; and at the same time, it consists in definition, division, proof, refutation, and the use of examples." (as quoted by Green, Ibid., p. 122) makes Green think that is the “fictive” description that separates poetic revelation from divine revelation (Ibid.) Poetry, unlike Augustine argues for the scripture, can never be read literally as in historically so its hermeneutic sense is always of one of spirit. This opens up the path for the four levels of interpretation to be applied to all human endeavours, not only the Bible. Taking a four senses approach to any kind of symbolic experience, like Dante did with his poem, gives birth to new ways of understanding the experience, deepening the conversation.

The point of the four levels of interpretation is not being stuck in the allegorical level, but to reach anagoge and understand that the symbol is unfolding itself in the here and now. Henry Corbin says that

Allegory, being harmless, is a cover, or rather a travesty of something that is already known or at least knowable in some other way; whereas the appearance of an Image that can be qualified as a symbol is a primordial phenomenon (1976, p. 16).

It is important to note that for Corbin the Image is received when in contact with the world of imagination, his *mundus imaginales* (Cheetham, 2012). Imagination for Corbin is the tool of perception used to enter this world (Ibid.), where we meet the Angel¹⁰. Corbin says that “there is no external criterion for the manifestation of the Angel other than the manifestation itself. The Angel is the very "ekstasis", the movement out of ourselves, which represents a change in our state of being.” (1976, p 20) The world of the imaginal is where “phenomenology becomes

¹⁰The Angel, in Corbins readings of Ibn Arabi’s work, is akin to the Platonic daimon. It is a sort of tutelary spirit that guides the soul towards God. (1976)

ontology” (Ibid.). Framing this in the four levels of interpretation model, phenomenology is in the realm of the literal and it becomes ontology in the anagogic. If we stop at the level of allegory, the phenomenology can be explained away. It leaves space for doubt and rationalisation. Anagogic experiences, as Corbin says, “have the virtue of shattering even the rock of doubt, of paralyzing the ‘agnostic reflex’” (Ibid). It breaks through the subject/object divide, and we are not in the position of thinking about the symbol and rather can *participate in* the symbol.

In order to illustrate this further, I would like now to explore the second myth of Xangô I have told previously. The second realisation I had when retelling the myth has to do with the fact that Xangô as a father is someone who goes to the underworld to rescue his daughter. I was in the literal sense a daughter of Xangô lost in a symbolic death state. If I took the perspective of enacting the myth, that I was living the Itan, the anagogical conclusion would be that I too would be saved. And that, therefore, I was saved already.

This last statement is perhaps so bold and cryptic that it needs more unpacking. While the tropological level of interpretation intimately relates to the moral turning of the soul where a reader realises what she must do, the anagogical level is one of hope, and particularly in its original Christian framing of hope for salvation. This is generally marked by the mystical realisation that salvation is *here and now*¹¹. Thus, for example, a tropological reading of this myth would exhort me to go to the underworld and save my loved ones, while my anagogical realisation is that by telling the myth, Xangô already saved me.

This is why the anagogical understanding of a myth is so important. Not only can I frame my situation differently by engaging with the myth using the four-fold system of interpretation, but I can also actively live the myth which is incredibly powerful and healing. I understand the anagogical moment to be a sacred literalization of the tropological turn. I am literally a daughter of Xangô, as soon as I accept the story as truth. I am an anagogically literal daughter of Xangô because I understand that the myth is being played out in my own life, right here and right now. An anagogical understanding must be, therefore, an embodied experience. This is akin to Iamblichus’ notion of communion with the gods, referenced in the beginning of this section, and

¹¹Cf Geoffrey Cornelius *Moment of Astrology* chapters 14-15.

it relates with the Theurgic idea in late Neoplatonism of taking the shape of the gods. By the perceptual turn that allows me to reframe my embodied and literal experience as an unfolding of Xangô's myth, I find myself immediately in his presence, and open room for a direct theophany in the world. This theme of embodiment, especially of hermeneutical embodiment will be of particular importance as we descend from the loftier level of the gods, into that of the daemons and generation.

The Channeled Daemon

In this section I will be looking at the level of Daemons in the Great Chain of Being, and analysing them through the notion of embodiment, channeling and divine possession. For Iamblichus, daemons are intermediary beings between souls and gods who “ have the specific function of unfolding divine logoi into material manifestation, not only in nature but also in souls” (Shaw, 2016, p.184). We can say that daemons are those beings who work at the level of the material world to manifest the creative power of the gods. They are within the realm of generation inasmuch as they are the ones who manifest the divine principle of the Moon in the specific creation of the silver. Daemons are therefore not really separated from the gods, but a further emanation from them, and “reveal [their] divine signatures (sunthēmata) in nature” (Ibid. p.177).

This is of particular importance because a fundamental point of Iamblichus' cosmology is that souls when embodied become mortal and must regain their immortality. That is, “the human soul—materialized, alienated, and mortal—must learn to embrace its alienated and mortal condition as a form of demiurgic activity” (Ibid). Daemons are the spiritual beings that attach the souls to the bodies, which means they fulfill a fundamental role in the drama of human existence. Iamblichus himself says, as cited by Gregory Shaw:

Daemons are the generative and creative powers of the gods in the furthest extremity of their emanations and in its last stages of division. . . . Daemons finish and complete encosmic natures and exercise oversight on each thing that comes into existence. . . . They oversee nature and are the bond that unites souls to bodies. (Iamblichus, *De Myst.*,67.1 68.2 apud Shaw, 2016, p.185).

