Antigone Samellas

Conversion as an Erotic Experience in the East of Late Antiquity

Abstract
This article examines religious conversion in the period of late antiquity as an erotic-magical experience that conferred to the convert freedom from the constraints of earthly status through his/her self-enslavement to God. In particular it attempts to trace the similarities between philosophical and religious conversion by exploring the magical and erotic qualities of the Word/voice. It also examines the way that erotic Socrates and polutropos Ulysses served as models for the enchanter apostle Paul. Finally the religious dimensions of ‘moral narcissism,’ as defined by the French psychoanalyst André Green, are explored by highlighting the philosophical and existential dimensions of the dematerialization and internalization of the erotic object in late antiquity. To understand the latter process mention will be made to the centrality of the Neoplatonic conceptualization of the theory of recollection in late antiquity. Also close attention will be given to the vocabulary that expresses the intuitive/erotic moment of access to a religious truth. Texts to be discussed include the Life of Thecla and the Acts of Andrew as well as the Platonic Theages and texts of Plutarch and Antisthenes.

*****
In the sources of late antiquity, the moment of attraction to a religious or philosophical truth is, often, almost literally depicted as love at first sight to the word. This narrative topos pointed to the experience of conversion as an emancipatory event tantamount to one’s enslavement to a transcendental principle, proclaimed by a charismatic teacher, apostle or philosopher. In order to highlight the paradoxical nature of conversion as a liberating erotic bondage to the word I will examine the elaborate paraphrase of the Acts of Paul and Thecla, a work written in the fifth century by Basil of Seleucia, a bishop well-versed in Greek culture. Judging from the number of its manuscripts and translations, the story of Thecla’s conversion to the new faith proved to be extremely popular in late antiquity and seems to have attracted women as well as men to Christianity in Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria and Armenia. The compelling nature of the eros for the word will be rendered more

---

1 For the Armenian and Syriac manuscripts see Catherine Burris and Lucas Van Rompay, “Some further Notes on Thecla in Syriac Christianity,” Hugoye 6 (2009), p. 341; The Acts were also translated into Coptic, Ethiopic, Slavic and Arabic: Kim Haines-Eitzen, “Engendering Palimpsests: Reading the Textual Tradition of the Acts of Paul and Thecla,” in The Early Christian Book, ed. William E. Klingshirn and Linda Safran (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), p. 186; Reading of the Acts converted John, future bishop of Tella, and Eugenia to Christianity, the former in the early sixth century and the latter in the fifth: for the first see Burris and van Rompay, p. 340 and for the latter Stephen J. Davis, The Cult of St. Thecla: A Tradition of Women’s Piety in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 143–148. Basil of Seleucia had a tendency to soften “the emphasis on sexual renunciation while at the same time keeping details that were objectionable to Tertullian, such as Thecla’s right to baptize herself and to teach.” S. Fitzgerald Johnson, The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 6, 31.

2 For material evidence for the cult of Thecla in Egypt, as attested by the fourth-century wall paintings in the Chapel of Exodus depicting her, pilgrim flasks and combs inscribed or decorated with her image and the naming of female children after the saint, see Davis, Cult of St. Thecla, pp. 158, 128, 192, 114.

For female monastic communities around the church dedicated to Thecla in Seleucia see Ibid., p. 55. Thecla appeared thrice to the mother of Gregory of Nyssa when she was about to give birth to Macrina, the great teacher of the Cappadocian Father: see Gregory of Nyssa, Life of S. Macrina, ed. and trans. by Pierre Maraval (Paris: SC 178, 1971), 2. 26.
explicit after the examination of Gregory Thaumaturgus’s account of his conversion to Christian philosophy as this has been immortalized in the farewell speech he delivered in honor of Origen in 238 A.D. in Caesarea. In the period under study *epistrophe* meant reversion to an immaterial erotic object, transcendent as well as immanent. The philosophical assumptions that led to the internalization of the erotic object are spelled out in an allusive manner in the apocryphal *Acts of Andrew*, an early third-century Gnostic text, thoroughly imbued in the intellectual climate of Middle and later Platonism.

Relying on literary testimonies, Peter Toohey has argued that in the Roman era we witness the transformation of eros from a violent passion to a melancholic lovesickness. As I hope will become obvious, this thesis is not supported by the evidence. What seems to occur in late antiquity is the emergence of religion as a narcissistic phenomenon. As such it gave special prominence to: psychic hermaphroditism, the effacement of the subject in a neuter desexualized erotic attachment, the dispossession of the self according to the strictures of the ideal ego, immortalization through self-abnegation, and self-engenderment through one’s binding to an internal object. These aspects of ‘moral narcissism,’ to borrow the term of the French psychoanalyst André Green, will be illuminated as we explore the erotic dimensions of conversion to a religious or philosophical sect in the East of late antiquity.

For other epigraphic and literary evidence for the cult of Thecla in Asia Minor see Maraval’s comments, p. 146, n. 2.


The Calling: The Spell of the Word

One day Thecla was sitting at her window, some time before her betrothal to Thamyris, the man her mother had chosen to be her bridegroom as he outshone, in every respect, the other illustrious youth who were vying one another for her favor, when she heard the voice of Paul.

She was astounded from the start, as if hearing some strange and foreign voice – Christ wanted it this way, in order to assure the capture of such a beautiful prey. And understanding certain words of the divine lesson, she was immediately bitten in her; and she was fixed to the window by the words of Paul as if by some adamantine nails … Without seeing Paul, she grasped nevertheless Paul’s words and was held fast to the window as if it were [an instrument] supplying to her the beloved sound … [Thamyris said] she is entirely for that man, for his words and for his deceptive charms. [δολερῶν ἱύγγων] Theoclia showing her daughter her breast and her white hair entreated her not to shame these by this absurd affliction. But the virgin, accepting not a single word of her mother remained firmly fixed to the words of Paul, and resembling a possessed woman she had eyes for one and only object: for the one towards which her yearning for Christ and the teachings expounded on his name attracted her.6

Three images, overlapping yet of a distinct coloration, convey the experience of conversion in the hagiographical narrative: the first one has a romantic air since it shows a girl standing by the window, the second evokes scenes of violence by depicting a girl fixed to the words of a stranger, as if she had been impaled by nails of adamantine, while the third has a more explicitly religious content as it portrays a girl in a state of possession who ignores the advice of her social milieu when she sees they want to distract her from her devotion to God.

In the Song of Songs 2.8-10 a girl exclaims “Hark! The voice of my lover. My lover here comes loping over the hills. Here he stands behind our wall,

---

peering in at the windows, peeping through the lattice." The girl sees him and responds to his calling, standing by her window, even if, in the words of Thecla’s mother, such a position did not behove a well-born girl and put in jeopardy her good reputation. The girl by the window was in a state of amorous preparedness, and already seemed to transgress the norm that would have her secluded in the interior of the house. Characteristically at Troizen there was a cult of the “spying” (kataskopia) Aphrodite and at Cyprus and Phoinicia of the Aphrodite who “bends over the window (parakuptousa).”7 The image recalls the erotic suspense, the thrill of hopeful expectation for something new to appear, for a stranger like Paul who would talk about things unusual; it speaks about the allure of the unknown. As it is stated in the Symposium 192c, it is difficult to know what one desires, for “the soul of each is wishing for something else that it cannot express, only divining and darkly hinting what it wishes.”8

The first exposure to desire was perceived to be a painful and violent experience akin to being fixed by nails of adamantine.9 To the bystanders, and to the modern reader as well, Thecla appears to have fallen victim of erotic magic. It was as if Paul, in the role of the would-be lover, had used a statuette, similar to the one exhibited in the Louvre10 depicting a woman on her knees, her hands tied behind her back, pierced with thirteen nails,11 saying

8  VT, 4,35–38. The heroes of Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe, transl. by Ronald McCail (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), I.22; when they first met “they desired, and yet they knew not what they wanted” (ἠθέλον τι, ἠγνόουν ὅ τι θέλουσι).
“demon, make her melt away of love for me, cause her to lose her mind, to remain sleepless, to think of no one else but me, night and day, till I make her mine.” 12 Indeed Thecla exhibited all the symptoms of lovesickness: she refused to eat and drink and neglected her appearance. She ignored the advice of her mother, as well as of that her bridegroom, feeling she no longer had anything to do with them. 13 Everybody in the city of Iconium was certain she had fallen in love with a magician, an impostor who was intending to render her captive by force.

