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There's Always the Sun

Metaphysics and Antiquarianism in Macrobius

Abstract: The present paper asks how Macrobius thinks his extensive allegories of statues of the gods and other elements of traditional religion are possible. He can be shown to espouse a Neoplatonic theory of images. This entails that truthful images are only possible of the Soul and the lower levels of the world, whereas the two highest hypostases cannot be grasped by language and man-made images. Even so, as the sun is an image of the highest principle, Macrobius' reduction of all deities to the sun can be understood as a discourse on the highest deity, albeit obliquely. How are images, then, truthful? He defends a common theory of inspiration, according to which the creators of images participate in the Logos when creating them. Philosophy is seen as the primordial discipline, containing the knowledge necessary to create and interpret images. These conclusions allow us to pinpoint more precisely the differences between Middle and Neoplatonism.

How does one justify the use of man-made images of the divine if one posits a supreme divine being that is beyond language and discursive knowledge? More precisely: on what conditions can a Neoplatonist presume that a traditional cult image of, say, Saturn, represents metaphysical truths? That myths, ceremonies, and cult images could be interpreted as containing knowledge about the world is a well-known fact: allegorical interpretations are prominent in the Stoic and Platonist tradition. If scholars have often asked the question of what precise technique of allegory was applied to understand poetry, myth, and cult as philosophy, the question of how the sheer possibility of such an exercise was explained has only recently started to draw attention. Boys-Stones has argued that in the late Hellenistic Period philosophers develop a narrative according to which earliest man (in all cultures) possessed full knowledge of the world and translated this knowledge into expressions of human culture. This ancient wisdom is then rediscovered by great philosophers, such as Plato, whose authority is due to the fact that they managed to overcome later corruptions. In an earlier publication, I have detailed the consequences of the idea of ancient wisdom for religion. A symbol system that was created by wise men of old, religion can be decoded by later philosophers, who try to recover the original wisdom. Such a theory helps to justify the philosophical interpretations of

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Greek and foreign cults that philosophers such as Plutarch propose. It also explains the extensive talk about ‘wise ancients’ in later ancient philosophy.¹

Boys-Stones has argued that this idea of ancient wisdom underlies Post-Hellenistic philosophy, which for him includes Neoplatonism as well. There is much to be said for continuity in this respect. It would indeed be easy to catalogue the numerous occurrences of aspects of the preceding view in Neoplatonic texts and there is a tendency to consider late antique religious thought as a continuation of imperial tendencies.² Yet, as I have already suggested,³ Neoplatonism distinguishes itself from earlier Platonist philosophy in some important respects. In particular, it puts a greater emphasis on divine transcendence (that is, transcendence of the highest principle(s)), which expresses itself in doubts as to the power of language to express something about these principles. Tying everything, albeit indirectly, to the highest principle, Neoplatonism also stresses more the unity of all that is.⁴ This paper wishes to ask what consequences such differences in metaphysics had for the justification of allegorical readings of images of the divine. I shall argue that there is continuity between Middle-Platonism and Neoplatonism in terms of the narrative used to justify allegorical readings, but also differences that often remain unarticulated but can be detected in the way the narrative is deployed.

The material object of my chapter is Macrobius,⁵ the author of two works (probably) dated to the second quarter of the fifth century: the *Saturnalia*, a 7 (or 8) book account of a symposium with a dramatic date of 17–19 December 384⁶, and a commentary on Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio*, which sets out a Neoplatonic world view. The question this chapter opened with is most acute for the first book of the *Saturnalia*, for it contains the famous account that identifies all deities as manifestations of some aspect of the highest god, the sun.⁷ To that end an impressive array of antiquarian lore is marshalled, with an interesting lack of explicit justification that such a reading of traditional cult statues, rites, and myths, as well as earlier scholarship, would even be possible. That all of these constitute in some way images of the highest god seems taken for granted. The massive deployment of evidence may constitute a rhetorical tool to avoid this question, but I shall suggest that we can find traces of a philosophical justification in Macrobius. As said, I am not interested in the precise

1 Boys-Stones (2001); Van Nuffelen (2011). For late ancient allegory, see Brisson (2012).

2 For an important recent synthesis, see Athanassiadi and Macris (2013).

3 Van Nuffelen (2011) 231–242.

4 For general overviews, see Smith (2004); Gerson (2012). On the problem of discourse, see Rappe (1999); Banner (2013).

5 For status quaestionis on the person Macrobius, see Caiazzo (2002) 13–25; Bruggisser (2010); Goldlust (2010) 7–32; Armisen-Marchetti (2011) vii–xvi.

6 Cameron (2010) 234–237 argues for 382; Döpp (1978) 629 suggests 383. Kaster (2011) xxiv notes the difficulty of establishing this date.

7 *Macr. Sat.* 1,17–23.

techniques of allegory that allow Macrobius to read the images as images of the sun,⁸ but in his views on why such a reading is at all possible.

