

Living as a Sphinx: Composite Being and Monstrous Interpreter in the ‘Middle Life’ of Michael Psellos

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a third life ... like a beast and like a human being and like a god. (Michael Psellos, Philosophica Minora 1.44.50–1.44.51)

One of the most characteristic traits of Michael Psellos’ philosophy is its capacity for finding middle ground, for accepting and balancing apparently contradictory demands¹; it is this tendency which leads to some of the most striking moves in his treatment of the relationship of body, soul and intellect. In what follows, I shall be concerned with a group of related oppositions: between body and soul, text and meaning, literary form and philosophical (or theological) content. Psellos demonstrates on many occasions a remarkably positive valuation of the body, and an enjoyment of text which is described in intensely bodily terms. His understanding of the human being as a composite of unlike parts is important to his views on reading and interpreting; since the interpreter is a being of this sort, his/her responses to text are also multiple and composite. Allied to this sense of the activity of the reader is a striking, and remarkably modern-sounding view of the reader as creator rather than discoverer of meaning.

In so far as Michael Psellos (c.1018–1080) is known to a broader audience, it is mostly for his historical work, the *Chronographia*. His intellectual activity was, however, extraordinarily various.² Far less well known are his numerous philosophical and theological works, the majority of which have only been properly edited in the last few decades (Duffy 2006, pp. 1–12).³ Many of these texts remain untranslated into modern languages. Yet for the transmission, and indeed the revival of the Platonic tradition in the eleventh century, Psellos is a vitally important figure. As

¹ There is a growing recognition of this tendency in Psellos’ thought: Jenkins (2006), pp. 131–151.

² For an invaluable bibliography of Psellos’ works see Moore (2005).

³ Some provisional thoughts on Psellos’ philosophy are offered by O’Meara (1998).

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both writer and teacher, Psellos played a leading role in the intellectual life of his era. Indeed, it is not too much to claim that he is a major figure of European intellectual history more broadly, passing on, and contributing to, a tradition which would later be transmitted to western Europe (Duffy 2002, pp. 139–156).

Psellos may be an understudied author, but he is an appealing one, and the secondary literature is growing.⁴ Among the questions to which Psellos repeatedly turns are the relationship of body to soul and intellect, and the composition of human beings out of apparently unlike parts. These parts are the traditional ones of Neoplatonism: body (σῶμα), soul (ψυχή), intellect (νοῦς), and, in a sense, the One (τὸ ἓν), the source of all being. The exact nature of Psellos' philosophical orientation has again become an open question in recent scholarship on his work (Kaldellis 2007). It is immediately evident to any reader of his philosophical and theological writings that Psellos is intimately familiar with late antique Platonism (Neoplatonism) in general, and Proclus (c.AD 410–485) in particular, whose thought is a constant presence in Psellos' works. Psellos is exact and competent in his use of Neoplatonic terminology, and knows the works of the earlier Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Porphyry (O'Meara 1998). However, as Kaldellis has aptly remarked: 'Psellos ... proves that he was no orthodox Platonist. But of course, neither was Plato' (Kaldellis 1999, p. 164). A full account of Psellos' philosophy is a much larger undertaking than the present chapter, but it is worth noting at the outset that for Psellos there is no radical break between the Platonism of Plato and the Neoplatonic tradition. The term 'Neoplatonic' is, after all, a nineteenth-century one, and the attempt to disentangle Plato himself from later Platonism is a modern undertaking. That is not to suggest that the effort to clarify the nature of Psellos' Platonism is not worthwhile, merely that for him, it is a continuous tradition, and that I will consequently refer both to his Platonism and his Neoplatonism.

In addition to his philosophical study, Psellos is equally well schooled in rhetoric, and speaks often of his combining philosophical with rhetorical and other studies. To take one example among many, in his *Letter to Keroularios* (52–60) he couples 'purifying his tongue by the sophistic arts' with the study of philosophy (Psellos 1990). Despite his clear admiration for his favourites among the ancients, he frequently shows real independence of mind. I should state at the outset that while I accept the traditional portrait of Psellos as a Platonist, he must be regarded as a highly unorthodox one; within a conceptual framework derived from late-antique Neoplatonism he is able to develop arguments of a markedly different tendency.