The initiatory language of Paul had a mesmerizing effect upon his audience. Multitudes took such pleasure in the teachings and sweet-sounding, like an iynx, tongue of the apostle that they hung from his lips having become oblivious of everything pertinent for their daily sustenance. 14

Iynx, a sweet-sounding bird which was used in magic, served as a metonymy for the seductiveness of the voice. At the close of the fourth century Bishop Synesius of Cyrene addressing himself to his former fellow student Herculianus, with the playful flirtatiousness required of a connoisseur of the

12 For this second-century love-charm of a woman against a man and the banality of the quoted expression see David Jordan, “A New Reading of a Papyrus Love Charm in the Louvre,” Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 74 (1988), pp. 236, lin. 63–64, the melting of wax images was supposed to sympathetically provoke that: p. 238.


14 VT 3.1–10; Androstenes, as well as his brother and his father, converted to Cynicism owing to the iynx of Diogenes’ words: Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers, 6.75–6, ed. and trans. G. Reale (Milan: Bompiani il Pensiero Occidentale, 2005). It was a topos of anti-heretical literature that Gnostics converted women to their religious philosophy by philters and charms, that they seduced them: Irenaeus, Adversus haereses 1.13.5 and numerous other examples cited by Madeleine Scopello in “Femme et Société dans les Polémiques contre les gnostiques,” in Femme, Gnose et Manichéisme (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 207–214.
epistolographic genre, wrote to him: “The deluge of charms (literally of iynx) contained in your epistles has emasculated me.’ The Sirens, as I have heard a wise man saying, can mesmerize anyone who puts his faith in them, leading to his destruction. It is the pleasure of hearing your enchanting voice emanating from your letters that has enslaved my soul to you.”

Cleopatra had reputedly used an iynx to seduce both Caesar and Antony. The full implications of this rumor are analyzed by Plutarch. According to the Greek historian, Cleopatra stimulated her interlocutors not just by the persuasiveness of her speech but also by her skills of rhetorical hypocrisis: “The sound of her voice was pleasant and her tongue, like an instrument of many strings, she could readily turn to whatever language she pleased, so that in her interviews with barbarians she very seldom had need of an interpreter, but made her replies to most of them herself … In this way she snatched away Antony” who, even when he was away from her, counted the days to return to Egypt behaving, “as if under the influence of drugs or magic” he had lost his wits.

Divine and simultaneously demonic, dissembling as well as cunning, Cleopatra, no less than the paradigmatic femme fatale, Helen of Troy, was

18 A beautiful attractive voice was considered to be a sign of divinity, as the depiction of Aphrodite-Calliroe in Chariton’s Chaereas and Calliope, ed. and trans. Georges Moliné (Paris: Budé, 1979), Π.3.8: Λαλούσης δὲ αύτῆς ἡ φωνή τῷ Διονυσίῳ θείᾳ τις ἐφάνη μουσικὸν γὰρ ἐφθέγγετο καὶ ἔσπερ καθάρας ἀπεδίδου τὸν ηχὸν … ἀπηλθὲν φλεγόμενος ἀκή τῷ ἔρωτι. 
adept in verbal manipulation and proficient in mimicry of the voices of others; in a word, she was “polytropos,” like Ulysses. Antisthenes, the Cynic philosopher-rhetor who is surnamed “magician” in the Suda, described Ulysses as “polytropos,” alluding to his versatile ethos, his inventiveness in the use of figures, and to his sweet-sounding voice that, like a nightingale, enchanted the hearers owing to the harmonious combination of different tones. According to Antisthenes, the wisdom attributed by Homer to Ulysses was linked to his polytropia, to the charisma he had of “associating with men in many ways.” Even Pythagoras, in the view of the Socratic Cynic, tailored his wisdom to the capabilities of his audience and so to children gave speeches fitting to children and with women conversed in a manner appropriate to women. In this respect, he behaved like the physicians who apply their cures in many ways, adapting them to the varying constitution of their patients. Even the lies Ulysses told detracted nothing from his wisdom for, with the approbation of Zeus, lovers too tell lies and promise the impossible.

20 Cleopatra associated with the negative connotations of poikilon in Plato’s Rep. 588c: see J.V. Luce, “Cleopatra as fatale monstrum (Horace, Carm. 1. 37. 21),” Classical Quarterly 13 (1963), p. 256.

21 Antisthenis fragmenta, ed. Fernanda Decleva Caizzi (Milan, 1966), fr. 51–52, p. 43 preserved by the student of Plotinus, Porphyry. The Suda has the following entry: “Antisthenes the magician. He wrote ten books; the first Magikon recounts about Zoroaster the Magician who invented wisdom.” Ibid. pp. 77, 86.

22 Ibid., pp. 43–44. That tropoi could refer to the turns or modulations of Ulysses’ voice as well as to the figures of speech and his many turns of mind, his metis, to his trickery and inventiveness is stated by Pietro Pucci, Odysseus Polutropos. Intertextual Readings in the Odyssey and the Iliad (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 24, 128. In Antisthenes tropos had three senses: a moral one, since it pertained to ethos, a rhetorical one, which designated the use of the discourses, and a musical one, which referred to the voice and the “variation of the melodies”: Aldo Brancacci, Antisthène. Le Discours Propre (Paris: Vrin, 2005), p. 53.

23 Antisthenis fragmenta, p. 44. On the admiration of the Socratics, Plato included, for Ulysses, and the defence by Socrates of Ulysses’s purposeful lying in Hippias Minor 372 see David Lévystone, “La Figure d’Ulysse chez les Socratiques,” Phronesis 50 (2005), 187–191. The verse of Callimachus in Palatine Anthology 5.6-8 “Lovers’ oaths do not penetrate the
Paul, too, had the power “to become all things to all men.” Not differently from Ulysses and Pythagoras he conveyed his wisdom in many ways and, as he himself declares, to the Jews he became a Jew in order to win Jews and to the weak he became weak that he might win the weak.\textsuperscript{24} Like the Protean Homeric hero,\textsuperscript{25} Paul was \textit{poikilos}: he changed appearance, he told lies on purpose, he pretended he was a fool, he boasted of his willingness to undergo every humiliation and persecution if thus he would hurt his enemies, he was different to different audiences, seducing his hearers and making them become enamored of the Word.\textsuperscript{26} He used a rhetoric that, with the divine sanction, aimed at the demolition of the opposing arguments and the magical annihilation of every thought hostile to Christ.\textsuperscript{27} As the apostle bragged: “the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”\textsuperscript{28}

ears of the immortals” had acquired a proverbial character. I would like to thank an anonymous reader for this reference.

\textsuperscript{24} 1 Cor. 9:20, 22. For rhetorical prowess as the weapon of the weak in Antisthenes and Paul see also \textit{Antisthenes fragmenta}, ed. Decleva Caizzi, fr. 15, 9–14 with the comments of Abraham Malherbe in “Antisthenes and Odysseus and Paul at War,” in: \textit{Paul and the Popular Philosophers} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 95–101, to whom I am indebted.