What this means is that the longing humans feel for communion with the divine that derives from embodiment, as well as the theophanies they encounter in the natural world all

around them, can be traced back to the activities of daemons in the world. For this reason, I will explore the subject of embodiment as well as the subject of channeling in this section.

But what does it mean to be embodied? Justin Smith says that To speak of embodiment (...) is always to speak of a subject that finds itself variously inhabiting, or captaining, or being coextensive with, or even being imprisoned in, a body. The subject may in the end be identical to, or an emergent product of, the body (2017, p. 1).

To talk of embodiment, according to Smith, means talking about two contrasting existences, the body and what is embodied, the soul for instance. In the Platonic tradition, the embodiment of soul is usually a fall from a higher state and “the degree of bodiliness of a being is accounted for in more or less overtly moral terms as the consequence of some sort of failure, transgression, or lapse” (Ibid., p.3).

The role of the body in Platonism has always been a contentious one. While Plato himself tended to swing between radical positions where the body was regarded as evil (for example, the *Phaedo*) and more moderate ones where the body was neutral (*Republic*), most of the resulting philosophy seems to deny any important role of the body in metaphysical terms. In truth, one could say that the main role the body plays in embodiment is that of capturing the soul and alienating it from the gods. This will create a debate between later (Neo)platonists on whether the soul even fully descends into the body or not. Plotinus (204—270 C.E.) will argue in the *Enneads* that the soul cannot be fully contained in the body, it will be divided once it enters the material body. Whilst the ‘higher part’ of the soul is unchangeable and will be in contact with the Intelligence, the lower part will enter the body into the world of change in order to craft the Cosmos (Gerson, 2018).

Iamblichus (ca. 245 C.E.- ca. 325 C.E) on the other hand, will argue not only that the soul is fully descended into the body, but also that all matter has an element of divinity (Shaw, 2016) Porphyry will say that the soul is divided but that such division is not complete as to say that humans have two different souls. The lower soul will depend upon the higher soul to function. Regarding the relationship between the soul and the body, Porphyry has an interesting perspective. He solves the problem of how something immaterial can inhabit the material world by proposing that the soul is not in the body, it *acts* on the body (Nem. 136, 11; p. 99 Dörrie).

Proclus (*412–485 C.E.) will follow the doctrine of a divided soul, rational and irrational. He will, however, argue that the corporeal and incorporeal realm cannot be fully separated from each other. The soul entering the body will be acted upon and be subject to passions, but the

body will be elevated to a more divine status due to its association with the soul (Helmig and Steel, 2019).

Justin E. H. Smith argues that in modern times the question that arises from reflection on embodiment is a matter of how much subjectivity is determined by embodiment and if our experience of the world depends on what kind of body we have (2017, p. 5). A dualist conception of the world, like Descartes proposes, will envision a reality where spirit or soul can exist without a material body as counterpart (Ibid., p.7). The tension that is explored is then mostly about the fact that whilst both determine the experience we have of the world, categories like character and intelligence should transcend the body (Ibid., p.5). Smith argues that “a comparative approach reveals that embodiment is the product of a mostly local, particular history, with a particular starting point and a possible future end” (Ibid., p.6). The ontological regime that is accepted by the Western world is one in which the body is the obvious existence but for a being to be qualified as humans the higher principle of the soul or spirit needs to animate it (Ibid., p.8).

I believe, however, that most neoplatonic thought focuses on the experience of ensoulment, not embodiment. Taking an ensoulment perspective means seeing the body without a soul is (evil or neutral) matter. The body and soul are separate. The (evil/neutral) body becomes good/divine when the soul descends into the body to animate it. It could be possible to have a body without a soul. The existence of the body is never in question, but whether there is a higher principle to ensoul it, master and perhaps divinise it.

Taking an embodiment perspective means seeing the body as a creative expression of the soul. My body is directly created, changed, influenced by my soul. Without the soul there could be no body. The soul becomes embodied in order to interact with other ways of existence. This is of particular importance since many mythologies seem to quite naturally affirm that even gods will take bodily forms to pursue their interests, from Zeus taking the form of an animal to seduce beautiful women to YHWH becoming incarnated in Christ to redeem humanity. The body cannot be completely good, bad or even neutral, because the soul is none of those things in essence. It has the potential to be all of them, and so does the body. The existence of the soul is never in question and it is a symbiotic relationship. As I mentioned before, Hillman’s *Suicide and the Soul*

postulates that the impulse for death is the soul's demand for a fuller life through a death experience (1988). In this context, the soul acts on the body to trigger a reaction and the body acts on the soul to trigger transformation. It is a two-way street.

One interesting way of thinking embodiment in religious terms is to draw upon channeling practices, and this may clarify what I am attempting to transmit. Wouter J. Hanegraaf defines channeling as “the conviction of psychic mediums that they are able, under certain circumstances, to act as a channel for information from sources other than their normal selves” (1998, p. 23). He goes on then to list characteristics of the process: the information comes from an intelligence that is usually of a higher level than the medium; the medium might be in a state of trance, which can be completely or only partially disassociative; sometimes there is no trance involved but the final purpose of channeling is always to communicate information that does not come from the individual's consciousness (Ibid., p.24). He argues, however, that channeling “*is an emic term used in the New Age context to refer to the general etic category of ‘articulated revelations’*” (Ibid., p. 27. Italics in the original). Trance channeling can be compared to shamanic “spirit possession”, Hanegraaf says, but the hearing of voices and experiencing visions seem to be a different phenomenon more associated with mystical understandings. The third type of channeling he postulates is one that results from training the rational mind and developing intuition (Ibid., pp. 33-34).