Prolegomena

Before we can proceed, I must briefly address some recent views on Macrobius and his *Saturnalia*, views that, if accepted, would render this question entirely meaningless. Recent scholarship on Macrobius' *Saturnalia* tends to downplay their philosophical nature or, at least, their philosophical background and sees them as a mere collection of material, a didactic encyclopaedia.⁹ This view has arisen as a response to the conviction of scholars that the antiquarian focus of the work is an illustration of the cultural pagan resistance that was supposed to flourish in fourth- and fifth-century Rome.¹⁰ As Cameron has shown, classicism and antiquarianism are not in themselves enough to identify someone as a pagan, for they reflect cultural attitudes that were widely shared in the late Roman elite. Yet the new image of Macrobius as a mere philologist with limited interests is hardly satisfactory. In the introduction to his recent Loeb edition, Kaster, following Cameron, puts forward the following image of Macrobius and the role of the theological passages of the first book:

The crucial point is that the manner of proceeding is not theological at all – not concerned with establishing basic principles of divinity and exploring the systematic relationship of these principles with one another – but is more nearly, and more simply, philological, concerned with accumulating data to support a series of definitions that have the general form ‘God X is the sun because...’¹¹

This is not a very fruitful approach. I shall leave aside the rather dim view Kaster has of his own profession: do philologists merely supply the proofs for a given proposition? Is the process of selection of topic and material, choice of genre and organisation into a text merely passive? Equally, his definition of theology is hardly suited for Antiquity, for it would also disqualify Cornutus' *Introduction to Greek Theology* and Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* (both works by authors with philosophical street credibility) and reduce theology to metaphysics. Given the obvious parallels of Macrobius' theological focus on the sun with Neoplatonist authors such as Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Julian, there is room for the *prima facie* contention that Macrobius' interests tie in with some wider intellectual currents – even if one decides to leave

⁸ See the paper by G. F. Chiai in this volume, pp. 235–261.

⁹ Especially Cameron (2011); Kaster (2011); Gerth (2013).

¹⁰ See De Labriolle (1948); Flamant (1977) 674; Franteantonio (2008); Ratti (2010) and (2012).

¹¹ Kaster (2011) xxi. See also Liebeschuetz (1999) 196f.: ‘an academic lecture’. Somewhat in this direction Altheim and Stiehl (1966) 217, criticised by Flamant (1977) 668.

the issue of direct influence aside.¹² Macrobius refers to the *Symposium* of Plato in the preface of the *Saturnalia*,¹³ and is the author of the highly philosophical (and theological in Kaster's terms) *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. All of this should warn against reducing Macrobius to a mere philologist.

The reductive reading of Macrobius is the basis for a more audacious contention by Kaster and Cameron: that he is a Christian.¹⁴ The theology expressed in the *Saturnalia* and the *Commentary* is then nothing more than a philological board game. Yet this contention cannot stand. Not so much because Macrobius' frame of thought is Neoplatonic (which most Christians were), nor because he sees the sun as the visual expression of the highest divine being (a metaphor Christians were fond of too¹⁵), but because he identifies the traditional, pagan gods, their names, statues, and myths as sources of knowledge and truth about the one supreme god, the sun. This is precisely the point at which the ways of late ancient pagan and Christian monotheists parted, as the correspondence of Maximus of Madaura with Augustine shows.¹⁶ Maximus seeks to close the gap between his beliefs and those of Augustine by underling that they share the same monotheistic metaphysics. But he also emphasises that the truth of the one god is visible in the traditional statues of the gods that stand in the forum. This effort at reconciliation is met with scorn: Augustine chides Maximus for holding on to the man-made statues that contain only lies. It will be difficult to find a Christian who identifies pagan cult statues, myths, and rites as excellent images of the true God.¹⁷

I do not wish to return to the views that Macrobius is a pagan "guerillero". We should, rather, avoid the either/or dichotomy according to which Macrobius, if he is pagan, must be militantly anti-Christian, or, if he is a Christian, he is a mere philologist for which his activity has no meaning. Macrobius clearly was working in an environment in which Christianity was present,¹⁸ and he may very well have subscribed to the sentiment of Maximus that Christians and pagans fundamentally agreed when it came to the metaphysics of the divine. At the same time, his commitment to the classical gods as a locus of knowledge about the divine makes him a pagan and not a Christian.

12 Kaster ignores Syska (1993), who argues that there is a clear philosophical, protreptic aim in the theological chapters. For parallels, see, e. g., Mart. Cap. 2,185; Iul. *Helios*.

13 Macr. *Sat.* 1,1,3.

14 Already suggested by Bevilacqua (1973) 126.

15 Wallraff (2001).

16 Aug. *epist.* 16–17.

17 Kaster (2011) xii–iii lists a number of passages that could provide proof for a Christian identity. But the passages prove only that Macrobius worked in a Christian context and undoubtedly counted with Christian readers too. For a rejoinder to Kaster's arguments, see Jones (2014) 151–7. An argument for a pagan identity not noted by Kaster and Jones is provided by Mastandrea (1997) 205: Macr. *Sat.* 1,11,12 changes Sen. *epist.* 47,18 *quod deo satis est* into *quod dis satis est*. For re-affirmations of a pagan identity, see Goldlust (2010) 11–19; Chiai (2013).

18 See Macr. *Sat.* 2,4,11.

One could object that a restricted reading of the *Saturnalia* as an educational, encyclopaedic project is suggested by Macrobius' own preface (1,pr. 2), in which he sets out its aim to his son Eustachius:

Hinc est quod mihi quoque institutione tua nihil antiquius aestimatur, ad cuius perfectionem compendia longis anfractibus anteponeunda ducens moraeque omnis impatiens non opperor ut per haec sola promoveas quibus ediscendis naviter ipse invigilas, sed ago ut ego quoque tibi legerim, et quicquid mihi – vel te iam in lucem edito vel antequam nascereris – in diversis seu Graecae seu Romanae linguae voluminibus elaboratum est, id totum sit tibi scientiae supellex, et quasi de quodam litterarum peno, siquando usus venerit aut historiae quae in librorum strue latens clam vulgo est aut dicti factive memorabilis reminiscendi, facile id tibi inventu atque depromptu sit.