\textsuperscript{25} On Socrates no less than Ulysses, being saved by his eloquence see Diogenes Laertius, \textit{Lives of the Philosophers}, in Giovanni Reale (ed. & trans.), \textit{Vite e Dottrine dei Più Celebri Filosofi} (Milan: Bompani Il Pensiero Occidentale, 2005), 2.20; and Olof Gigon, \textit{Sokrates. Sein Bild in Dichtung und Geschichte} (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1947, repr. 1979), p. 100: according to a Hellenistic source, Socrates worked as a slave in a quarry where Criton encountered him and fell in love with “the grace of his soul” and freed him.

\textsuperscript{26} On Paul’s ironic foolishness and his impersonation of the \textit{ἀλαζών}, that is, the braggart, the impostor, see Laurence L. Welborn, “The Runaway Paul,” \textit{Harvard Theological Review} 92 (1999), pp. 147–151.

\textsuperscript{27} On “binding speeches” (\textit{logoi phimotikoi}), charms that magically reduced to silence one’s opponents see Scopello, “Femme et société dans les polémiques contre les gnostiques”, p. 285; Paul’s eloquence had a similar effect.

\textsuperscript{28} 2 Cor. 10:4-5.
To the apostle’s rhetorical prowess also alludes the author of the *Life of Thecla* when he writes that Thecla was fastened to the words of Paul by nails of “adamant.” According to the *Gorgias* an argument “is held firm and fastened with reasons of steel and adamant.”29 Plato refers to the objective, dialectically proven, irrefutability of an argument based on reason, yet it was not unusual to attribute to an argument a magical power to persuade the hearer about its plausibility whether it was true or false.30 Thaumaturgus describes in the following way conversion to philosophy:

Human argument is an awesome tool and very flexible, manifold in its artifices and sharp; it penetrates the hearing to make an impression on the mind and when it has persuaded those forever captivated that it should be loved as true, remains within it, false and deceptive though it be, like a dominating sorcerer whose own dupe himself comes to his defence. Not only that, but even if another argument should wish to pit it straight, it is no longer accessible or open to persuasion, but clings to what it has, as if some relentless tyrant held it fast.31

Thaumaturgus’ account resonates with themes first encountered in Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen*. There logos is described as a “powerful lord,”32 which constrains the soul by persuading it “both to obey its utterances and to approve its doings.”33 Persuasion charms the auditor, overpowering her soul

29  Plato, *Gorgias* 509a
30  On the personal, dialectic nature of the Socratic *elenchos* and the objectively compelling nature of the argumentation it entails see Terence H. Irwin, “Coercion and Objectivity in Plato’s Dialectic,” in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 40 (1986), pp. 59, 63, 64. To the binding character of *logoi* also alludes the famous saying adopted by Antisthenes: “one has to construct walls with inexpugnable arguments” cited in Brancacci, *Antisthène*, p. 81, n. 15.
33  Ibid. 12.
with the divine power of eros. The entrapment of the soul in the unstable, illusory impressions that constitute opinion (doxa) enhance its emotional pliability.34

As the student of Origen later observed “an irrational impulse toward philosophy” made each adherent of a specific sect attached to the teachings he had first heard and blind to the doctrines of other schools.35 The irrational impulse was the eros for the word, or rather to be more accurate, the word awakened desire in the soul of the convert. This at least is what happened when Aristippus came, for the first time, in contact with the teachings of Socrates. According to Plutarch,

when Aristippus met Ischomachus in the Olympic games, he asked him what was Socrates saying as to make the young men so favourably predisposed towards him. And even though he received few of the seeds, a bare sample of the speeches, he was so much affected that he fainted and became altogether pale and thin till he sailed to Athens and quenched his ardent thirst from the source and inquired about the man, his speech and his philosophy.36

Socrates was erotikos: according to a work of Aeschines entitled Aspasia, the woman who reputedly taught the philosopher the erotic art, Socrates was “able to act as a moral guide by inciting or appealing to eros in others.”37 He attracted his prospective students to the word impregnating their souls with the seeds of desire. The physical presence of the philosopher was redundant for that purpose. His speech sufficed to create the necessary longing, as the

34 For works of art, including verbal craftsmanship, awaken eros in one’s soul see Gorgias, The Encomium of Helen 18 with the comments of Charles P. Segal, “Gorgias and the psychology of the Logos,” in Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 66 (1962), pp. 123–24; words “merging with opinion (doxa) in the soul” beguile it see Gorgias, Encomium of Helen 10; Segal, “Gorgias and the psychology of the Logos,” p. 111.

35 Gregory Thaumaturgus, Address of Thanksgiving to Origen 163.


hysterical fainting of Aristippus at his first exposure to the speech of Socrates shows. Similarly Alcibiades whenever he heard Socrates, or someone else speaking his discourses, became possessed like a Corybant, his heart leapt and tears came to his eyes. The same rapture was felt by the other members of the audience too. As to himself he had to close his ears and stay away from Socrates in order not to be enthralled by the Sirens of his speeches till his old age.38

Thecla, too, first fell in love with the “strange voice” (ἀήθους φωνῆς) of Paul. “Strange” (ἀήθεις λόγοι), as we know from Plato’s Euthedemus, was the language of the mysteries, the incantations the Corybants sang to those who wanted to be initiated in the Phrygian cult.39 The strange language of

---

38 Alcibiades possessed in Symp. 215d; Sirens: 216a. What interests me is that the allure of voice becomes autonomous from the physical presence of the interlocutor (215d). In Lacanian terms the voice—of Socrates, in our case—becomes a partial erotic object. See his lectures on Plato’s Symposium in Jacques Lacan, Le Séminaire. Livre VII. Le Transfert (Paris: Seuil, 1991, repr. 2001), p. 107. As Dorothea Frede has remarked Alcibiades’s speech echoes Diotima’s description of Eros in Symp. 203a as a demon through which are conveyed “all divination ... and incantations ... and all soothsaying and sorcery.” Dorothea Frede, “Out of the Cave: What Socrates Learned from Diotima,” in Nomodeiktes. Greek Studies in Honour of M. Ostwald, ed. Ralph Rosen and Joseph Farrell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) p. 410, n. 23. Socrates as a sorcerer in Plato, Meno, ed. and trans. Robert W. Sharples (Oxford: Aris and Phillips Classical Texts, 1985), 80a. The Socrates of Aeschines declares that though he knew no science he thought that by keeping company to Alcibiades he “could make him better by the power of love.” He himself attributes to his erotic possession, his resourcefulness, his ability to draw “milk and honey from wells where others cannot even draw water.” In Theages 128b3–4 Socrates declares that his sole expertise is in things erotic. Socrates was the student and paramour of the philosopher Archelaos, the Stoic Zeno the beloved of Parmenides. For the former see Aristoxenus of Tarentum, Fr. X 2 05 in Die Fragmente des Aristoxenos aus Tarent, ed. Stefan Ikarus Kaiser (Zürich: Georg Olms Verlag, 2010), p. 174 and for the latter Plato, Parmenides 127b. A more humorous version of Socratic eros is reported in Philostratus, Lives of the Sophists 617: “This young man is in love with his own teacher. Therefore we should do well to further his cause with his beloved (τῶν ἀγαπητῶν). And certainly it will be a windfall for him if, when he leaves us, he has learned how to make an encomium.”

39 Plato, Euthedemus 277d–e.
the Christian mysteries, on the other hand, could refer to the tongue of the angels, in which Paul was fluent, to the many barbarian and incomprehensible languages the apostle could speak owing to the charisma of glossolalia, or, more prosaically, to his strange sermon of continence.  