I will be focusing on the first type of channeling Hanegraaff proposes, and I would like to argue that the purpose of channelling, when adhering to an embodied perspective, is not focused on the relay of a message or “articulated revelations” but rather on the knowledge that the experience in itself can reveal. Channeling should be considered as a communion practice, where the body and soul of the medium are elevated due to her interaction with a being in a higher level of the Great Chain. It is not about the higher soul descending into the body, but the body experiencing and projecting the higher soul. When channeling, the medium's body can be transformed in order to express the nature of the second soul - as several people have reported, the medium can apparently change genders, become older, move in a completely different way and so on and so forth (Hanegraaff, 1998, p. 39). I would also like to argue that the revelation is the moment of the channelling experience and does not necessarily need to be articulated. The

body in itself can comprehend non-discursive knowledge through embodiment. Just the act of joining together with a higher soul is enough to receive the information needed, which then later can be decoded by an analysis of the event.

Proclus in *On the Signs of Divine Possession* defines divine possession very similarly to Hanegraaff:

there are men who are possessed and who receive a Divine Spirit. Some receive it spontaneously, like those who are said to be seized by God, either at particular times, or intermittently and on occasion. There are others who work themselves up into a state of inspiration by deliberate actions, like the prophetess at Delphi when she sits over the chasm, and others who drink from divinatory water. (p.1)

One very interesting point that Proclus makes is that for a theagogy to happen, a change in consciousness must also occur. This rules out Hanegraaff's third type of channeling as a proper channelling experience. It does not mean that the medium must enter a complete state of dissociation, to use Hanegraaff's word, as Proclus maintains that the medium does not need to be completely besides themselves and if aware during the experience, the theagogy can be worked consciously. So, what does it mean to have a change in consciousness? I would argue that Proclus' point has to do not with a dissociation state, but a state of consciousness where divine inspiration can be allowed, without the intervention of a disbelieving self. It is allowing the body and soul to receive the spirit without denying it.

Iamblichus had already argued that there are ecstasies that "lift the soul above nature, attach us to beings that transcend human understanding, and unite the soul with the gods" (Shaw, 2003, p. 51) This union is not reached through reason, but through theurgical practice.

According to Shaw

Iamblichus distinguishes three levels of prayer with each degree expressing an increasing intensity of communion with the gods. The first stage is called "gathering together" which establishes contact with and awareness of the gods. The second stage, called "binding together," brings the soul into a common mind with the gods and provides divine gifts even before we think of them. The third and highest stage is called "ineffable union" which establishes all power in the gods and allows the soul to rest in them perfectly. (Ibid)

This union is achieved through an ecstatic exchange that allows imagination to connect our soul with the god's soul. The mind needs to be empty in order to receive visions and witness the reunion (Ibid., p. 65). Our soul has been alienated not only from the gods but also from its own divine expression. The ecstatic experience is needed in order for the soul to rediscover its divinity. This does not mean that the individual is escaping from herself through dissociation,

but rather acting as “ an agent of cosmogenesis through whom the gods express themselves in the soul’s theurgic activity” (Ibid., p. 86). The theurgic ritual happens through its faculty of imagination.

For Iamblichus, the first step in theurgy is to connect with the daimons. If the medium does not start here, she will not “possibly contain the presence of the intelligible god” (Ibid., p. 80). Daimons manifest the gods’ will. As Shaw says

to assume that one could forego the material realm and go straight to the Intelligible was a conceptual mirage that, in Iamblichus’ estimation, had lured Porphyry and the Greeks away from a living and embodied engagement with the gods and their daimones (Ibid.)

Just like with the levels of hermeneutic interpretation, starting with the literal or material world is the first step to commune with the gods. The divinisation of the soul in the theurgic ritual is the anagogical moment in hermeneutics, but to reach it the seeker must also engage with the other levels of meaning. This is why both for Proclus and Iamblichus the use of objects, the *sumbola* or *sunthêmata*, in the ritual is so important. They contain, as I explained in the first section, the symbolic in the material. Channelling a daemonic intelligence is, like the anagogical interpretation, materialising the symbolic. Through the embodied connection with the daemon the soul elevates itself to the gods and is purified, just like an embodied hermeneutic understanding of a myth brings salvation to the interpreter.

Robert Bosnak, a modern dream interpreter and student of Hillman, understands this movement of the soul as embodied imagination. Like Iamblichus, his embodiment also focuses on ecstasy. He says:

The closer we get to an image-presence, the more it becomes an environment in which we find ourselves. We are pulled into the presence and participate in its medium. This is the literal meaning of the word *ekstasis*, a movement outside of ourselves, changing our state of being (2007, p. 20)

To participate in embodied imagination the outside must become the inside and vice-versa (Ibid). In a channelling episode, both outside and inside conflates: there is something else inside me or am I inside the something else? The outside intelligence is acting inside my body. As Bosnak states, “an embodied image comes to life by possessing us. Upon being absorbed in its

medium, we become the medium of its epiphany (Ibid. p.21).” In channelling rituals, the channeller will use the symbols (sunthêmata) of the intelligence channelled in order to immerse herself in the realm of said intelligence to then become the medium of revelation. Embodiment in channelling is a way of fully achieving Bosnak’s embodied imagination ideals, for in such practices, as he describes, “both self and other turn inside out, and we become a mutual body, a mutual state” (Ibid.).