I base my discussion primarily on Psellos' philosophical works, especially the *Philosophica Minora*, though it will be helpful at times to make reference to other texts, in particular some of the *Theologica* and his letters.⁵ The character of the *Phil-*

⁴ Among recent contributions see Barber and Jenkins (2006); Kaldellis (1999, 2007), pp. 191–224; Ljubarskij (2004). Still valuable, despite appearing before many of Psellos' works were available, are Zervos (1920), and Tatakis (2003), pp 129–187. The series of English translations of Psellos promises to render his work accessible to a larger audience; the first volume is Psellos (2006).

⁵ I cite throughout from the recent Teubner editions of the texts: Psellos (1989a) *Opuscula Logica, Physica, Allegorica, Alia*; Psellos (1989b), *Michaelis Pselli Theologica I*; Psellos (1992); Psellos (2002). Other editions of individual works will be noted as appropriate. I have in general para-

osophica Minora varies: while some are really just paraphrases or assemblages of ancient sources, reported *verbatim* in response to particular enquiries, others show considerably more freedom in their treatment of the questions raised. The recent editors of these texts, by tracing the sources quoted or echoed, have laid an invaluable foundation. Nonetheless, a great deal of interpretive work remains to be done, as they themselves indicate.⁶

There are two reasons for my focus on the *Philosophica Minora* in particular. The first is concerned with the requirements of the present volume: it is in these short philosophical texts that Psellos approaches issues of the body and its relationship to the non-physical parts of the human composite most directly, and it is also here that we can find several instances of Psellos at his most original on these topics. Secondly, a great deal remains to be said about these intriguing texts, as serious work on them has only just begun. The close engagement with specific texts and with particular issues within those texts is what is most needed before a full appraisal of his thought will be possible: it is in engagement with the details of Psellos' thought that the next steps towards a fuller appreciation of his place in intellectual history should be taken.

Psellos, as one might expect of a writer engaging with the Platonic tradition, turns often to consider the relationship of body and soul. For Psellos, a human is a composite being, able to operate on several ontological/psychological levels. Given the Neoplatonic inheritance to which I have been alluding, this need be no great surprise, but as is always the case in 'Later Greek' thought (whether late-antique or medieval), it is in the ways in which this tradition is received, moderated and altered that its liveliness and interest are to be found. What is most remarkable in Psellos is his acceptance of the human composite as a whole. One can indeed speak of a 'rehabilitation of the body'.⁷ This is not to say that such a positive valuation of the body is entirely without precedent, either in the Neoplatonic or Christian traditions, but he is nonetheless remarkably independent and prone to accentuate the more open-ended and world-affirming sides of the Platonic tradition. Most characteristic of Psellos' thought regarding body and soul (and, indeed, on many topics) is a sort of hovering in between, a willingness to accept the inconsistency and multiplicity of human existence. He regularly avoids the extreme and dogmatic, and shows a real openness to varying points of view, even when they seem to be in contradiction. Certainly, this can lead to self-contradiction or ambivalence, as will be apparent in

phrased rather than translated these texts for the sake of conciseness. On occasion I transliterate as well as translate some key terms, where this might prove helpful, or is unavoidable. In citations of the second volume of the *Philosophica Minora*, I give the number of the *opusculum*, the page number and the line-number of the page on which it appears, as the line-numbers of the extracts are not given. When citing the *Theologica* and the first volume of the *Philosophica Minora*, I give the number of the *opusculum* and line-number within it.

⁶ O'Meara (1998), who stresses the 'caractère provisoire' of his observations on Psellos' philosophy.

⁷ As does Kaldellis (1999), pp 154–166.

the following discussion; but this same tendency can be seen more positively as an acceptance, and a reflection, of the composite nature of human beings.

Firstly three of the more conventionally Neoplatonic of the *Philosophica Minora* will help to establish the framework within which Psellos' thinking on the human composite takes place. *Philosophica Minora* 1.1 (titled *De Vita Philosophica* in Duffy's edition) is a short response to the question of what life the philosopher should choose in order to be entirely independent of other people. (A majority of these short philosophical works, incidentally, are presented as responses to questions, sometimes from groups of students, sometimes from named or unnamed individuals). Psellos' response here is that the life to choose is the noetic one (τῆν νοεράν), that is, life lived at the level of intellect. Psellos goes on to say that 'each of us is an animal and a human being and an intellect, and even, so to speak, a god' (1.1.4–1.1.5). Life in connection with the body is an animal life, but operating on a noetic or intellectual level we need for nothing (1.1.5–1.1.9). So far, this all seems fairly straightforward: the animal life or the life of the body is something to surpass in rising to intelligible reality and eventually to the One itself. There is, however, rather more to Psellos' thinking on these matters than just this. It should be noted even in this relatively conventional passage that Psellos does not necessarily imply that the noetic life is superior in absolute terms, but only that it is the life in which one needs least from others. The feasibility, and indeed the desirability of this independence is not discussed, and Psellos' critical attitude towards a cold otherworldliness in other contexts, for instance in the *Letter to Keroularios*, should make us wary of assuming that he is recommending this transcendent path without reservation.