Paul’s sermon of continence was perceived by the society of Iconium to be subversive of its norms. Paul, according to their allegations, slandered the institution of marriage by urging men and women to embrace celibacy and solitude. Such an option, they claimed, would wreak havoc on cities and villages, on arts and crafts for it would have rendered the earth desolate and uninhabitable. Someone who preached a doctrine hostile to marriage overturned the laws of nature and the rules of a well-ordered society.

Thecla herself experienced her conversion to the teachings of Paul as a slavery that bestowed freedom. As she herself explained to her fiancée, she had rejected a marriage with an illustrious bridegroom out of her eros for continence and because she desired to render service to Christ. It was on account of a “slavery, superior to every freedom” that she suffered exile and persecution.

A Slavery that bestows Freedom

According to Plutarch “in Rome after the proclamation of a so-called dictator, all the other magistrates resign their offices; in the same way those who are under the sovereignty of Eros are free and released from (ἀφετοί) all other lords and masters and live, as it were, from now on like temple-slaves.” By virtue of being dedicated to god, temple-slaves were released from every earthly sovereignty and were free from every worldly care. On account of

---

40 1 Cor. 13:1–2; 1 Cor. 14:10–11.
41 VT 5.23–24; 6.40–61.
42 VT 15.45–48.
43 Plutarch, Amatorius 768a.
their being under the protection of god, they enjoyed a special legal status: they were above and outside the law (ἂϕετοί).  

Eros was a force disruptive of the social order. As Plato states in the Phaedrus, the person who falls in love, forgets family and friends, neglects the care of material goods, ignores the social conventions and the rules of good conduct and despises everything in which previously he took pride. His sole aspiration is to become a slave to his beloved.

Eros was a riddle for it freed those who became enslaved to him, robbing them of their livelihoods, their marriages and their high commands. Thecla too shook off the yoke of marriage and social status as soon as she became enamoured of the Word of God: she repudiated the fiancée her mother had chosen for her, she sold her jewelry, she left her house during the night and went to prison to see Paul, and then travelled alone to preach the gospel. In the words of Paul, Thecla was no longer a woman and it was uncertain whether she still belonged to him. With this apostrophe the apostle wanted to show that her passionate attachment to a transcendental principle had helped her surpass the limitations of her gender. Likewise, Thaumaturgus saw his conversion to Christianity as auguring a state of freedom which exempted him from bondage to marketplaces, tribunals, crowds and pretensions: as soon as he was “gravely wounded by the love for the most attractive Word,” he neglected the study of law as well as his native land and his friends.

---

44 About the meaning of ἄϕετοι see Plutarch Dialog über die Liebe, ed. and trans. Herwig Görgemanns and essays by Herwig Görgemanns et al., (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) p. 180, n. 386; for eros as voluntary slavery see, Plato, Symposium 184c; Chariton, Chaereas and Calliope IV. 7.3 and Achilles Tatius, Leucippe and Cleitophon IV.10.2; and as involuntary slavery in Plato, Symp. 215e, 219e.

45 See Plato, Phaedrus 259a.


47 VT 15.33–36 (Paul’s words). As Dagron states, Thecla had cut her hair, see Vita Theclae, ed. G. Dagron, p. 231; jewels and visit to prison: VT 8.15-35; preaching: VT 28.1-6.

48 Thaumaturgus, Address of Thanksgiving to Origen 192, 83–84.
Conversion started with a calling that was physically an act of violence: for, according to the Stoics, “voice is like a blow to the soul, which receives the thought by force through the ears, whenever we converse with one another.” As a Greek philosophical pun put it, the Good had the inherent capacity to call one to itself. The Good was embodied in the person of an apostle or a philosopher who bound the novice to the truth, since in the view of Thaumaturgus “it is proper for the inferior to be joined to the superior and to be as it were powerless to escape from the bonds.”

Conversion had a compelling character. It was a painful experience in that one began to feel the pangs of love for something strange, new and unknown. A teacher like Origen succeeded in making his students lovers of virtue and wisdom for he had first shown them how to be “fiercely in love with love.” The result of this godsent, magic implantation of desire in the soul of the disciple was the transformation of the passive recipient of the calling to a lover who actively pursued the object of his/her desire. This turning-point in one’s life was described as a state akin to possession. It was a divine madness that endowed women, like Thecla, with the freedom to defy the social ex-

---

49 Plutarch, *On the Daimonion of Socrates*, trans. Donald Russell with essays by Heinz Günther Nesselrath et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), p. 53 (588e); for the antinomian character of eros, see also Plutarch, *Amatorius*, 762a; a sight or a voice, according to the Stoics was a shock (πληγή) that invaded the senses before reason gave its assent to the external stimulus by critically assessing its value. On the standard definition of voice as “air that has been struck” see Jaap Mansfeld, “Illuminating what is Thought.’ A Middle Platonist placitum on ‘Voice’ in Context,” *Mnemosyne* 58 (2005), p. 377, n. 55.


51 Thaumaturgus, *Address*, 90, 91.

52 Ibid., 147.
pectations and behave in public like men. It was an enchantment that drove scions of illustrious families, like Thaumaturgus, to abandon their studies so as to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the Word.

Eros is bittersweet, the Neoplatonist Hermias explained, quoting Sappho, in his commentary on the *Phaedrus*, because we strive, for this higher reality but cannot reach it tied as we are to the world of becoming. Enchantment by the word simply gave a premonition of the birth-pangs of self-transformation. One had to suffer what one heard. Conversion was nothing but the Incarnation of the Word. It was a *coup de foudre* that led to the painful discovery of what was worthy of love. Socrates, wrote Didymus the Blind in his commentary on the *Ecclesiastes*, talked about love, by which we see the heavenly things, god and the intelligible substance. As we shall see apostle Andrew in the role of Socrates tried to attract his disciples to similar erotic objects. Religious conversion was *epistrophē*, a reversion to the first principle from where everything sprang. In late antiquity this kind of self-knowledge

---


54 For other men of noble origin who followed Gregory’s path see Antigone Samellas, *Alienation. The Experience of the Eastern Mediterranean (50–600 A.D.*)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 103–107; that the apocryphal acts apart from tales of female autonomy also include less anti-familial episodes is argued by David Konstan in “Acts of Love: A Narrative Pattern in the Apocryphal Acts,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), pp. 20, 22, 33. However, I believe that these episodes are of secondary importance to the narrative structure of the *Acts*.


was believed to presuppose but also to perfect the internalization of the erotic object. To the examination of the philosophical premises of this process we now turn.\textsuperscript{57}

\section*{The Internalization of the Erotic Object}

Not even I know whether I had already loved you, in an indeterminate somewhere … Perhaps you are a nostalgia of my own, body of absence, presence of distance, female, perhaps, for reasons other than those that make the female.

\begin{flushright}
Fernando Pessoa
\end{flushright}

After she had heard the sermon of apostle Andrew, Maximilla ceased to sleep with her husband and, thinking that intercourse was something terrible and shameful, sent her slave in her place to fulfill her marital duties. When her husband, Aegeates, discovered he had been deceived, he fell on her knees and asked her the reasons for this abrupt change of feeling towards him. If she had an affair with another man, he said to her, he was willing to forgive her for, on account of her modesty, after twelve years of marriage, he still loved her, almost like a goddess, and, further, she too had put up with his stupidities.\textsuperscript{58} Maximilla answered his entreaties saying:

I love, Aegeates, I love. And what I love is not of this world so that it might become manifest to you; and day and night it excites me and inflames me with love for it; it is an object that you cannot see, for that is difficult, nor can you

\textsuperscript{57} Ἐπιστροφή in Neoplatonism as 1. “the turning or inclining of a subject towards something”, 2a. “the turning or inclining of a subject towards itself or (2b) a higher source” in Lloyd P. Gerson, “Ἐπιστροφή πρὸς ἑαυτὸν: History and Meaning,” in Documenti e Studi Sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale 7 (1997), p. 13.