Bosnak perceives embodied imagination as “a true meeting with alien substantive intelligences which can possess our subjective bodies and influence our physical body” (Ibid., p. 22) which I consider to be a better definition to channelling experiences than Hanegraaff’s. Channelling is not an emic term for the etic category of articulated revelations, but rather to a different category in itself, which Iamblicus calls theurgy and Bosnak calls embodied imagination, where the primary goal is to express physically different intelligences that surrounds us and commune with them. The spoken revelations that come through with the process are more like secondary effects, not the objective of the practice in itself.

This is an understanding that is supported by my own experience with channelling. Umbanda is a channelling tradition. The main spiritual developments are achieved through the practice of channelling. The spirits channelled in Umbanda are not called daemons, but spirit guides. The guides are divided into archetypal categories, like Caboclo, PretoVelho, Boaideiro and several more¹² that permeate the mythopoetic world of african-brazilian culture. Yet they are in the same ontological category as daemons, being spirits above the human soul but inferior to the gods. The purpose of channelling in Umbanda is not to receive revelations, but it is seen rather as a process of purification of the soul through the contact with higher entities. Most channellers will not even speak during the channelling ritual and only mediums with permission will actually talk with people who are attending the ritual. The focus of the channelling moment is to embody the spirit guide, nothing more. The process of channelling represents a direct theophany through the embodiment of the spirit guide or daemon.

This does not mean, however, that other goals are not achieved. Real knowledge can be gained from a channelling session, even if the spirit does not communicate directly with the medium. I remember the first time I channelled my Preto Velho spirit guide. Apart from the physiological transformations, like a curved back, difficulty in walking and with this spirit a

particular difficulty moving my right leg, the biggest impact was the profound sadness and compassion for the world I felt as I channelled the spirit and that I can feel in my body even now, as I retell this experience. The spirit did not need to tell me she was old, that she was abused, that she was sad, but that despite all that she also had an immense love for this world and the people that populate it. That we are all her grandchildren for whom she cares dearly. With the certainty of these feelings also came the certainty that they were not mine. They arose in me, for sure, but they did not feel *mine*.¹³ It was a true experience of embodied imagination as discussed previously through the work of Bosnak. There was no revelation, but there was an understanding of the mythopoetic reality through which this particular spirit manifests herself. This understanding was reached non-discursively, through an embodied practice.

Like with the Itans regarding Xangô, I had heard stories and definitions about these spirit guides, but I only truly understood their nature when I had an embodied experience with them,

¹²Caboclos are spirits that take the shape and are inserted in the archetype of the native indians of Brazil. Preto Velhos are spirits that express the experience of old people who suffered slavery in Brazil. Boiadeiros are spirits connected with cow herding tradition that permeates the whole of Brazil. For more information cf. Vieira, 2015.

¹³Interestingly enough, this is somewhat similar to the early Greek conception that rather than having feelings we are a medium through which feelings happen (Dodds, 1962).

especially because of the racial tension that existed, and I could not dispel rationally. How could I, a young white woman, channel an old black spirit? What right did I have to do so? These were the thoughts that raced through my head during the experience in my half-conscious state. What I understood with that first channelling experience is how silly these concerns were. The embodiment, as the channelling moment is called in Umbanda, happened not due to my own will, but due to the spirit's will. If she had thought I had no right to receive her, she would not have come. The power is not in my hands and I only believed it was because I did not understand how *profoundly other* the spirits are. They are not an expression of my psyche, they exist outside me and therefore my conceptions of what is right and what is wrong had nothing to do with them.¹⁴ And although I can try to explain this rationally now, I reached these conclusions through the experience of embodying the Preta Velha spirit, not talking with her. Suddenly and all at once.

The perspective of being embodied instead of ensouled allows for the body to be a tool for theophany and not only an impediment, like platonists might argue, and this is particularly evident in channelling. The channelled intelligence does not only commune with my soul, as it would happen in an ensoulment perspective, but also with my body. It divinises the body and not only the immaterial soul because the material is also seen as being passive of being divinised. Bosnak's embodied imagination allows for the change to happen at body level and not only at an intellectual level, in fact the intellectual and spiritual understandings are posterior to the bodily ones for Bosnak. As I explained regarding my channelling experiences, my body can be an

¹⁴This is, naturally, a statement of faith that autoethnographically informs my understanding of the spirits, but I cannot affirm with academic authority that the spirits are wholly other. I will allow myself to follow this line of understanding here because of two reasons: The first is the autoethnographic nature of the work, and the fact that these spirits feel wholly other to me, the other is the fact that I am using a (Neo)platonist framework that assumes the spirits are wholly other as well.