For this reason I judge nothing dearer than your education, and in making it complete I prefer shortcuts to long roundabouts: being impatient of delay, I am waiting for you to make progress only in subjects you are learning through your own wakeful efforts, but I have made a point of reading on your behalf, so that all that I have toiled through – in various books of Greek and Latin, both before and since you were born – might be available to you as a fund of knowledge. If ever need arises for a piece of history, say, that lurks hidden from the common run of men in a mass of books, or to call to mind and produce it easily as through from your own private store of culture.¹⁹

Macrobius' aim, then, seems to be didactic, and this with a reference to antiquity and brevity. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the didactic strategies of Macrobius have been studied in detail recently and his project has been defined as encyclopaedic.²⁰ Again, some caution is necessary. Encyclopaedism suggests the dual aim of system and completeness. The former is explicitly defended by Macrobius in his preface through an accumulation of related metaphors (cooking, digestion, bees, 1,pr. 3–9) and there is indeed some order in the books. At the same time, the genre of the symposium imposes variety and change.²¹ Completeness is, I would argue, explicitly absent: Macrobius claims to be gathering the fruits of his varied reading but he is not transmitting systematic knowledge. Indeed, the difference between an encyclopaedic project and Macrobius' can be gleaned from a quick comparison with the third century grammarian Censorinus and his *De die natali*. Both discuss the structure of the year, but whereas Censorinus gives a systematic exposition of its constitutive parts, Macrobius discusses in sequence the calendars of Romulus, Numa, and Caesar (*Sat.* 1,12–16). One gains a much better understanding of how the Roman calendar functions from Censorinus than from Macrobius. I shall suggest later that there is a specific philosophical reason for such a limited and antiquarian interest.²² Thus, even if Macrobius frames the *Saturnalia* as a didactic treatise and imposes on it the genre of the symposium, this does not preclude (at least) the pos-

¹⁹ Tr. Kaster (2011) 3–5.

²⁰ Goldlust (2010); Kaster (2011) xii; Gerth (2013).

²¹ Flamant (1977) 217–230; König (2012).

²² See pp. 136–138. 140.

sibility of (at least) a philosophical substratum that directs the choices made within such a framework.

A final preliminary: the study of Macrobius has long been dominated by *Quellenforschung*. If for a long time, under the influence of *Einquellentheorien*,²³ he was seen as an author entirely dependent on his predecessors, scholars now tend to accept that he must have read a substantial amount and produced his own synthesis,²⁴ in which, however, Porphyry must play an important role.²⁵ For the purpose of this chapter, I simply assume this revised view to be correct.

A theory of images: from Macrobius to Plotinus

It is, first of all, important to understand what the relationship of an image means for Macrobius. A good starting point is a passage early in the *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, where, probably relying on Porphyry, he discusses under what conditions a philosopher is allowed to use myths (*fabulae*) in his discourse.²⁶ Using the Platonic method of *diairesis*, he specifies that myths must have a basis of truth and the narrative must be morally proper.²⁷ Then Macrobius puts another limitation on the use of *fabulae*: they can only relate to the lower hypostasis, the Soul, but not to the Good or Highest God (i. e. the One) nor to the Intellect:

ceterum cum ad summum et principem omnium deum, qui apud Graecos τὰγαθόν, qui πρῶτον αἴτιον nuncupatur, tractatus se audet attollere, uel ad mentem, quem Graeci νοῦν appellant, originales rerum species, quae ἰδέαι dictae sunt, continentem, ex summo natam et profectam deo, cum de his, inquam, loquuntur summo deo et mente, nihil fabulosum penitus attingunt. Sed, si quid de his adsignare conantur quae non sermonem tandummodo sed cogitationem quoque humanam superant, ad similitudines et exempla confugiunt. sic Plato cum de τὰγαθῷ loqui esset animatus, dicere quid sit non ausus est, hoc solum de eo sciens quod sciri quale sit ab homine non possit, solum uero ei simillimum de uisibilibus solem repperit et per eius similitudinem uiam sermoni suo attolendi se ad non comprehendenda patefecit. ideo et nullum eius simulacrum, cum dis aliis constituerentur, finxit antiquitas, quia summus deus nataque ex eo mens sicut ultra animam ita supra naturam sunt, quo nihil fas est de fabulis peruenire (Macr. somn. 1,2,14–16).

Further, when the discussion dares to raise itself to the highest God, ruler of all, who among the Greeks is called to *agathon* (the good) or *proton aition* (the first cause), or to the Intellect, which the Greeks call *nous* (mind), which contains the original forms of things, called *ideai* (forms), and which is born and proceeded from the highest God – when, thus, they talk about these

23 Mastandrea (1979) 169–179 contends, for example, that Macrobius is largely dependent on Cornelius Labeo.

24 Bevilacqua (1973) 116; Syska (1993) 105–112, 215–216; Goldlust (2010).

25 Flamant (1977) 656–668.

26 Cf. the fragment of Porphyry in Prokl. in Plat. rep. 1,106,14–107,14.

27 Macr. somn. 1,2,10: *cum veritas argumento subest solaque fit narratio fabulosa...*; 1,2,11: *aut sacrarum rerum notio sub pio figmentorum velamine honestis et tecta rebus et vestita nominibus enuntiat.*

things, they do not mention anything fictitious at all. However, if they want to hint at those things that surpass not only speech but also human thought, they have recourse to analogies and exempla. Hence Plato, when he wanted to talk about *tagathon*, did not dare to say what it was and knew only this about it, namely that it cannot be known by man what it is. He found, in fact, that of the visible things, only the sun is analogous to it and through that analogy he opened up a road for his discourse to lift itself at the things that cannot be grasped. For that reason also antiquity has not produced a statue of the Good, as were made for the other gods, because the highest God and the Intellect born from him are beyond the Soul as they are beyond nature and it would not be proper to try to grasp them with fictions.