separate me from it for that is impossible. Let me unite with it, alone to rest with it.59

The object exciting the passionate love of Maximilla was invisible. It was Christ who, in the Acts of Andrew appeared at one time like a “handsome young boy,” and at another like apostle Andrew himself.60 The polymorphy of Christ in this and other Gnostic texts symbolized the immateriality and formlessness of the divine nature. God was ungraspable. If ever he seemed to have put on a human form it was because each perceived the transcendent principle according to his capabilities. Thus, according to the Gospel of Philip, “some saw Him and thought they were seeing their own selves.”61 Christ, in his essence, was unknowable and indeterminate. For this reason he was the most desirable erotic object. In the philosophical formulation of Plotinus:

when you cannot grasp the form or shape of what is longed for, it would be most longed for and most lovable, and love for it would be immeasurable … since the nature of the best and the nature of the most lovable is in the altogether formless. The experience of lovers bears witness to this, that, as long as it [the Good] is in that which has the impression perceived by the senses, the lover is not yet in love; but when from that he himself generates in himself an impression not perceptible by the senses in his partless soul, then love springs up. He seeks to see the beloved that he may water him when he is withering (Phaedr. 251b). But if he should come to understand that one must change to that which is more formless, he would desire that. For … the first nature of beauty is formless.62

The formlessness of the transcendent erotic object aroused infinite desire. At the same time its immaterial and immanent nature rendered it the most pre-

59 Ibid., 23.17–21. Rest (anapausis) follows after the perfect union with God, see Prieur, p. 359.
60 Ibid., 46.12–14; 32.1–4, with the comments of Prieur pp. 360–365.
61 Gospel according to Philip, 58:3–5.
cious and secure possession to the person attached to it. Echoing the cryptic words of Maximilla, the Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry exhorted his wife to flee the body so as not to experience his physical absence as painful. Then she might encounter him “in a beautiful and most pure form of union ... intangible and imperceptible ... yet present and united with her night and day.” Since “we do not receive from the externals what has been implanted in them for us. Rather we receive only the pitch, as in a chorus, which leads us to the recollection of what we have from the giver in our wandering.”

In the Symposium Socrates in his effort to alert Alcibiades to the beauty of the soul states that “the intellectual sight begins to be keen when the visual is entering on its wane.” This relative downplaying of the significance of sense perception in the genesis of eros becomes far more pronounced in Neoplatonism where the perceptive powers of the soul were thought to be fully active only when they directed their power of apprehension inwards. In the same way, Plotinus stated, that a person has to be in a state of auditory vigilance so as to catch the voice he desires to hear; thus the soul had to take leave of the din of the sensible world in order to hear the voice coming from above. It was unnecessary for the soul’s powers of apprehension to orient themselves towards the exterior. For the soul had the eros of the Good inside it. Even though it was not conscious of its presence and was always in search of that, it did not need the beauties of this world to be reminded of the Good; judging that true beauty became polluted in the bodies of flesh, it felt contempt for them.

64 Plato, Symposium 219a.
66 The receptivity of the soul to the highest principle depends on her shutting herself out from the din of the senses see Plotinus, Enneads V.1.12.12–20 and Gwanaëlle Aubry, Dieu
Eros was an innate attribute of the soul. “For since the soul is other than God but comes from him it is necessarily in love with him.”\(^{66}\) Therefore any sensible stimulus was redundant, if not antithetical to the awakening of desire for the first principle. The paradox of the Platonic \textit{Meno}, according to which it is difficult to search for what we don’t know because even if we come across it we will never be able to recognize the identity of the sought-after object, undergirded the innatist understanding of knowledge and perception.\(^{67}\) It is indicative that Plotinus alluded to the paradox of the \textit{Meno} when he wrote that “Eros is a mixed thing, having a part of need, in that he wishes to be filled, but not without a share of plenitude, in that he seeks what is wanting to that which he already has; for certainly that which is altogether without a share in the Good would not ever seek the Good.”\(^{68}\)

The erotic object was both transcendent and immanent. This pre-existent eros needed a voice, a pitch to be awakened. Its consummation led to union with oneself, to the discovery of, the previously thought as external, erotic


\(^{68}\) Plotinus, \textit{Enneads} III.5.9.40–45.
object within oneself, and, as a consequence, resulted in the total identification of the lover with the object of his desire. The meaning of this identification was the transformation of the former into the latter, “becoming like God as far as possible”.69 The interpretation of the Symposium in light of the Meno, which also occurs in the mid-second century anonymous commentary on the Theaetetus, seems to justify Plutarch’s remark that Socratic erotic art, his love for the divine and the intelligible, is tantamount to reminiscence.70

In the Anonymous Commentary on Plato’s Theaetetus Diotima’s statement “all men are pregnant both in body and in soul”71 is interpreted as meaning that they are pregnant with recollection.72 Moreover, Socrates’s claim in the Theaetetus that he himself is barren of any conception and that he teaches nothing to his disciples, but only “helps them discover within themselves a multitude of beautiful things, which they bring forth into light”73 is thought to signify that “god prepares the souls not to learn but to recollect.”74 As David Sedley remarks, the maieutic method, here defined as recollection, is elevated to the crux of all philosophic education.75 Along with this, Socrates’s profession of absolute ignorance coincides with the philosopher’s elevation, almost, to divine status for, as the anonymous commentator reiterates, in Theaetetus it is god who compels Socrates to exercise his philosophic midwifery.76 Further, the daimonion, the divine sign which usually hinders Socrates

69  Plato, Theaetetus 176b.
70  Plutarch, Plat. Quest. 1000.
71  Plato, Symposium 206c 1–3.
73  Plato, Theaet. 150d
76  Theaet. 150c, Col. LV, 10–15, p. 414.
Antigone Samellas: Conversion as an Erotic Experience

from doing something, assumes a positive advisory function and so now recommends the students worthy to receive philosophic instruction.77

The anonymous commentator’s reading of the Theaetetus is confirmed by Harold Tarrant, who has observed that in this Platonic text the frequent reference to synousia, the continuous intercourse of Socrates with his disciples, seems to point to the importance of the supernatural presence of the teacher in the educational process.78 A work heavily influenced by Theaetetus 150, the Theages, an Hellenistic work attributed to Plato, portrays the transmission of knowledge from Socrates to his student Aristides in terms of physical contact, in order to underline the significance of the erotic bond between the philosopher and his disciple in the acquisition of knowledge in an intuitive way.79 The Acts of Andrew assimilate these developments in the Platonic tradition, treating however erotic intimacy as synonymous with an intellectual touch.80

An Intellectual Touch

Like the demonic Socrates of the Theaetetus, the apostle Andrew boasted of his expertise in midwifery and divination. He also declared himself happy to see his disciple Stratocles in doubt about his former certainties, in a state of amazement and intellectual impasse (aporia), for, in his opinion, this showed he was ready to give birth to the “new man.” Stratocles on his part said he saw in the person of Andrew the envoy of the living God and that he would

77 Theaet. 151a in Ibid., Col. LVI, 40–45, p. 418.
79 Theages 130d–e with the comments of Mark Joyal in his edition of The Platonic Theages (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000), pp. 94–97. Joyal dates this dialogue c. 345–335 B.C., see p. 155.
never separate himself from him until he gained self-knowledge. Indeed, he stayed day and night at the side of the apostle questioning him in private and then found rest, relishing in the intellectual tranquillity the replies of the apostle gave him. When Andrew saw that the first stage of Stratocles’s initiation had been successfully completed, he asked him to introduce to the public the offspring of his mental labour so that the salutary words would be imprinted on the souls of his spiritual relatives.81

After he had delivered a sermon to both Maximilla and Stratocles exhorting them to love Christ, Andrew asked the disconsolate Stratocles who was grieving over the apostle’s imminent death:

Do you know to whom these words were addressed? Has each one of them reached your intellect? Have they touched your intellectual part? (ἔθιγέν σου τοῦ διανοητικοῦ μέρους) Do I still have the one who listened to me? Do I find myself in you? Is there someone inside you conversing with me whom I can consider my own? Does he love the one who has spoken in me and does he desire to be in communion with him? Does he want to be united with him? Does he desire to be yoked with him? Does he find in him some rest?82

Andrew ended his farewell speech saying he had found what he had been longing for, since death would at last allow him to rest with Christ. Distraught, Stratocles replied that like spears of flame, each one of his words tormented the affective part of his soul. He knew it was good that he departed. Yet he feared that the seeds of the salutary words he had sown in his soul needed him and no one else in order to bear fruit.83

82 Ibid., 42.6–11. In Plato, “dianoetikon,” i.e. discursive reason, is usually distinguished from nous, i.e. intellect, which, when ‘touched’, intuitively acquires contact with the divine. The discursive reason is in need of memory to apprehend the higher realities. The dianoia, i.e. the thought of the philosopher in Phaedrus 249c–d, is ecstatically, and yet permanently, transported through recollection to the highest realities. For all this see the excellent article of Fabio Massimo Giuliano, “L’enthousiasmos del Poeta Filosofo tra Parmenide e Platone,” in Studi Classici e Orientali 46 (1996), pp. 531–532, n. 42.
83 See Acta Andreae, 43, 44.
Conversion was an intellectual touch which attracted the soul to an erotic object that was external as well as internal, transcendent as well as immanent. Andrew elicited this spiritual transformation to his disciples owing to his demonic nature. According to Plutarch, demons were particularly sensitive vessels of divine revelations on account of their purity. It is indicative that Socrates’s daimonion was not a vision, but the perception of a voice or the apprehension of a thought which made contact with him in some extraordinary way ... The intellect of the higher being guides the gifted soul, which needs no blow, touching it with its thought (ἐπιθιγάνων τῷ νοηθέντι) ... The part submerged in the body is called the soul: the part that survives destruction is commonly called Intellect, and people believe it to be within themselves, just as they believe reflections to be in mirrors. Those who have the right idea of it, however, call it daimon, regarding it outside themselves.84

Andrew was a demon, an envoy of God whose mission was to bridge the distance between the heavenly and the earthly realm, by sowing the seeds of salvation in the soul of the convert. Like Socrates he was apt for this mediatory role because he had liberated himself from the domination of the passions and had purified his soul from any contact with the body.85 Yet for the seeds

---

84 Plutarch, On the Daimonion of Socrates, 588c–d–E, 591e; on Socrates’s daimonion as endowing him with prophetic powers see also Plutarch-pseudo, Essay on the Life and Poetry of Homer, ed. and trans. John J. Keaney & Robert Lamberton (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), p. 212. It is important to note, as to what concerns the revelatory nature of voice, that many lexicographers and Middle Platonic sources established a very close relationship between voice and thought which was based on etymology: voice (phone) was considered as “illuminating (photizousa) what is being thought.” For all this, see Mansfeld, “Illuminating what is Thought.,” pp. 359–376. For touch (thiggano) as meaning intuition in Plutarch see Marco Zambon, Porphyre et le Moyen-Platonisme (Paris: Vrin, 2002), pp. 50, 57; on the identification of intellect with god in Plutarch and Plotinus see Ibid. pp. 109, 125.

85 On Socrates’s “untroubled personality” and “holy soul” which rendered his intellect “sensitive enough to respond quickly to whatever impinged upon it (εὔαρπῆς νούς),” see Plutarch, Daimonion, 589d, 588e. The direct transmission of thought was superior to
of his teaching to bear fruit, much more than a rational understanding of his speech was required. Thus, though Stratocles had been exposed day and night to Andrew’s philosophic midwifery, he had not yet managed to be fully “touched” by the apostle’s message of salvation. What an intuitive grasp of his sermon entailed becomes manifest when we take into account Maximilla’s reactions at the words directed to her: “she disposed herself according to the words, having become precisely what the words signified.” If Stratocles had reached the stage of becoming what he had heard, he would have subdued his emotions for he would have been united with the “bridegroom within,” with Christ, the Word, who in one sense was similar to the transcendent principle that touched the intellect of the disciple but in another sense different.

According to Plotinus, the One is not the same in the case of perceptible things in comparison with each other nor is the One in the intelligible realm identical to the One in the perceptible world.

Nevertheless all try to represent the same [One], but some attain only a remote resemblance, some come nearer, and attain it already more truly in intellect ... Each thing wishes not just for being, but for being together with the good. For this reason, things which are not One, strive as far as they can to become One ... wishing to be united in identity with themselves ... For nothing whatever among the real beings could have come to exist or endure in existence if its striving was not directed towards the One. So the One in it [in the case of be-

communication via the sounds of voices because “the soul willingly submits to the direction offered to it.” But such freedom only gifted individuals like Socrates could enjoy: Stephan Schröder, “Plutarch on Oracles and Divine Inspiration,” in Plutarch, Daimonion, pp. 162–163.

86 Acta Androae, 46.1–4.
87 Acta Androae, 16.9–10 For the translation see Lautaro Lanzillotta, Acta Andreae Apo-
crypha (Genève: Cahiers d’Orientalisme 26, 2007), pp. 129, 125, n. 85, 180. “ἀσυμμετρών αὐτὴν τῷ ἐσω αὐτῷ”.
88 For Christ as the inner man, as Logos in Gnostic, encratite texts see Christoph Markschies, “Die platonische Metapher vom ‘inneren Menschen’,” Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte 105 (1994), p. 11.
The One is the universal, transcendental principle, the source from where everything emanated, the goal which everyone strives to reach. The One in being, "the divine in us" is the same as the transcendental One, even if the former is derivative from, and posterior to the latter. To the extent that each identifies himself with the supra-rational Intellect abiding in the One, not only does he acquire knowledge of the One but becomes the One, thus acquiring unity with himself. For, if according to a cardinal principle of ancient philosophy only the "like can know the like," self-knowledge is effected by the imitation of, and assimilation to, the superior hypostasis. The cultivation of the rational part of one’s soul opened the way to the reversion to one’s higher self while insight brought to its final destination the journey of return. Intellect, according to Plotinus, had two different powers:

Intellect has one power for thinking, by which it looks at the things in itself, and one by which it looks at what transcends it by a direct awareness and reception (ἐπιβολῇ τινι καὶ παραδοχῇ) ... And that first one is the contemplation of the Intellect in its right mind, and the other is Intellect in love (νοῦς ἐρῶν), when it goes out of its mind ‘drunk with the nectar.’

90 See, for instance, Plotinus, *Enneads*, II.4.10.3 and especially III.8.9.19–23, VI.7.21–22. This is a version of the so-called affinity argument as formulated in the *Phaedo*. “The soul or part of it must be like the Forms in order for knowledge to be acquired. But we do possess knowledge, as was shown in the Recollection argument. Therefore our soul, or a part of it, is an incorporeal entity, like the Forms.” In late antiquity this was translated as the intellect knows the intelligibles and also contains them: see Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, pp. 41, 63.
Epistrophe, the reversion of the self to its source, was an introspective process involving the intellect which stood for the discursive reason contemplating the Forms it contained within itself, and the supra-rational intellect, “the intellect in love” which intuitively grasped the nature of the transcendent One, ecstatically uniting with it. The latter “always possesses the right” is like “another self” unceasingly abiding in us, it is that “with which we are in contact with god.”