From the Platonic texts with which Psellos shows a profound engagement, he inherits a tradition which is profoundly ambivalent on the question of the right valuation of body and soul, and more broadly of the physical world relative to the intelligible. This broader question of the best attitude towards the physical world underlies the more specific one of the right attitude towards the body and embodied existence. Most characteristic of Psellos' own thought regarding the material portion of the human composite is a willingness to accept the inconsistency and multiplicity of human existence, including its bodily component.

As we have seen, Psellos is willing to recount the standard Platonic narrative of the development of the individual philosopher towards Soul and then Intellect (and an understanding of the Forms), and away from the body. In *Philosophica Minora* 1.49 (*On the types of philosophy*), Psellos quotes *verbatim* the statement of David of Armenia, a sixth-century commentator on Aristotle (Anhaght 1983), that one is drawn to philosophy by a 'restrained madness' (σώφρονι τινι μανίᾳ) and that a 'wise desire' (σοφὸς ἔρωϛ) leads one to it (1–10). Psellos' eventual definition of philosophy in general, after giving Platonic, Pythagorean and Aristotelian definitions is that 'philosophy is transferring the soul to divine and non-material things away from this obscuring and material life by means of putting the souls and bodies of human beings in order' (224–226). This is, of course, a broadly Neoplatonic definition, and here too, Psellos follows David almost word for word. As often in Psellos' writings, we encounter the ancient notion of philosophy as spiritual prac-

tice, an ordering of the parts of oneself.⁸ Where Psellos differs here from David is in the inclusion of three words: *καὶ τὰ σώματα* ('and the bodies') (225). Rather than considering philosophy as simply the ordering of the soul, Psellos makes an important departure to include the ordering of the body. Moreover, the body is to be regulated or put in order (*κοσμεῖν*) rather than simply suppressed or transcended.

A traditional Neoplatonic narrative of ascent and a similar account of the pleasures of contemplation appear in *Philosophica Minora* 2.1 (*Of the most wise Psellos on the soul*). Here, Psellos outlines the stages of the psyche's development, whereby it turns inward to itself, then to *Nous* (the world of intelligible reality or the Forms) and finally to the One, the source of all things (p. 1.1–1.9). In experiencing the noetic, it is astonished by an incredible pleasure (*θαυμασίαν ἀγάλλεται ἡδονήν* (p. 1.6)). This short piece ends with some observations on emotions of a more everyday variety. If anyone bewails his own life (*ἀπολοφυρόμενος*), Psellos says, he does not speak from the unmixed soul (*οὐκ ἐκ τῆς ἀκηράτου ψυχῆς*) but from the soul mixed with body, which is made irrational by this mixture with it (*συναλογωθείσης* (2.1.p. 1.22–1.23)). The experience of these lower emotions, in other words, is not purely a phenomenon of the soul, but has its origins in the interaction of body and soul. Here too, Psellos reproduces Neoplatonic thought faithfully; the late work of Plotinus, *Ennead* 1.1.2–1.1.7, deals similarly, though at greater length, with the issue of the lower soul and its relationship to the body.