Macrobius then ensues to make clear that for the other gods (the heavenly bodies and elements) and the Soul myths are acceptable.²⁸ The reason for this distinction is obvious: the Soul is generated by the Intellect and it loses its complete immateriality “by looking back”²⁹ – when it starts to produce bodies, of which man is one. As the passage just quoted makes clear, the Good and the Intellect are beyond human thought and speech and can thus not be properly grasped by narrative, and certainly not by fictitious narrative. Philosophers, however, have alternatives at hand for these higher hypostases: *similitudo* (comparison, analogy) and *exemplum* (example).³⁰ Crucial in these cases is that there is only an ‘external’ relationship between the two poles of the comparison: the sun relates to the visible world in a way that is similar to the way the Highest God relates to all that is. In other words, the Sun does not have any of the properties of the Highest God, even in a reduced way (as a portrait would have).

This discussion of myth is not irrelevant for my topic of images, for Macrobius adds that, just as philosophers refrain from using myths concerning the two highest hypostases, ‘antiquity’ did not produce statues (*simulacra*) of them either, as they are beyond nature.³¹ Later in the *Commentary* Macrobius indeed identifies Jupiter with the World Soul and not with a higher hypostasis.³² Belonging to the material (and human) world, statues and myths are thus unable to express something about the supernatural (transcendent). One way of understanding images here is as discursive objects, that is: on condition that they are truthful images, they express a true proposition about the object they relate to and, as such, have a direct relationship with its object. It is, for example, possible to produce an image of the sun that indicates its qualities of being hot and emitting light, or to tell a myth like the one of Icarus that expresses these qualities. This is impossible for the highest God and the Intellect because they are beyond discourse. The use of the image of the sun is an analogy that does not imply that the Highest God would be warm and emit light.

²⁸ Macr. *somn.* 1,2,17.

²⁹ Macr. *somn.* 1,14,7.

³⁰ See the definition of *similitudo* in *Rhet. Her.* 4,45,59: *similitudo est oratio traducens ad rem quampiam aliquid ex re dispari simile*. For later reflections on these issues, see Sheppard (2002).

³¹ Macr. *somn.* 1,2,16.

³² Macr. *somn.* 1,17,14f.

So far, the following characteristics of images have been identified. They are a product of the material (and human) world. As a consequence, images can be wrong in two ways: either because they possess no truthful relationship with an object (that is, their form is unrelated to the object they are supposed to designate or they represent a fictitious object); or because they try to express something about the two highest hypostases. Only obliquely, through analogy or example, can human language express something about the highest God and the Intellect, but for Macrobius such statements are not images in the strict sense of the word. In the passage one also notes an implicit parallelism between language and visual images as two similar discursive ways of expressing something about the world.³³

The founding father of Neoplatonism, Plotinus, is known to have attributed even more characteristics to a truthful relationship between image and object.³⁴ In 4,3,11, he states that a real presence of the divine is found in cult statues:

Καί μοι δοκοῦσιν οἱ πάλα σοφοί, ὅσοι ἐβουλήθησαν θεοὺς αὐτοῖς παρεῖναι ἱερά καὶ ἀγάλματα ποιησάμενοι, εἰς τὴν τοῦ παντός φύσιν ἀπιδόντες, ἐν νῷ λαβεῖν ὡς πανταχοῦ μὲν εὐάγωνον ψυχῆς φύσιν, δέξασθαι γε μὴν ῥᾶστον ἂν εἴη ἀπάντων, εἴ τις προσπαθῆς τι τεκτῆναιτο ὑποδέξασθαι δυνάμενον μοῖραν τινα αὐτῆς. Προσπαθῆς δὲ τὸ ὅπως οὖν μιμηθέν, ὡς περ κάτοπτρον ἀρπάσαι εἰδός τι δυνάμενον. Καὶ γὰρ ἡ τοῦ παντός φύσιν πάντα εὐμηχανῶς ποιησαμένη εἰς μίμησιν ὧν εἶχε τοὺς λόγους, ἐπειδὴ ἕκαστον οὕτως ἐγένετο ἐν ὕλῃ λόγος, ὃς κατὰ τὸν πρό ὕλην ἐμμερόφωτο, συνήψατο τῷ θεῷ ἐκείνῳ, καθ' ὃν ἐγένετο καὶ εἰς ὃν εἶδεν ἡ ψυχὴ, καὶ εἶχε ποιούσα. Καὶ δὴ οὐχ οἷόν τε ἦν ἄμοιρον αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι, οὐδὲ ἐκείνον αὐτὸν κατελεῖν εἰς τοῦτον. Ἦν δὴ νοῦς ἐκείνος ὃ ἐκεῖ ἥλιος – οὗτος γὰρ ἡμῖν γινέσθω παράδειγμα τοῦ λόγου – ἐφεξῆς δὲ τούτῳ ψυχὴ ἐξηρητημένη μένοντος νοῦ μένουσα. Δίδωσι δὲ αὐτῆς τὰ πέρατα αὐτῆς τὰ πρὸς τοῦτον τὸν ἥλιον τούτῳ τῷ ἡλίῳ, καὶ ποιεῖ διὰ μέσου αὐτῆς κάκει συνήφθαι οἷον ἐρμηνευτικὴ γενομένη τῶν τε ἀπ' ἐκείνου εἰς τοῦτον καὶ τῶν τούτου εἰς ἐκείνον, ὅσον διὰ ψυχῆς εἰς ἐκείνον φθάνει. Οὐ γὰρ μακρὰν οὐδὲ πόρρω οὐδενὸς οὐδὲν καὶ αὐτὸ πόρρω τῆ διαφορᾷ καὶ μὴ μίξει, ἀλλ'εἶναι ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ [οὐ τόποις] καὶ συνεῖναι χωρὶς ὄν. Θεοὶ δὲ εἰσιν οὗτοι τῷ ἀεὶ μὴ ἀποστατεῖν ἐκείνων, καὶ τῆ μὲν ἐξαρχῆς ψυχῆ προσρητῆσθαι τῆ οἷον ἀπελθούσῃ ψυχῆ, ταύτῃ δέ, ἥπερ καὶ εἰσι καὶ ὃ λέγονται, πρὸς νοῦν βλέπειν οὐδαμοῦ ψυχῆς αὐτοῖς ἢ ἐκεῖ βλεπούσης.