However, a very brief survey on hypotheses regarding spirit channeling is important. The idea that channeling is the result of inner states objectified in an apparent outer figure goes back at least to Theodore's Flournoy *From India to The Planet Mars - A Study of a Case of Somnambulism with Glossolalia* (1899) in which the experiences of a medium are reinterpreted as the manifestation of the unconscious imagination under the argument that there is not enough evidence for the "spirit hypothesis". Bosnak (2007) argues that this is an attempt of the colonialist psyche of the time to assimilate all that is other. Some research has tried to use mediums to add evidence to the spirit hypothesis. In the 19th century, Frederick Myers was one such researcher (cf. Kripal, 2011, ch.1). More recently Schwartz (2002) has used the experience of mediums to try and demonstrate the possibility of life after death, adding strength to the "spirit hypothesis" dismissed by Flournoy. Other researchers, like Terrence Palmer (2011) have argued for a sympathetic ethnographic approach, where the phenomenology of the practitioner is given precedence over ontological questions regarding the nature of the spirits.

expression both of my soul and of daemonic intelligences and it is possible to acquire knowledge through the experience of embodiment alone. This knowledge opens the path to theophany.

The Masked Hero

In this section we will be looking at the level of the Great Chain of Being associated with Heroes. Unlike the levels I have discussed so far, Heroes tend to be regarded as a category of spirit that has incarnated at some point in time. Herakles, Odysseus and Achilles¹⁵ are all examples of heroes and in their mythologies, they have an earthly (as well as a heavenly) lineage, they interact with other humans and seem, in general, to be embodied human beings like any other. The difference resides in the fact that their soul is more perfect than that of the common human being and therefore it has a stronger presence in the intelligible realm. As Thomas Taylor tells us in a footnote to the Orphic Hymn to Herakles “Now Hercules is celebrated in this Hymn as the Sun, (...) hence the reason is obvious why Hercules is called "earth's best blossom." (Taylor, 1792, pp.126-127) What this means is that Herakles is both an embodied presence, as seen for example in the *Iliad*, but also a divine one, existing simultaneously on two different ontological realms.

Iamblichus hints at this when he says that

Such being the first and last principles among the divine classes, you may postulate, between these extremes, two means: the one just above the level of souls being that assigned to the heroes, thoroughly superior in power and excellence, beauty and grandeur, and in all the goods proper to souls, but nevertheless proximate to these by reason of homogeneous kinship of life (*De Myst.* 1.5).

That is, heroes share the kinship of life with human souls, inasmuch as they become embodied, but they are in all respects superior to these human souls. This is quite similar to Christian conceptions of Saints, for example. While their place in the great chain of being is quite similar to that of daemons, one could say that daemons are the last of the divine hierarchy while heroes are the first of the soul hierarchy. Because of this, Iamblichus tells us, they have “leadership over souls” (Ibid. 2.1).

The purpose of this section is to look at theatre, and in particular ancient Greek theatre, as a means of manifesting and embodying heroes and the important messages of virtue they must

15 Cf. Homer's *Iliad*.

give us. For this, I will look at theatre as a form of divine embodiment and its dialectical relationship both with actor and spectator.

Most importantly for our purposes here, performance is also a way of engaging with imagination in an embodied way. Tom Cheetam says that the cathartic and transformative effects of theatre performances is a result of active imagination participating in the drama of the psyche, the drama enacted on the stage being real (2012, pp 161-162). Engaging with artistic endeavours is “a transformative process in which the artist and the medium are both changed. Artistic expression is frequently at the leading edge of change, defining a reality unseen by the language of objectivity” (Higgs, 2008, p. 511). Embodied imagination can also be explored through art, as it can be an external force for change that both creates and is created by the individual. “Dance, music, poetry, and other arts all provide metaphors for lived experience, allowing us to see new ways to live and grow and new ways to know (Ibid., p. 553)” and since performance practices in particular are embodied practices by nature, the embodied hermeneutic model that I have presented is especially strong in such practices. The vehicle that transmits the symbol is the body of the performer. In the here and now of the performance “bodily actions of drama express crisis, schism, and conflict” (Schechner, 2003, xviii). As Richard Schechner says:

performers specialize in putting themselves in disequilibrium and then displaying how they regain their balance, psychophysically, narratively, and socially – only to lose their balance, and regain it, again and again. Theatrical techniques center on these incompletable transformations: how people turn into other people, gods, animals, demons, trees, beings, whatever – either temporarily as in a play or permanently as in some rituals; or how beings of one order inhabit beings of another order as in trance; or how unwanted inhabitants of human beings can be exorcised; or how the sick can be healed (Ibid.).

Theatrical performances, if inserted in a ritualistic context, can be a type of theurgy. It has the potential for the gods to manifest themselves on earth during the play and for the actress not only act but to embody the god - it is a theophanic activity.