The nature of the irrational affections (*πάθη*) and their arising from the combination of body and soul are further discussed in another brief *opusculum*: 2.26 (*On Evil*). Here, Psellos argues that evil does not arise from body or from soul, but from parts of a human being acting outside their proper sphere of operation. Once again, Psellos is responding to a query from an unnamed individual, this time regarding the nature of evil, or more specifically 'in which things evil exists' (*ἐν τίσιν ὑφέστηκε τὸ κακόν* (2.26.p.101.1)). As O'Meara observes in his edition of this text, the wording of the question is close to that of Proclus in *De Malorum Substantia* 11.1. Here, as often in these *opuscula*, Psellos depends heavily on Proclus, on this occasion in particular on the *De decem dubitationibus circa providentiam* (Didochus 1960). Psellos tells us that some say evil arises in the irrational affections (*πάθη*) in us. His examples of these irrational affections, drawn from Proclus' *De decem dubitationibus* 30.4–30.8, make clear that it is, in fact, primarily the emotions which he has in mind here: anger (*thumos*, *θυμός*) and desire (*epithumia*, *ἐπιθυμία*) (2.26.p. 101.2). Given the model of Platonic ascent that we saw earlier, we might expect this to be the sort of position that Psellos will take himself. He says, however, that he will avoid giving too glib an answer, since we must first consider 'the depths of our mental being' (*τὸ βάθος... τῆς ψυχικῆς οὐσίας ἡμῶν*) (p. 101.3–102.1). There are, he says, two parts to our nature, one part 'in accordance with reason' (*κατὰ λόγον*), the other 'contrary to reason' (*παρὰ λόγον*) (p. 102.4–102.5). Neither is evil (p. 102.7). Returning to examples of apparent, but not actual, sources of evil in the soul, he says that anger is not an evil thing from the faculty of anger, nor desire from the desiring faculty, even when it desires the worse, as these impulses

⁸ On this understanding of philosophy in antiquity see Hadot (1995).

are irrational by their nature (οὔτε γοῦν τῷ θυμικῷ μέρει τῆς ψυχῆς κακὸν τὸ θυμοῦσθαι οὔτε τῷ ἐπιθυμητικῷ τὸ ἐπιθυμεῖν καὶ τῶν γε χειρόνων, ἄλογοι γὰρ ἀπὸ φύσεως αὐτῶν αἱ ὁρμαί). Evil arises out of incorrect relationship of the two parts. The implication is that even apparently negative emotions are not to be suppressed or denied, but should play their appropriate role, and are to be prevented only from dominating the parts of the mind which they ought not to dominate.

This understanding of the position of the body and the sensory and emotional life paraphrases Proclus' *De decem dubitationibus* 30.18–30.20; a similar thought, however, appears, and is vividly adapted to another context, in an extraordinary little note: *Philosophica Minora* 1.16ε'. The larger text to which this passage belongs, 1.16, is a series of responses and reflections on miscellaneous matters: when embryos become living beings, how some creatures become male and others female, and the reason for roosters singing at night, *inter alia*. 16ε' addresses the question of why sex seems more pleasant for those who are dreaming. Psellos' response is once again made by reference to our nature as composite beings, made up of a body and non-physical components. We have a double life (δίπτυ ... ζωή), he says, one released from the body and one accompanying the body, one irrational, one rational (163–165). 'In waking intercourse, the rational life does not entirely give the reins of pleasure to the irrational' (165–167). However, the 'horse of desire' takes charge in sleep (171–172) and the things of pleasure appear half-finished 'in crowds and suddenly' (ἀθρόως καὶ ἐξάπιννα ἡμιτελῆ τὰ τῆς ἡδονῆς γίνεται (175–176). So far, this might appear an essay on the ways in which the sleep of reason breeds monsters, but the conclusion strongly implies a more positive valuation of these emotive and sensual aspects of the human composite. Because more restrained people (οἱ σωφρονικώτεροι) are more restrained in sex, Psellos says, their offspring are often born with defects, less complete in bodily power and practical skills. Those who are 'more wanton' (οἱ ἀκολαστότεροι) consequently have harder and more able children (176–187). 'The more licentious, since they sow the female furrow with their whole strength, reap a stronger and more able crop in the cycles of the years' (186–187). The implication is that there is a time and a place for reason: not in bed, it seems, for Psellos. Within their own sphere the emotional and appetitive parts of a human being should play their role, unhindered by reason.