I think, therefore, that those ancient sages, who sought to secure the presence of divine beings by the erection of shrines and statues, showed insight into the nature of the All; they perceived that, though this Soul is everywhere tractable, its presence will be secured all the more readily when an appropriate receptacle is elaborated, a place especially capable of receiving some portion or phase of it, something reproducing it, or representing it, and serving like a mirror to catch an image of it. It belongs to the nature of the All to make its entire content reproduce, most felicitously, the Reason-Principles in which it participates; every particular thing is the image within matter of a Reason-Principle which itself images a pre-material Reason-Principle: thus every particular entity is linked to that Divine Being in whose likeness it is made, the divine principle which the soul contemplated and contained in the act of each creation. Such media-

³³ For the neoplatonic theory of *onomata-agalmata*, see Hirschle (1979), based on Proclus' *Commentary on the Cratylus*. In his preface to *Peri agalmaton* (F351 Smith), Porphyry treats images as texts. O'Meara (2002) 351 notes that cult images are usually seen as something low for the masses. Even if images indeed relate to the material world, we shall see that Macrobius has a more positive interpretation. See further Fattal (1998); Charrue (2005); Mortley (2013) 111–125.

³⁴ See also Plot. 6,9,11–27, with further references in Banner (2013) 144f.

tion and representation there must have been since it was equally impossible for the created to be without share in the Supreme, and for the Supreme to descend into the created. The Intellectual-Principle in the Supreme has ever been the sun of that sphere – let us accept that as the type of the creative *Logos* – and immediately upon it follows the Soul depending from it, stationary Soul from stationary Intelligence. But the Soul borders also upon the sun of this sphere, and it becomes the medium by which all is linked to the overworld; it plays the part of an interpreter between what emanates from that sphere down to this lower universe, and what rises – as far as, through soul, anything can – from the lower to the highest. Nothing, in fact, is far away from anything; things are not remote: there is, no doubt, the aloofness of difference and of mingled natures as against the unmingled; but selfhood has nothing to do with spatial position, and in unity itself there may still be distinction. These Beings [scil. the Reason-Principles of this sphere] are divine in virtue of cleaving to the Supreme, because, by the medium of the Soul thought of as descending they remain linked with the Primal Soul, and through it are veritably what they are called and possess the vision of the Intellectual Principle, the single object of contemplation to that soul in which they have their being.³⁵

What cult statues and shrines aim at, is capturing ‘some part’ of the World Soul. This is secured by a mimetic relationship between the receptacle and the Soul, illustrated by the simile of a mirror. Here we find justified the thesis that cult statues have a real divine presence, which is mediated through a mimetic relationship. As in Macrobius, cult statues can only be truthful images of the Soul, but in Plotinus the cleavage between the Soul and the two highest hypostases is not as absolute as Macrobius seems to suggest: every material image is, in fact, an image of a *logos* which is, in turn, an image of an immaterial *logos*. When the Soul creates, it does so by contemplating the higher hypostases and there is thus also a link between the highest divine principle and the lower images, through the mediation of the Soul. As Plotinus specifies, in such a system both the unity of the cosmos and the transcendence of the One and the Intellect are preserved. As a corollary of such a view, Plotinus holds that an artist, if he produces an image that reveals something about the metaphysical world, is driven by intuition. Indeed, intuition, as the capacity to grasp something that goes beyond discursive knowledge, is a necessary presupposition within Plotinus’ system, for one needs a non-discursive quality to transcend the barrier that separates the image, belonging to this world, to the metaphysical world.³⁶ It is, in effect, a theory of inspiration.

How much of such a theory of inspiration is taken aboard by Macrobius? It is hard to find explicit references in his œuvre to the idea that cult images have been produced by inspiration and intuitive insight in the metaphysics of the world.³⁷ As such, he could be seen to be close to earlier Stoic and Middle-Platonic interpretations of images according to which these are symbols of the divine power that lies behind the physical phenomena, with a distinct lack of emphasis

³⁵ Tr. S. Mackenna and B. S. Page.