I believe that the differentiation Plotinus makes between these two intellects helps us discern, for analytical purposes, two phases in the conversion of the disciples of Andrew to Christianity. At the outset the apostle applied Socratic midwifery to help the neophyte attain self-knowledge: Through daily intercourse with his disciple, but without using elaborate argumentation, Andrew sowed in the soul of his interlocutor the seeds of the Christian Word, making him thus desire to give birth to “the new man.” This led the disciple to his abandoning his pagan way of life and to his identification with his immaterial, spiritual self. Through his attachment to the demonic Andrew the convert discovered the “inner man” his rational self and, along with it, God as the Word containing all concepts and Forms of the virtues.

At a later stage, the communication with the divine acquired an unmediated character. To this perfect communion with God Andrew alluded at his farewell speech to Stratocles when he addressed him with words signifying the intuitive contact of the ecstatic intellect with what surpasses it (ἔθιγέν σε, ἥψατό σου). God is “above Time, above the law, above the Word and above

---

93 Plotinus, Enneads, V.1.11.7,11, 14–15. Because in conversion the end is the beginning it is important to note that before the Intellect acquires a separate hypostasis it only feels an indeterminate desire for the One “like a touch that has nothing intellectual.” VI.7.39. 19–20. For this point see Pigler, Plotin, pp. 89–93, 125.

94 About the contemplating intellect which is “many” because it is discursive: “discursive thought in order to express anything in words has to consider one thing after another; but how can one describe the absolutely simple?” Plotinus, Enneads, V.3.17.23–25. “Stratocles abandoned his property to attach himself to the word.” Ibid.,12; principles of truth imprinted by the Father in his Word in Origen, Commentary on John 1.283 and virtues contained in pure form in the Word; for all this see Samellas, Alienation, pp. 448–450.
the body,”95 Andrew proclaimed in his valedictory speech to his brothers. Therefore, to love Christ as a transcendent hypostasis, the internal intellect had to receive the immediate spiritual touch of the higher principle. Then the amorous intellect became one with what exceeded the boundaries of reason and discursive thought.96

It is no coincidence that Andrew’s appeal to the spiritual touch was made a little before his departure to the other world. Without his presence and bereft of his sermons, his disciples would have to discover the Word within themselves and abide in it so as to remain loyal to the one who first bound them to Christ. The attachment to an eternal internal erotic object, Christ, seems to have established a permanent bond with the apostle who was mourned by his disciple Stratocles as already dead. That the internalization of the erotic object could be a way of denying the death of a loved one is rendered evident in the Gospel of John. There Jesus is portrayed as the bridegroom97 who, as he is about to go to his Father, tries to console his distraught disciples by telling them they would join him in his Father’s house and they would see their present tribulations end. They would be saved if they fol-


97 See Ann Roberts Winsor, *A King is Bound in the Tresses. Allusions to the Song of Songs in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 55, 19: About the bridegroom at the well as he is speaking with the Samaritan woman 4:1-26 cf. *Prov.* 5:15-19; Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with pure nard and wipes his feet with her hair; that alludes to ‘beloved is a bundle of myrrh … between his lover’s breasts’, *Cant.* 1:13-14. John 15:13: “Μείζονα ταύτης ἀγάπην οὐδεὶς ἔχει, ἵνα τις τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ θῇ ὑπὲρ τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ”.
owed his Word and proved their friendship by dying for him. On his part, he prayed to his Father “that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them...that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me...”\(^98\)

The French psychoanalyst André Green has traced the formation of the superego, the psychic core of religion, to the idealization and introjection of the dead father. But, also from the first stages of psychic development, the ego creates an ideal image of itself and internalizes the lost erotic object to protect itself from the humiliation of dependency and the pain of separation. The chimera of self-sufficiency is often expressed as a wish for self-engenderment and for a unification accomplished in a neuter, desexualized bisexuality.\(^99\) To the dream of Narcissus which became real in the last stage of conversion to a philosophical or religious truth we now turn.

**The Dream of Narcissus**

Narcissus was in love with a transcendent object: for the form he saw he could not reach. Yet it appeared to him that the figure he saw in the water responded to his love: when he stretched out his hands towards him, the handsome youth did the same, when he leaned forward to kiss him, the watery shadow lifted up his face and strove to reach him. Narcissus distressed realized that the only way to attain perfect union with his mirror-image would be to separate himself from his body even if that would mean the death both of himself and of the form he longed for.\(^100\)


\(^99\) Green, *Narcissisme de Vie*, pp. 218, 213, 214, 116, 38-39. According to Green, loss of the mother’s breast inaugurates the auto-erotic state, which gives to the child a self-image of wholeness, such as Lacan has described in his famous article on the mirror-stage: p. 134.

To attain the perfect unity Narcissus separated himself from his body. Similarly Maximilla’s renunciation of all contact with her husband inaugurated her reversion (epistrophe) to primordial unity.

One day Maximilla fled from Aegeates and went to Andrew to recount to him her heroic resistance against the sexual claims of her husband. When the apostle heard of her troubles he praised her resolve saying:

Rightly I see in you Eve becoming aware and in me Adam reverting to himself (epistrephonta). Since what she suffered because of not knowing, you now, soul to which I’m referring, rectify it by reverting to yourself ... Having recollected and recovered yourself in your [true] condition, think that in what you excel. And since you have seen your face in your essence, breaking all the fetters, desire now to see that one who has not yet been seen by you ... Just as Adam died in Eve, having agreed on her concession, so I also now live in you, since you are transporting yourself to that which is coherent with your essence.101

As Gerard Luttikhuizen has observed, Maximilla’s conversion amounted to a “return to the asexual unity and completeness of the pre-Paradisiac Adam.”102 Because she had resolved to lead her life according to the “inner man” she was judged worthy of accomplishing the internalization of her beloved apostle, who was about to be martyred. This amounted to her transformation to the new Adam and the new Eve, the bisexual spiritual being who as such could now devote itself to the contemplation of God.

Narcissus dreamt of a perfectly reciprocal love. And on account of this, he drowned himself in his image. Similarly, if God was the intellect and especially an “intellect in love” (nous eron), the discovery of one’s true, intellectual nature led to the establishment of a mutual erotic relationship between God and the person who contemplated him; but a perfect reciprocity between

---

101 Acta Andreae, 37.20–24; 38.14, 16; 39.2–5. I rely on the translation of Lautaro Lanzillotta, pp. 117, 121. I have only translated epistrephonta as “revert” instead of “turning back.” Both translations are valid.

them would be realized only in the hereafter. As Andrew told his disciples: When we reach the other world we shall tell God “we have brought you your gift” and he will reply “I will give you myself. All that I am, I give also to my own.”

In the fourth century the Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nazianzus praised his sister Gorgonia in terms that remind us of Andrew’s encomium of Maximilla: In the funeral oration he delivered in her honour he stated: “Nobody of those who are passionately and unrestrainedly enamoured of a body loves like her to be in all purity with the good, having rejected these fetters and transcended the mud in which we live, and receives her beloved, all of him—I would add her lover too—whose rays now only faintly illuminate us.” Gregory himself had often expressed his regret for not having been able to depart from this life to meet the one whom he loved, the one who had detained him with sweet fetters, the one who had shaken his mind, instilling in him a fierce longing for his beauty. Christ was “the one who desires when he is desired and sees when he is seen and comes to meet the one who comes near him.”

In the Platonic tradition possession by the god was described as a kind of death, as a narcissistic experience that permitted one to love oneself as divine and see oneself loved by the god. In the formulation of Plotinus the one who is possessed by the god “presents himself to his own mind and looks at a beautified image of himself; but then he dismisses the image, beautiful though it is, and comes to unity with himself; is one and all together with that god, and is with him as much as he wants to be and can be.” He becomes “an object of vision to another who contemplates him shining out with

103 Acta Andreae, p. 12.
thoughts of the kind which come from that world.” When the soul is filled with god, it “generates beauty, and generates righteousness, and generates virtue.”