One of the fullest expositions of Psellos' thinking on the human composite comes in one of his allegorical readings of Hellenic myth and literature: the allegory of the sphinx (1.44). This is one of several images in his works in which Psellos presents either the human subject in general, or himself in particular, as a composite monster; for example in letter 191 (to Xiphilinos) he wonders whether he is something divine or a beast more complicated than Typho (Jenkins 2006, pp. 143–144). In the allegory of the sphinx (1.44), he begins by describing his interpretive method through an analogy with the ancient mystery cults: the curtains before the inner sancta (ἄδυστα) guarded the sacred things unseen. Psellos, with the tone of the badgered lecturer, says that the sanctum was opened once a year in the Eleusinian mysteries and the hidden things revealed. 'But you', he says, addressing a group this time, 'compel the hierophant many times in a day to tear open the coverings' (8 ff). Psellos would shrink from doing this, if the ancient mysteries had not been abolished and divine

teachings (that is, Christianity) come into power (10). So let the covering be torn from the myth of the sphinx, and let the hidden things be revealed, having a secret (ἀπόρρητον) philosophy (12–14). Psellos begins with a description of the sphinx (15 ff): the myth depicts her as a beautiful girl, but not all the way to her feet, only to the navel, from which point she has shaggy fur and the feet of a beast and a long tail, and she has a tongue which ‘speaks Attic and is Pythagorean’ (ἀπικίζουσά τε καὶ Πυθαγόρειος), and she tells riddles (17). Such is the the freak, or prodigy, or omen (τέρας) of the myth (20).

The poets can write with what licence they will, Psellos goes on, but the philosophical intellect (ὀφιλόσοφος νοῦς) does not rest with the surface meaning, but considers the allegorical meaning of the prodigy (21–22). The sphinx is nothing but a human being, put together from dissimilar parts (ἐξ ἀνομοίων συγκείμενος (24)). ‘Our existence’, he says, ‘is a thing of many parts’ (25). Some parts have to do with rational powers, in some parts we share in the irrational nature (25–26). He gives a Neoplatonic ordering of our nature: we have the One in us, then Intellect, then ‘double-natured discursive reasoning’ (διφυῆς διάνοια), and true opinion (ἀληθὴς δόξα) the conclusions of reasoning, which conclusions are all rational things and divine (26–29). And there are *phantasia* and perception and such things as need the body for their existence, which are ‘irrational and beastlike and directed towards the external’ (30). Psellos gives an Aristotelian definition of *phantasia* at *Philosophica Minora* 2.3.p. 3.4–3.7, and it is consequently not readily translatable by a single English term. The definition follows Aristotle, *De Anima* 428a12–19 closely, and makes *phantasia* a reception of sensory material prior to perception (*aisthēsis*). While *aisthēsis* makes a judgement as to whether the phenomena reported by the senses are true or false, *phantasia* receives data of both kinds. A similarly Aristotelian use of this word appears, for instance, at 2.13.p. 31.17–31.26, where Psellos is following Philoponus’ commentary on the *De Anima*.

These components of the human being are ‘distinguishable by reason’ (τῷ λόγῳ διαιρετά (31)). ‘The moulding of the human being pours all of them together and for a time they are unclear’ (ἀφανῆ) (31–32). If someone at once gains a philosophical understanding and recognises what the actually existing things (ὄντα) are, Intellect and Soul, he hates matter and turns away from the body, and closing the senses and bidding farewell to *phantasia*, he first observes Soul (ψυχῇ) in its own nature, then he goes within to Intellect, and through Intellect is united with god (32–37). So far, this Neoplatonic account of philosophic development plays up the world-denying side of the tradition, as Plotinus, for instance, often does during his mental ascents.⁹

If one stays in the world of becoming (γένεσις) and uses the senses and possesses ‘a life which is dominated by *phantasia*’ (φαντασιώδη ... ζωὴν) (37–39), he dares to enter into the life of the beasts by his choices (39). Existing in ‘becoming’ he does not believe in any of the things that really exist (40), but only in the

⁹ To take one example of many, see *Enneads* 1.6.8, where he exhorts his listeners, in Homeric language, to return to their fatherland.

things he can touch (41). At one of these extremes live speechless dogs and pigs and wild animals; at the other extreme live angels and children of god, 'and I might say, gods' (44–45). A great chasm separates a beast from a god (45–46), so it is necessary, Psellos says, to posit a 'middle life' (46–47) which some of the Chaldean oracles call 'partly light' and 'partly dark' (47–48) 'but which I would simply call a human one' (49).