³⁶ Plot. 5,8,1,5, with Halfwassen (2007).

³⁷ Macr. *somn.* 1,3,10–12 and 3,18–20 accepts inspirational dreams, but most ancient philosophers do.

on a possible role played by divine inspiration in their production. A similar position has been claimed for Porphyry, possibly Macrobius' source of inspiration.³⁸ Yet, in his *Philosophy from Oracles*, Porphyry notes that the gods give oracles on how they should be represented.³⁹ Macrobius himself refers to a dream received by the Middle-Platonist Numenius, in which the Eleusian gods expressed their approval of being worshipped in the form consecrated by tradition for them.⁴⁰ There is, then, at least some hint that images are not mere human projections.

Antiquarianism

In order to answer this question more conclusively, we shall have to take a look at Macrobius' antiquarian appeal to his authorities. As tabulated by Bruggisser, Macrobius refers to about 190 sources in the *Saturnalia* (obviously not all of them occur in the theological passages).⁴¹ Many of these are poets and earlier authors of philosophical and antiquarian works. What is their status? Does Macrobius reflect on the reasons why they can be used as authorities?

Let us look at two key passages in Macrobius. In the *Commentary* (1,10,9), he notes how pre-philosophical thought on hell approached the truth without actually reaching it:

antequam studium philosophiae circa naturae inquisitionem ad tantum uigoris adolesceret, qui per diuersas gentes auctores constituendis sacris caerimoniarum fuerunt, aliud esse inferos negauerunt quam ipsa corpora, quibus inclusae animae carcerem foedum tenebris horridum sordibus et cruore patiuntur.

Before the study of philosophy regarding the inquiry into nature grew to sufficient vigour, those who were, among the different peoples, the creators of religious ceremonies, denied that hell was something else than the bodies themselves, in which the souls were enclosed and suffered an imprisonment that was disgusting because of the darkness and horrible because of the dirt and blood.

After a review of the early poetry on hell, he introduces the philosophical views by saying: "it should be said what the cult of philosophy, the more careful researcher of the truth, later added to this" (1,11,1: *dicendum est quid his postea veri sollicitior inquisitor philosophiae cultus adiecerit*). Not everything the ancients have said or done in religion is hence fully correct: their emphasis on punishment is, for a Neo-

³⁸ Johnson (2013) 168–170.

³⁹ Porph. *phil. ex orac.* F 317–319 Smith.

⁴⁰ Macr. *somm.* 1,2,19–20.

⁴¹ Bruggisser (2012).

platonist, at best just one side of the coin.⁴² Philosophy, identified as the golden chain Pythagoras – Plato, improves on pre-philosophical opinions and thus appears as the yardstick in a double story of progress: progress relative to pre-philosophical wisdom, but also Platonism in relation to other philosophies.⁴³

An even richer passage is Vettius Praetextatus' introduction to the chapter on solar theology in the *Saturnalia* (1,17,2–6):⁴⁴

Tum Vettius: Cave aestimes, mi Aviene, poetarum gregem, cum de dis fabulantur, non ab adytis plerumque philosophiae semina mutuari. Nam quod omnes paene deos, dumtaxat qui sub caelo sunt, ad solem referunt, non vana superstitio sed ratio divina commendat. 3 Si enim sol, ut veteribus placuit, dux et moderator est luminum reliquorum, et solus stellis errantibus praestat, ipsarum vero stellarum cursus ordinem rerum humanarum, ut quibusdam videtur, pro potestate disponunt, ut Plotino constat placuisse, significat: necesse est ut solem, qui moderatur nostra moderantes, omnium quae circa nos geruntur fateamur auctorem. 4 Et sicut Maro, cum de una Iunone diceret: Quo numine laeso, ostendit unius dei effectus varios pro variis censendos esse numinibus, ita diversae virtutes solis nomina dis dederunt: unde ἐν τὸ πᾶν sapientum principes prodiderunt. 5 Virtutem igitur solis quae divinationi curationique praeest Apollinem vocaverunt: quae sermonis auctor est Mercurii nomen accepit. Nam quia sermo interpretatur cogitationes latentes, Ἑρμῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐρμηνεύειν propria appellatione vocatus est. 6 Virtus solis est quae fructibus... effectus eiusdem est qui frugibus praeest. Et hinc natae sunt appellationes deorum [sicut] ceterorum qui ad solem certa et arcana ratione referuntur: et, ne tanto secreto nuda praestetur adsertio, auctoritates veterum de singulis consulamus.

Then Vettius said: Careful, my good Avienus: do not suppose that when the flock of poets tell stories of the gods, they are not often borrowing germs of wisdom from the sacred shrine of philosophy. It's not empty superstition but divine reason that prompts them to relate almost all the gods – at least those beneath the heaven – to the sun. If “the sun is guide and governor of all other stars in heaven” as the ancients judged, if it alone presides over the planets, and if the movements of the very stars have power to determine (as some think) or foretell (as Plotinus is known to have held) the sequence of human events, then we must acknowledge the sun – which governs those bodies that govern our affairs – as the source of all that goes on around us. And just as Maro, in saying of Juno alone, “with what aspect of her divinity harmed” shows that the different actions of a single god must be understood as different manifestations of her divinity, so the diverse special powers of the sun gave the gods their names: hence the foremost philosophers have revealed that “the all is one”. So they have called “Apollo” the special power of the son that presides over prophecy and healing, while the one that is the source of speech gained the name Mercury: since speech makes our hidden thoughts plain, Hermes got his name, appropriately from “interpreting”. It is the special power of the sun that ... the fruit of the trees ... and also his creative force that presides over the fruits of the fields. Hence too there came to be the names of the other gods, which relate to the sun in a fixed and secret sys-

⁴² Other passages that cite religious and cultural practices as evidence for philosophical theses are: Macr. *somm.* 1,2,2. 11; 2,10,5–9; 3,1–11. There the idea of philosophical improvement is not highlighted. For improvement in religious rites, see Macr. *Sat.* 1,7,31.