In Ancient Greece, the birthplace of Western theatre, theatre was part of the religious life, as the plays were performed in the context of religious festivities. As Arnott says, “For the

Greeks it [theatre] was participatory and took many forms. The gods were honoured by human achievement: by athletic meets and boxing matches, by singing songs and acting plays” (1989, p.5). The audience in Ancient Greece was very participative (Ibid., p.6) and, therefore, the plays had to be written and performed with the audience’s reaction in mind. Attending a play, even a tragedy, was by no means a passive affair (Ibid., p.11). Without being able to resort to modern techniques of creating a fourth wall between the stage and the audience, the Athenian playwright had to somehow provide a participatory role to the audience in the plays. In *The Eumenides*, for instance, Aeschylus through the dialogue invites the spectators to identify themselves with the visitors of the Delphic shrine (Ibid., p.17), a situation with which the majority of them were already familiar.¹⁶

We may not have partaken in the experience of going to the oracle

but because the playwrights were engaged in dramatizing human experience, because the gods and heroes who peopled the stage were ‘examples’ as well as characters, because the theatre of the Athenians was a place where ideas were translated into art, it is still possible, given favourable circumstances, for Greek drama to be seen as both alive and immediate. (Walton, 1984, p.1)

Like the Pythia in Aeschylus, heroes were given life in the plays and interacted with the audience through them. Theatre is not, as some might say, a space for lies or pretending. It can give form and expression to complex and delicate subjects and allow for them to be engaged with in an honest way for “at its best the theatrical offers a means of opening up a story or an argument, of argumenting intellect with emotion and understanding” (Ibid., pp. 3-4),

In the world of theatre, the embodied presence of the characters is incredibly powerful. The treatment of heroes, gods and other mythical beings can be explored on the stage and again the non-discursive element is very important. It is a world “in which objects speak volumes, where the silent character can show himself more powerful than the speaker and the movement

¹⁶“THE PYTHIAN PRIESTESS: (...) And if there stand without, from Hellas bound,
Men seeking oracles, let each pass in
In order of the lot, as use allows.
For the god guides whate’er my tongue proclaims.” (Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, ll.40-43)

of a dozen men in masks can give a living embodiment to the hopes and fears of an entire community” (Ibid.). It offers a in-between space where the audience is capable of “(...) reading those artistic signals which form the language of the stage as one of the links between themselves, the world about them, their fellow men and their gods” (Ibid.). Because it is an embodied experience it is also provides an immediate understanding of the themes the play is exploring. It allows the audience to share and participate in the embodied imagination process that constitutes the performance.

Whilst it is true that Plato considers art to be an imitation of real experience and therefore a degenerate pursuit, and that there is a danger in theatrical performance since he argues that we become what we imitate and “therefore acting like a villain will turn us into a villain” (Ibid., p. 23), I believe that the potential in *mimesis* better explored by Aristotle and his notion of tragic art that has catharsis as its primary goal (Ibid., p. 24). Theatre allows us to explore our potential for emotion and

the value of the religious/dramatic festival, and of tragedy in particular, is that it excites this emotion, or rather these emotions identified as ‘pity’ and ‘fear’ and exorcises them. The audience feels sympathy with the stage characters and achieves a release of emotional tension by weeping on their behalf (Ibid., p. 25).

It is not that acting like a villain turns us into a villain but allows us to understand in a very profound way the processes that makes someone become a villain and to live the experience without actually committing the crime. It opens up realms of experience that then allow us to follow our righteous paths. It expiates the sin “(...) or perhaps, as an experience, the watching of a tragedy is a kind of spiritual emetic, contributing actively to the sanity and balance of individual and community” (Ibid., p. 26). Iamblichus makes a similar point, but from the point of view of the audience rather than the actors. When asked by Prophyry why Theurgic rituals have obscene imagery and words Iamblichus replies:

The powers of the human passions that are within us, when they are repressed, become correspondingly stronger; but if one exercises them in brief bursts and within reasonable limits,

they enjoy moderate relief and find satisfaction, and hence, being “purified,” are laid to rest through persuasion, and not by violence. That is why, when we behold the passions of others both in comedy and in tragedy, we stabilise our own passions, and render them more moderate, and purify them; and similarly, in the sacred rites, by viewing and listening to obscenities we are freed from the harm that would befall us if we practised them (*De Myst.* I.11).

Here, as before, the direct experience of evil or obscenities does not result in assimilation but in expiation, rendering the soul purer than it originally was.

Much like the thinkers that developed hermeneutics, the playwrights dealt with the “structure of myth to consider the relationships between the natural and supernatural worlds” (Walton, 1984, p. 29). Plays create a space where we can make sense of the world around us and engage with the mythopoetic interpretations that arise from such engagement. It connects us to the symbolic realm and the actor taking on divine attributes allows for the gods to become “in physical form, the personification of more abstract ideas and emotions” (Ibid., p. 30). Theatre allows for ways of thinking to be enacted and embodied: “Pandora’s box, the Trojan horse, the stone of Sisyphus all represented a way of thinking. The theatre of the Athenians was a specific art form which transformed that way of thinking into living metaphors” (Ibid., p. 31). Performance gives life to the myths, emotions, problems and concerns that permeates society, both in Ancient Greece and in modern times. It is a way of dealing with the forbidden, with death, disease and heal the wounds that surround such themes. Going to the theatre is akin to going to the oracle and hear the Pythia speak. Performance exists in the subjunctive mood, in the “as if” or “if only” (Schechner, 2003, p. xviii).