It is in this turn to a mixed life that one can see the kind of thinking which characterises Psellos in many of his philosophical discussions, not least when he turns to problems of human psychology and the actual experience of lived existence. His impatient dismissal of oracular obscurity is very much in character: this, after all, is the same man who likened wrapping philosophy in myth to wrapping food in excrement (1.46.23–1.46.24), though he is elsewhere far more positive about myth and allegorical interpretation. It is this third life that Psellos goes on to discuss: a life, 'like a beast and like a human and like a god' (50–51), as neither a beast nor a god purely, but both (55). 'So,' he asks, 'in which of the three lives do we think to have found the sphinx?' (55) The life of *phantasia* (φαντασιώδης ... ζωή, a life dominated by sensation) is indicated by the animal part (59 ff). In so far as one flees from being a beast, one's speech becomes articulate (64), but in so far as one practises a life not turned towards the divine, one's words become confused and indistinct (64–66). The riddling and unclear language of the sphinx, in other words, is a result of the animal part of her nature. Intellect is the angel and *phantasia* the beast; one is open to intelligible reality, the other a wandering and mindless thing in itself. When these qualities are mixed in a human being, they begin to overlap with each other's functions, so that intellect employs *phantasia* and *phantasia* thinks (74–75). When there is a battle between body and spirit, the two faculties operate in each other's sphere (77). When the body wins, we are altogether dominated by perception (φανταστικοί); when the spirit (πνεῦμα) wins, we operate in Intellect (νοητοί). When each part rules and is ruled, 'we're simply sphinxes' (80). Psellos concedes that, for most of us, staying here in the middle is the likeliest situation. The battle will go on.

What emerges from all of these short essays is a particularly human version of the Platonic tradition. Psellos brings out, in his own way, much of what is best about that tradition: the set of useful ambivalences with which it started, and in particular, the unwillingness to be overwhelmed by one aspect or another of the human composite. This is far from the emotionally disengaged (and ethically disengaged) asceticism as which late-antique and medieval Platonism is sometimes presented. Increasingly, such an understanding of the Platonic tradition is being revealed as the caricature that it is. The Platonic tradition is always transformed in the hands of its major inheritors and the contradictions are among what is most useful in it, most productive. Psellos is a great inheritor and a great transmitter of that tradition, not least in his treatment of the body and the emotions. He is willing to accept the contradictions of human existence, and on occasion even to argue that within their own territory the emotional and bodily parts of the composite have a sovereignty on which even reason should not intrude.

All of this suggests a willing acceptance of the bodily and wordly, if not quite a celebration of them. In some further texts, to be discussed below, it is possible to see such a celebration. In all of these texts, however, an ambivalence, familiar from much else in the Platonic tradition, remains, and to construct an absolutely consistent view out of Psellos' writings would be to distort the evidence. I would like to move at this point to consider Psellos' thinking on interpretation, a topic closely connected to his thinking on human beings as composed of body, soul and intellect. It is this composite creature who interprets, and Psellos shows an awareness that the composite nature of the interpreter makes interpretation itself a multifaceted process.

It has been necessary already to discuss some of the texts in which Psellos appears as interpreter of myth and text. The group of generally short essays or lectures in the *Philosophica Minora* dedicated to allegorical interpretation offer a great deal of interest for an appreciation of Psellos' attitudes to the body and the philosophical life. They also reflect on the process of interpretation itself, and the relationship between the readings which Psellos produces and the ancient sources with which he is concerned. There are important variations in Psellos' positions regarding interpretation, in particular on the point of whether the interpreter unearths or creates the meaning of the text, and on the question of the primacy of the pleasure of the text or its philosophical or theological profit. In part these dichotomies are due to Psellos' bold and inclusive character as a thinker: his tendency to find productive middle ground has rightly been much remarked upon in recent writing on his works, and it is telling that scholars approaching Psellos with very different questions and through a range of his texts have come to recognise this as a central feature of his thought.¹⁰ In his thinking on interpretation, just as in other philosophical questions, these tendencies are in evidence. More than this, however, the way in which any reader will understand the process of interpreting depends on some sense of the nature of the being who interprets. The multiple and composite nature of the self in Psellos' thought leads necessarily to a view of the reader as multiple and composite.