⁴³ Bruggisser (2012) 246, 248, notes that Macrobius admires the past but allows that the present can improve it. For Platonic superiority, see Macr. *somm.* 2,2,1.

⁴⁴ On solar theology in Macrobius, see Liebeschuetz (1999), with reference to earlier scholarship. For the wider context, Wallraff (2001).

tem: let us ask the ancient authorities about them, one by one, lest so great a mystery be afforded no more than mere assertion.⁴⁵

The theory of names that this passage alludes to concurs well with the theory of images that we reconstructed earlier for Macrobius: truthful names capture some quality of the deity. Macrobius emphasises, however, that the names do not co-exist in an arbitrary way: all divine names “relate to the sun in a fixed and secret system”. But how did these names come into being? Macrobius seems to make two points. First, poets depend on philosophy, designated with tropes borrowed from the mystery cults,⁴⁶ for their knowledge. Elsewhere authors of myths are also ranked below “physical scientists” (*physici*),⁴⁷ a view that concurs well with the passage from the commentary we have just discussed. But Macrobius also seems to make a second point that grants some greater autonomy to the poets: it is “divine reason (*ratio divina*) that prompts them to relate almost all the gods (...) to the sun”.⁴⁸ Such a divine reason can be understood to guarantee the ‘fixed and secret system’ that underpins the divine names that one finds in the poets: indeed, if each poet just went about inventing names on his own, there never would be a system. The passage seems to leave open two options. On one reading, one could identify philosophy as the only place of *ratio divina* and make poetry entirely dependent on philosophy. Another reading would allow some poets also independent access to *ratio divina* (even if not necessarily as well as philosophy): this would concur with Macrobius’ practice in the next chapters where the argument of the ultimate identity of traditional deities with the sun is entirely based on poetry, cult statues and other cultural traditions.

Conclusions

So far the harvest from Macrobius has not been rich in explicit statements. Yet the material gathered allows for some conclusions, which relate to two aspects.

1. The nature and aim of Macrobius’ chapters on solar theology

1.1 In the light of the theory of images, they are primarily about images of the World Soul: all deities are instantiations of the sun, which governs the material world.⁴⁹ At the same time, however, the sun is more than a material object: it is

⁴⁵ Tr. Kaster (2011) 207–211.

⁴⁶ See also Macr. *Sat.* 1,7,18.

⁴⁷ Macr. *Sat.* 1,8,6 and 1,9,5.

⁴⁸ The praise for Praetextatus after his discourse refers to both his knowledge and inspiration: Macr. *Sat.* 1,24,1.

⁴⁹ Syska (1993) 211. Syska understands the *Saturnalia* as a “Hinführung zum Kult und Verdeutlichung der wahren Gottheit” (93), and even suggests that Macrobius aims at a “Heilserfahrung” (97) in the individual reader. Whilst I can agree with his view, I would emphasise that the solar the-

also an analogy for the highest God. In that sense, the *Saturnalia* can also be understood as obliquely talking about the highest God.⁵⁰

1.2 If myths, rites and statues are understood as images of the divine, there must be more to the *Saturnalia* than the collection fever of a philologist. As just said, the so-called theological chapters offer the best evidence for that. I would suggest that such a deeper message also underlies other chapters of book 1. The solar theology is preceded by a discussion of the development of the calendar (*Sat.* 1,12–16), which can be read as the story of the adjustment of the Roman calendar on the course of the sun.⁵¹ By progressively organising social life on the course of the sun, human society also adjusts itself onto the analogy of the highest realities that is the sun. Macrobius takes care to point out that some understanding of the truth underpinned even the eldest calendar,⁵² thus again illustrating that his view is a progressivist one that does not disavow antiquity entirely. In the light of this suggestion, it is hardly an accident that the dialogue takes place during the *Saturnalia*, that is, a festival related to the winter solstice and, thus, the symbolic return of the sun.⁵³

2. Differences with Middle-Platonism

2.1 The theory of images that we have found in Macrobius clearly distinguishes itself from what one would expect among Middle-Platonists and Stoics of the preceding centuries.⁵⁴ They seem to have had little doubt that it is possible to make images of the highest god and also to produce discursive statements about him, as can be illustrated by the discursive images they produced and the allegories of traditional cult statues and rites, taken to refer to the highest God.⁵⁵ Because of its stronger emphasis on the transcendence of the highest principles, Neoplatonism would not venture that far.

2.2 Among Middle-Platonists, there is a strong emphasis on the man-made nature of cult statues, which are symbolic translations of the truth as grasped by ancient wise men. Importantly, they did not consider them to be places that captured a part of the divine: the relationship of an image to its object is mediated through a human act. This renders the image, up to a degree, arbitrary and culturally determined as its creator could have made other choices: this helps to explain the religious diversity and, for example, to render Egyptian animal cult respectable in Plu-

ology primarily concerns the level of physics, leading up to metaphysics, and far less the subjective cult experience leading to divine contemplation that Syska argues for. Some of his readings of individual passages seem forced to me.