The main point of framing performance in this way is that it creates dialogue with the divine, that is, a sort of divination. An interesting framework to analyse the dialogue is Geoffrey Cornelius’ concept of *theoros* and *hermeios* in divinatory practices. He says:

Drawing on indications from classical and Hellenistic thought, this is expressed in complementary and dialogical terms as a seeking and enacting in the known world of our concern – *theoros*– and a responding from the oracular place which is beyond or unknown – *hermeios*. The interpretation of symbol, characteristic of inductive divination, is suggested to be the task of *hermeios* (2014, p. 1)

The theoros, as Cornelius explains, refers to celebrants in festivals or rituals and also to those who go seek the oracle. In the case of Ancient Greek theatre, the theoros is the audience in the festival of Dionysius that goes to watch the plays. In the example I mentioned in *The Eumenides* all these roles conflate. The audience in celebrating a festival, participating in a ritual and seeking the oracle. The participatory nature of the affair is also safeguarded. Cornelius argues that

there is no festival unless it is celebrated by those who are there, and their thereness, although entirely passive (pathos), is participatory, since they are 'carried away'. The truth of their participation lies not in their subjectivity but in that which they see (Ibid., p. 3).

This brings us back to the “here and now” understanding of analogical and embodied moments. What makes performance such an interesting aspect of embodiment is its “thereness”. The symbol cannot wait for a more propitious moment for the subjectivity necessary for the hermeneutic process to arise. The symbol is there to be acknowledged in what the audience sees.

Defining hermeios is a more complicated matter. Cornelius argues that he uses hermeios

as a generic term for the medium of divinatory interpretation, the heralding or carrying of otherness, whether this is known as a divinity, a spirit-being, or abstracted intelligence, into communicable form and therefore into common speech. This bringing-across is the act of interpreting, and it is the primary responsibility of the one enacting hermeios. This individual is therefore an embodiment of duality, with one foot in either realm.” (Ibid., p.6)

Looking back into channelling, the medium takes the role of the hermeios. She is the one that crosses between worlds and bridges the daemon with the human. Much like in Bosnak’s embodied imagination, there is a double process at work where the hermeios is both the channeller and the interpreter of the oracle. It gives us the oracle and tells us what it means. In a performance, the actress is the hermeios that both acts out the symbol and shows us how to relate to it.

Hermeios and theoros exist as a dual unity: “without there being divinatory presentiment and the intention of divinatory seeking then there will not be a divinatory response” (Ibid., p. 7). The oracle must be sought and understood for the divination to take place - the task of the theoros. This is true both to the first section about hermeneutics and the second section about embodiment. Without the willingness to pursue the matter, no hermeneutic or embodied moment can unfold. The same thing applies to performance. If the audience does not witness the performative moment it does not exist. It is not a performance but a rehearsal at best. The dialogue happens in the “thereness” of the actors and the audience. Why is the dialogue important? Can the play not happen without it? I believe that it is in the nature of theatre to be dialectical. Each performance will be different, and the audience is not responding to a static finished product because “our very responses assist the actors to shape the drama to our expectations and energy, so that indeed we are a part of the performance” (Jennings, 2005, p. 1). The actor as hermeios through the same play will be giving a different oracle to each audience, perhaps to each member of the audience. The power of the play lies in our engagement with it, for each theoros will bring a different question to the oracle.

A theatrical performance also has the power to change how we engage with our own reality. It “is able to condense a story in time, space and action in order that we can take it in as a piece; it also expands the story so that we have a new perception or understanding” (Ibid.) and therefore what is happening on stage is also pertinent to our lives beyond that space. Theatre helps us navigate our own world and “understand who we are and where we are in the world” (Ibid.). Theatre is not only about putting on a show but about bringing mythopoesis to life. The actions of a hero in a play is as important to the outside world as it is to the dramatic scene. As mentioned before, the audience can expiate sins, mourn deaths and overcome tribulations through the emotional connection created with the characters on stage. The heros are here and now. I would like to explore this with the example of Antigone.

The main conflict in Sophocles’ *Antigone*¹⁷ can be summarised as “a contest between the claims of the state and those of family, religion, and conscience” (Paris, 1997, p. 105). It focuses

¹⁷ *Antigone* is the story of a young woman who meets her doom at the hands of her uncle and king, Creon, because she dares to defy his ruling that her brother should not be buried and receive his last rites.

on the drama between Creon who believes that the welfare of the state should be the main concern, and Antigone who believes that duty towards family and the gods supersedes the duty towards the government. This is a theme that is pertinent even in our modern world and the play “vindicates Antigone and teaches Creon the error of his ways, but too late to prevent a tragic outcome” (Ibid). Taking the perspective of the play as dialogue between characters/hermeios and audience/theoros, what the audience can take away from the play is clear: the (tragic) hero here is Antigone and she stands for what is the right course of action. Antigone as hermeios tells us that we should bury our dead, no matter what. We as theoros take away an important lesson for our own lives. The example of the hero should be our code of conduct and it is embodied in the actress on stage. The hero transformed into flesh tells us how sacred duty and piety are more important than civil duty, but this is achieved also through dramatic distance as we are allowed a

passage back and forth between two planes: the subjective and the objective. (...) Drama is a social encounter in a special place and in a special time. The actors and the spectators move between real time and imaginary time, from existential reality to dramatic reality. (Meldrum, 2005, p. 15).

It is in the in-between that the hero takes form to guide us through our journeys and the dramatic distance “makes it more possible to interact with aspects of one’s own life and to understand these aspects which previously were too close to us for us to see (Jennings, 2005, p. 4).