For Psellos, the interpretation of literary texts and Hellenic myth really becomes interesting when the literal meaning of the text is left behind. His remarks on the reading practices of Nicetas reflect this preference for the allegorical,¹¹ which can in any case readily be demonstrated from the readings of ancient literature which survive under his name. This is not to suggest that Psellos' was exclusively interested in allegorical interpretation; his comparison of the novelists Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius, for instance, engages with these texts on the level of style and plot, and does not resort to allegory (Psellos 1986, and again Wilson 1983, pp 174–177), though some medieval readers of Heliodorus certainly did (Miles 2009; Hunter 2005). Nonetheless, allegory is for Psellos an important mode of reading. In addition to the allegory on the sphinx discussed above, Psellos also gives allegorical readings concerning Hades, Tantalus and the Cave of the Nymphs on Ithaca (*opuscula* 32–48

¹⁰ Jenkins (2006); Kaldellis (1999, 2007).

¹¹ On the character of Nicetas, his relationship to Psellos and on the *Epitaphius Nicetae* see Cesaretti (1991) and the earlier translation and discussion by Wilson (1983), pp 149–150.

(‘Miscellanea et Allegorica’) in the first volume of the *Philosophica Minora*). While Psellos’ reading of the Cave of the Nymphs (1.45) follows that of Porphyry very closely, in the other allegorical readings he appears to be interpreting far more independently. In the course of offering these readings, Psellos frequently reflects on the nature of his own reading practices, often in striking metaphors. He is concerned not only, or even primarily, with interpreting the texts or myths in question, but with demonstrating a method which his students can in turn practise for themselves. Edwards plausibly sees a similar double purpose, both offering a particular interpretation and demonstrating a mode of interpretation, in Porphyry’s essay ‘On the Cave of the Nymphs’ (Edwards 1996), and Psellos even more clearly is intent on offering, and reflecting upon, a model of reading which students can immitate. At the conclusion, for instance, of the ‘Allegory on Tantalus’ (1.43), Psellos says: ‘Since we have now opened up the road of Hellenic myth for you for the first time and demonstrated the way in which one ought to interpret these things allegorically, fitting them to this measure, you too bring something similar to the remaining myths’ (Ἐπεὶ οὖν ὑμῖν τὴν ὁδὸν νῦν πρῶτως τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν μύθων ἠνοιξάμεν καὶ ὑφηγησάμεθα ὅπως δεῖ τούτους ἀλληγορεῖν, τῷ ἐνταῦθα κανόνι στοιχοῦντες καὶ ὑμεῖς τι τοῖς ἐπιλοιποῖς συνεισενέγκατε (1.43.120–1.43.122)).

While Psellos clearly sees the allegorical method as something which one may simply learn to apply, the exact nature of this activity is defined in two contradictory ways. On a number of occasions, there appears a fairly conventional understanding of a hidden meaning of the text. The image of the ancient mystery cults appears frequently in connection with this view, as for instance in the opening of the allegory on the sphinx cited above (1.44). Somewhat similarly in 1.3, the Egyptians are said to have concealed their teachings ‘in coffers’, leaving only the sphinx outside the walls (1.3.100–1.3.102). More negatively, Psellos speaks of the construction of allegory as concealment of philosophy in the ‘excrement of myth’ (1.46.23–1.46.24).

This notion of encoded ancient wisdom which can be revealed through allegorical reading is a widespread and important one in the Neoplatonic tradition (Lamberton 1989), but Psellos also shows on occasion a rather more striking indifference to whether this meaning was ever concealed there or intended at all. At the conclusion of 1.44 (‘Allegory on the Sphinx’), Psellos writes: ‘Whether the myth intended such a thing, I don’t know; and if I have thought out something eccentric, this too is both philosophical and Pythagorean’ (111–112). Interpretation, on this very different model, is really a transformation of the text; the interpreter makes it into something which it previously was not. This is a point which Psellos makes more clearly at the beginning of his allegory on the Homeric line ‘the gods sat beside Zeus and took council’ (οἱ δὲ θεοὶ παρὰ Ζηνὶ καθήμενοι ἡγορόωντα) (*Philosophica Minora* 1.42). He begins with the favourite image of the bitter and the drinkable water, the latter of which is generally used of Christianity and the former of Hellenic philosophy (Duffy 1999). He moves from here to state that there is ‘another form of technical discourse’ (ἄλλο εἶδος τεχνικοῦ λόγου (1.42.5–1.42.6)), which has the power of transformation. While Moses worked this wonder (of transformation) in actions by changing his brother Aaron’s staff to a snake (*Exodus* 7.10), discourse too is able to produce change. A wise man is not one able merely to proclaim divine things ac-

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