Religious conversion fulfilled the deepest yearnings of Narcissus, for it involved the love of a transcendent object in a reciprocal way and the attainment of a perfect union with oneself. Negating the possibility of losing his erotic object and, more, importantly of losing love itself, the convert transfigured mourning in love and either joined the loved object in death or kept it eternally in his possession as the “inner man,” “the bridegroom within.” The fruit of this metamorphosis was the “new human,” who was neither male nor female; having superseded their corporeal dimension mortals turned into an intellect that did not tire giving birth to virtues.

**Conclusions**

The association of *eros* with absence, beauty and recollection was first made in the poetry of Sappho. If in Plato’s *Phaedo* the sketch of a lyre suffices to recall the absent beloved, in Sappho’s poetry the “rosy-fingered moon” evokes the Lydian woman “roaming about far and wide,” while the reminiscence of the “lovely walk” of Anactoria brings her close to the lovesick poetess. Most important for the Greek philosophical tradition was the connection Sappho made in fragment 16 between *eros* and impersonal cultural and artistic ideals. In the famous priamel that opens the poem it is written: “Some

---


say that the most beautiful thing upon the black earth is an army of horse-
men; others, of infantry, still others, of ships; but I say it is whatever one
loves.” Beautiful could be what was celebrated in epic poetry, what was
extolled in the public sphere, Helen of Troy or Anactoria. Beautiful could be a
face, but also an object. Reversing Sappho’s order of preference, Plato elevat-
ed the most desirable and beautiful erotic object to an impersonal entity,
identified with the Good, the One, God, with something “beyond being”
which could be defined only negatively. As Diotima warns Socrates in the
Symposium: The initiate will not find the beautiful presented to him “in the
guise of a face or of hands nor as a particular description or piece of
knowledge … while all things partake of it, it is affected by nothing.” In
Jean-Louis Chrétien’s succinct formulation in Plato “initiation in the erotic art
amounts to an initiation in the neuter.”

In Plato the ladder of erotic, epistemological ascent began with the partic-
ulars of the sensible world and ended in the highest abstraction of the intelli-
gible realm. In late antiquity however, eros became almost totally independ-
ent of any object of perception for it was thought to be tantamount to anam-
nesis. Owing to the centrality this doctrine acquired in Middle and Late Pla-
tonism, the role of visual stimuli in the genesis of desire was not just down-
played, but judged distractive to the soul’s effort to return to the transcen-
dental erotic object. In the Life of Thecla and the Acts of Andrew, the latter was
identified with Christ, with the Word. At the outset, Thecla fell in love with
the Word owing to the magical qualities of Paul’s sweet-sounding voice, his
rhetorical prowess and the appeal the sermon of continence had on her. In
the Acts of Andrew it was not just the encratite preaching of the apostle, but

108 For the reading of this fragment I rely on Helene P. Foley, “‘The Mother of the Argu-
ment’: Eros and the Body in Sappho and Plato’s Phaedrus,” in Parchments of Gender: Deci-
phering the Bodies of Antiquity, ed. Maria Wyke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998),
pp. 58–62, 55.

109 Plato, Symposium 211a–b.

the exercise of Socratic midwifery which brought about the conversion of his disciples to Christ. In both cases the apostles were mediating, demonic figures who attached the proselytes to their persons only to help them realize that the primary force of attraction was the Word itself. The imminent separation of the disciples from their teacher forced them to realize that the lost object was within them, as the one which was most valued by the departed apostle, namely, the “inner bridegroom.” The inner bridegroom, identified in his transcendental dimension with the ungraspable and the immaterial excited infinite desire, precisely on account of his formlessness. The union with him was understood as the reversion of “the intellect in love” to its source. This last intuitive moment in the process of conversion was described as a spiritual touch which elevated the inner word to the heights of its transcendental principle. As a result subject/object, inner/outer ceased to be differentiated and fused into oneness. At that moment of narcissistic bliss occurred the self-engenderment of the “new human,” of the soul which generates virtue.111

Conversion to a religious or philosophical truth was perceived as equal to an enslavement to an unknown force of heavenly origin, which rendered one free from worldly concerns. Like the temple-slaves who enjoyed special privileges because they were consecrated to god, those who were struck by love, defied the social conventions and neglected the worldly affairs. The erotic-magical enthralment of Thecla to the Word endowed her with a freedom unusual for her sex: from a passively obedient girl who did whatever was expected of her, she turned to a bold transgressor of all the rules of good conduct. Conversion turned a passive subject to an active lover of a transcendental erotic object. It was a turning-point in a person’s life as it presup-

111 It is significant that Gregory of Nyssa, in his commentary on Song of Songs, relates Thecla to the discovery of “the inner man” to the World living in her. See Gregory of Nyssa, Hom. 14.5.13 in Gregorii Nysseni Opera VI, 405. After I had finished my article I came across Barbara Diane Lipsett’s study on Hermas, Thecla and Aseneth, Desiring Conversion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). I think that the author, in her otherwise interesting study, downplays the erotic elements of conversion in the Life of Thecla. See her comments in pp. 82–83.
posed one’s exposure to a desire for something strange and unknown. It was a coup de foudre which overturned every certainty and violently uprooted one from one’s established way of life.

Hannah Arendt has defined freedom as the capability of making a new beginning. Conversion bestowed on the proselyte the freedom to create his/her self ex nihilo. But that freedom was nothing but the other facet of his/her bondage to a transcendental desire. Possibly our inability in the present era to experience freedom as the possibility to make a new beginning is related to our erotic impotence to discover the transcendental force which will bind us to its word. Hence conformity rules in every domain in a loveless, disenchanted world.

Bibliography
Antisthenes: Antisthenis fragmenta. Edited by Fernanda Decleva Caizzi (Milan: Instituto Editoriale Cisalpino, 1966)
Beierwaltes, Werner: Proklos: Grundzüge seiner Metaphysik (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1965)

Antigone Samellas: Conversion as an Erotic Experience

Carson, Anne: *Eros the Bittersweet* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998)
Damascius: *Commentaire sur le Philèbe de Platon*. Edited and translated by G. van Riel (Paris: Budé, 2008)
Didymus the Blind: *Comm. in Eccl. 3, 13* (VI cent. papyrus). In *Corpus dei Papiri Filosofici Greci e Latini* 1,3 b (Firenze: Olschki Editore, 1999)


Gigon, Olof: Sokrates: Sein Bild in Dichtung und Geschichte (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1947, repr. 1979)


Green, André: Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983, repr. 2007)


Gregory of Nazianzus: Patrologia Graeca 37 (Paris: Migne 1862)


Johnson, Scott Fitzgerald: The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006)


Laplace, Marcelle: *Le Roman d’Achille Tatios* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007)
Lévystone, David: “La Figure d’Ulysse chez les Socratiques: Socrate *polutropos*.” *Phronesis* 50 (2005), pp. 181–214
Luce, J. V.: “Cleopatra as *Fatale Monstrum* (Horace, Carm. 1. 37. 21).” *Classical Quarterly* 13 (1963), pp. 251–257
Philostratus: *Lives of the Sophists*. Translated by Wilmer Cave Wright (Cambridge, MA: Loeb 1921)
Antigone Samellas: Conversion as an Erotic Experience


Plutarch: *Amatorius/Dialog über die Liebe*. Edited and translated with essays by Herwig Görgemanns et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006)


Sedley, David: “Three Platonist Interpretations of the Theaetetus.” In Form and Argument in Late Plato. Edited by Christopher Gill and Mary M. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 79–103


Antigone Samellas: Conversion as an Erotic Experience

Winsor, Ann Roberts: *A King is Bound in the Tresses. Allusions to the Song of Songs in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999)