Theatre also allows us to explore roles and if channelling facilitates the exploration of what a daemonic experience is comprised, drama facilitates the exploration of the hero, like Antigone, and her social role which is “an education for our life when a diverse range of roles is required of us, especially living in a complex society” (Ibid., p. 5). Going to the theatre is an expansive experience for “when we identify with the characters the actors are playing: ‘We accept our kinship with monsters: we enlarge the domain of our being’ (Wilshire 1982:10)” (Meldrum, 2005., p. 15). It is important to experience several roles because “the more experienced we are in our range of roles, the more we are equipped for survival in a rapidly changing society” (Jennings, 2005, p. 6) and this is what Antigone teaches us - how to act when

faced with a difficult situation. “The theatre itself can inspire us to resolve or change things in our lives or to realise the implications of our behaviour” (Ibid), the actress acting as hermeios provides the oracular moment and watching Antigone teaches us theoi how to become heroes ourselves.

The Becoming Soul (concluding thoughts)

Continuing with the role theory presented in the last section, I would like to point out that archetypal psychologist James Hillman (1991) argues that the “natural” state of the mind is a Dionysian one. He believes that in therapy we should not look for the true self that is hidden beneath the enactments of life, but for the personae, the masks we wear, and characters we play in the drama of our souls. To work in the context of a Dionysian consciousness means to understand our personal narratives through dramatic tensions, not conceptual oppositions. This changes the focus of therapy to be on soul history and not case history. The literal gives way to the symbolic, the mythical. To view our experiences within a drama means also bringing them back to its ritualistic and religious origins.

In *The Soul's Code* Hillman says that “each person enters the world called” (1996, p. 7). The ethnographic part of this dissertation has been about this same calling: the calling of Xangô, the calling of the Preta Velha, the calling of Antigone. The soul receives the calling by virtue of love. As Hillman says, “to change how we see things takes falling in love” (Ibid., p. 34). Hermeneutics, channelling, performance, all deal with changing how we see the world, how to make a subject of what is normally considered object. That is the primary concern of embodiment theory: acknowledging the body’s subjectivity and potential for transformation. I believe that the descent into the body in a ritualistic manner might be a way of what Hillman calls “growing down” which is the platonic process of the soul descending into the body and what Hillman considers to be fundamental to the realisation of our calling. We cannot wish to be young forever and need to accept the growing down process of ageing, for example. For him “until the culture recognizes the legitimacy of growing down, each person in the culture struggles blindly to make sense of the darkenings and despairings that the soul requires to deepen into life” (Ibid., p. 43), I would like to say that until we recognise ourselves as embodied beings and start paying attention to our bodies, a great part of our potential might go to waste.

In the first section I talked about how the embodied hermeneutics can provide a better understanding of our relationship with the gods. Taking myths of the Orixá Xangô as a starting

point, I tried to demonstrate how living the myth in the tropological and anagogical levels can bring a possibly better understanding of the meaning of the myth. Living mythopoetically is furthered by an embodied perspective of the soul. The body can be a manifestation of soul and therefore insights that work and change us at a soul level may also work and change us at a body level.

In the second section I tried to demonstrate how channelling can be an embodied imagination practice and how the body in itself can be a gateway to theophany, like hermeneutics can be a gateway to theophany when discussing sacred texts. The theurgic ritual of being possessed by the daemon is very similar to channelling practices and both have the same objective: to bring the soul closer to God. The moment of channelling in itself can be a theophanic experience without the need for discursive revelation. The knowledge is based in the bodily experience.

In the third section I brought the discussion to the realm of generation, to the realm of performance and heroes. My main arguments were that performance can be an attempt to bring heroic characters to life and our engagement with them can be akin to a divinatory process. The actress on stage has much to tell us by her acting of a hero regarding the principles, values and lessons that the same hero has to teach us.

Now what does this all mean? I would say that this means that whilst taking a (Neo)platonist approach to the world has value in itself, one of its most basic tenets, that the body is evil or at best neutral can be refuted within its own internal logic. The main objective of this dissertation and of the autoethnographic moments therein is to show that there is wisdom in the body. Like Hillman postulates, the (neo)platonist soul must grow down in order to live to its full capacity. Accepting the body and listening to the wisdom of the body is a growing down strategy. The fact that we do live in a body even if we consider having an immortal, immaterial soul is, as Hillman says, a dramatic tension we should explore and not, as the platonists postulate, reject.

I also hope I have explored the Neoplatonic great chain of being and how it is possible to engage with several ontological levels of being through an embodied perspective. Contrary to what Plotinus says I, like Iamblichus, think that going through the chain through contemplation

alone is not the only way. There is knowledge to be acquired regarding several intelligences in our daily practices if we consider them in a ritualistic way. A conversation with a friend, a trip to the theatre, a short experience with a daemon in a temple, all can be incredible sources of encounters with the great chain of being if we take time to explore the dramatic tension we feel in our bodies.

The title of the dissertation comes from a question I took from a Walt Whitman poem entitled “I Sing the Body Electric” and I would like to end the dissertation with his answer to it:

The expression of the body of man or woman
balks account,

The male is perfect, and that of the female is
perfect. The expression of a well-made man appears
not only in his face,

It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in
the joints of his hips and wrists,

It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the
flex of his waist and knees—dress does not hide
him,

The strong, sweet, supple quality he has, strikes
through the cotton and flannel,

To see him pass conveys as much as the best
poem, perhaps more,

You linger to see his back, and the back of his
neck and shoulder-side. (...) (2004, p. 140).

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