50 For example, the emphasis on unity in the Assyrian understanding of Hadad (which they worship as the highest God) can be understood as such: *Macr. Sat.* 1,23,17.

51 For clear ideas of progress, see *Macr. Sat.* 1,12. 13,1. 14,1. 3. 13.

52 E. g. *Macr. Sat.* 1,16,30. See also 1,12,36, warning against changing the names of the months.

53 Syska (1993) 93.

54 Liebeschuetz (1999) 198 claims that the theological chapters are not neoplatonic.

55 For examples, see Van Nuffelen (2011).

tarch's *De Iside*. This presupposes a weaker version of the image theory that we have found in Macrobius: there it seems to be presupposed that an image needs to have a direct relationship and similarity in properties in order to be a true image. Because that is impossible for the highest two principles, no images but only analogies can be produced of them. This helps to account for the fact that theurgy seeks to produce material receptacles that share some properties with the divine so as to allow it to descend.⁵⁶ Even Porphyry, who emphasised the man-made nature of images,⁵⁷ accepted that the gods would communicate to man the form that pleased them.⁵⁸

2.3 Thus, in one way or another, Neoplatonism espouses a theory of inspiration:⁵⁹ the truthfulness of cult images is assured by the fact that their creators participate in the *logos* when creating them and that images possess a mimetic relationship with the object they represent. Middle-Platonists do not seem to emphasise the inspired nature of the ancients, but rather their intuitive grasp of the fundamental principles of world, based on the idea of the superiority of ancient times.⁶⁰ This difference allows us to understand why Macrobius can put forward tradition that goes back to the mists of time as well as Vergil (and many other poets and writers from historical times), as authorities for the correct interpretation of the divine: they were divinely inspired to set out the right interpretation.

2.4 Middle-Platonists put forward philosophy as an independent confirmation of philosophical views, which were a rational articulation of what the ancient intuitively had grasped in symbolic language.⁶¹ The passages from Macrobius we have just read suggest a different picture: philosophy assumes a priority, logical and temporal, over the ancients.⁶² This is in line with what has often been noticed for Neoplatonism, namely that its philosophers behave as the supreme priests of ancient religion.⁶³

As noted above, Macrobius does not provide us with much of an explicit narrative to justify his extensive recourse to antiquarian knowledge for his allegories. This

⁵⁶ Iambl. *Ep. ad Anebon (de myst.)* 5,23.

⁵⁷ Porph. *de imag.* 351F Smith.

⁵⁸ Porph. *phil. ex orac.* 317–319F Smith. See now Krulak (2011).

⁵⁹ Dillon (2012a) 45.

⁶⁰ Van Nuffelen (2011) 27–47. Boys-Stones (2001) 19f. argues that for Posidonius, who seems to be the first to formulate the idea of ancient wisdom systematically, the ancient sages were philosophers in the technical sense of the word (i. e. they had rational, philosophical knowledge). Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof (2013) 191–193 argue that the ancients only had intuitive knowledge according to Posidonius.

⁶¹ Van Nuffelen (2011) 231–239.

⁶² Macr. *Sat.* 1,24,21 (*His dictis et universo coetui conplacitis Praetextatus, cum in se conversa omnium ora vidisset: Philosophia, inquit, quod unicum est munus deorum et disciplina disciplinarum, honoranda est anteloquio: unde meminerit Eustathius primum sibi locum ad disserendum omni alia professione cedente concessum*); *somn.* 1,1,3. See Marin. *vit. Procl.* 32, where the gods refer to Iamblichus in a dream to Proclus who had asked them to reveal the identity of a pair of deities.

⁶³ Iambl. *v. P.* 1 states that philosophy was taught by gods, and thus cannot be understood without the aid of god. See also Marin. *vit. Procl.* 15; 19; 22; Porph. *abst.* 2,49; Iul. *epist.* 20 Wright (= 89a Bidez). Cf. Dillon (2012b) 126.

can be understood by the fact that emphasis has shifted away from the wise ancients, as in Middle-Platonism, to divine inspiration that can be operative throughout history. This obviously does not amount to a disavowal of tradition. On the contrary, much more of the tradition becomes now available to be included as testimonies to the truth, by taking late authors such as Vergil to be divinely inspired philosophers.⁶⁴ Thus, although the massive reliance on antiquarian texts is obviously also a rhetorical tool to demonstrate how much the truth about traditional religion is rooted in tradition, Macrobius hints at deeper, more philosophical reasons why this is more than mere rhetoric.

From the perspective of religious studies, allegories of cult statues by philosophers can be interpreted as ways to reconcile the plurality of the traditional pantheon with the monism posed by philosophy. This was indeed an issue, as shown by Macrobius' rebuttal of astrology on the dual grounds that it introduces a plurality of deities and that it presupposes the possibility of evil divine beings.⁶⁵ Yet as the contrast between Middle- and Neoplatonism shows, such reconciliation can take different forms, and these differences can be explained by underlying philosophical reasons. The different view on what the relationship of an image entails and, especially, the emphasis on its inability to say anything about the highest principles in Neoplatonism is to be understood as the result of an increased emphasis on the transcendence of these principles, whilst the idea of the fundamental unity of all that is, ensures that, ultimately, in some way or another all remains connected to the highest God.

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⁶⁴ Goldlust (2010) 184.

⁶⁵ Macr. *somn.* 1,19,18.

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