

Synesius Concerning Dreams

De Insomniis

Translated by Augustine Fitzgerald

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Preface

It is an old tradition, I think, and quite in the manner of Plato, to conceal the profound thoughts of philosophy behind the mask of some lighter treatment, that thereby whatsoever has been acquired with difficulty shall not be again lost to men, nor shall such matters be contaminated by lying exposed to the approach of the profane. The end accordingly has been most zealously pursued in the present work, and whether it attains this end, and whether in other respects it is wrought with distinction after the manner of the ancients, let those decide who shall approach it in a spirit of loving labour.

De Insomniis

1. If dreams are prophets, and if the visions seen in dreams are riddles of their future fortunes to anxious men, they would in that case be full of wisdom, though certainly not clear. In sooth their lack of clearness is their wisdom.

“For the gods keep man’s life concealed.”¹

To obtain the greatest things without labour is a divine prerogative, whereas for men, not merely “in front of virtue”² but of all fair things,

“The gods have set sweat.”³

Now divination must be the greatest of all good things, for it is in knowledge and, in a word, in the cognitional part of his faculties that God differs from man, as does man from the brute. But whereas the nature of God is sufficient unto Himself for knowledge, man through divination attains to much more than belongs to our human nature. For the mass of mankind can know only the present. Concerning that which has never been, it can only guess; and Calchas was the only one in the whole Greek assembly who understood

“The things which are, the things which shall be, and the things which have been.”⁴

¹ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 42

² [Cf.

Τὴν μὲν γὰρ κακότητα καὶ ἰλαδὸν ἐστὶν εὐλόγηται
Ρηιδίως. λείη μὲν ὁδὸς, μάλα δ’ ἐγγύθι ναιεῖ.
Τῆς δ’ ἀρετῆς ἰδρώτα θεοὶ προπάρουθεν ἔθηκον
Ἄθανάτοι. μακρὸς δὲ καὶ ὀρθίος ὄμιος ἐπὶ αὐτῆν,
καὶ τρηχὺς τὸ πρῶτον. ἐπὶ δ’ εἰς ἄκρον ἰκνῆται
Ρηιδίη δ’ ἠπειτα πέλει, χαλεπή περ ἔουσα.

— Oper. & Dier. Bk. i. vs. 285-90

I.e., For abundant wickedness is easy to prefer; the road of plunder lies close by. But the immortal gods placed sweat in front of virtue. And it is a long uphill path to virtue, and rough at first. Later, as you approach the peak, you will then move easily, no matter how difficult it is. — ED. PHIL.]

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Iliad* i, 70



And according to Homer, the affairs of the gods are dependent on the judgement of Zeus, for this reason, that

“he came into being before them and has the more knowledge,”⁵

by the very fact, I suppose, that he is older. For I think that the reference to age in these verses point to the conclusions that to know more comes through time, and knowledge was, it seems, the most precious thing. But if any one is persuaded on the authority of the other passages that the rule of Zeus rests in the strong hand, as in the text

“he was superior in force,”⁶

that man’s acquaintance with poetry is that of the vulgar, and he has never heard of the philosophy therein, which affirms that the gods are nothing else but minds. It is in this sense that to the words “he was superior in prowess,” he has fastened the words “he is more ancient in days,” meaning that Zeus is an elder-born intelligence; for what else is strength of mind but intelligent thought? Whosoever, being a god, is deemed worthy to rule over the gods, rules in that he is mind by the superior force of wisdom. Therefore the phrase,

“he was superior in force,”

comes back to the same thing for us as

“he has greater knowledge,”

and means this. For this reason also is the wise man akin to God, because he strives to approach Him in knowledge, and occupies himself with thought, in the which the divine essence has its being.

2. Let the foregoing be proof that divinations are amongst the best vocations of man; and if all things are signs appearing through all things, inasmuch as they are brothers in a single living creature, the cosmos, so also they are written in characters of every kind, just as those in a book some are Phoenician, some Egyptian, and others Assyrian.

The scholar reads these, and he is a scholar who learns by his natural bent. One reads some of them and another reads others, one reads more and another less. In the same way one reads them by syllables, another reads the complete phrase, another the whole story. In like manner do the learned see the future, some understanding stars, and of these, one the fixed stars, another those flames which shoot across the sky. Again, there are those who read it from the entrails, and from the cries of birds, and from their perches and flights. To others also what are termed omens are manifest, written indications these of things to be, and again voices and encounters otherwise intended, for all things have their significance for every one. In the same way, if birds had had wisdom, they would have compiled an art of divining the future from men, just as we have from them; for we are to them, just as they are to us, alike young and old, very old and very fortunate. In must needs be, I think, the

⁵ *Ibid.* xiii, 355

⁶ *Odyssey* xviii, 234



parts of this great whole, since it all shares one feeling and one breath, belong to each other. They are, in fact, limbs of one entire body, and may not the spells of the magicians be even such as these? Obviously, for charms are cast from one part of it to another, as signals are given, and he is a sage who understands the relationship of the parts of the universe. One thing he attracts to himself through the agency of another thing, for he has present with him pledges of things which are for the most part far away, to wit, voices, substances, figures. And as when the bowel is in pain, another part suffers also with it, so a pain in the finger settles in the groin,⁷ although there be many organs between these parts which feel nothing.

This is because they are both portions of one living organism, and there is that which binds them one to the other more than to other things. Even to some god, of those who dwell within the universe, a stone from hence and a herb is a befitting offering; for in sympathizing with these he is yielding to nature and is bewitched. Thus the harp-player who has sounded the highest note does not sound the sesquioctavus⁸ next, but rather strikes the epitrite and the nete, a heritage to-day from a more ancient state of harmony. But there is in the cosmos, even as in human relationship, a certain discord also; for the universe is not one homogeneous thing but a unity formed of many. There are parts of it which agree and yet battle with other parts, and the struggle of these only contributes to a harmonious unity of the whole, just as the lyre is a system of responsive and harmonious notes.⁹ The unity resulting from the opposites is the harmony of both the lyre and the cosmos. Archimedes the Sicilian asked for a point of support outside of the earth wherefrom he might prop himself against the whole earth, for he said that as long as he was himself upon the earth he had no power over it. But the man, how so great his knowledge of the nature of the universe may be, once placed outside of it, could no longer make any use of his wisdom. He uses the universe against itself; accordingly his touch with it once lost, he will watch it in vain, and the lifeless symbols only would then be recorded. And small wonder, for whatever of the divine elements is outside the cosmos can in no wise be moved by sorcery.

“He sits apart and careth not
Nor taketh any thought thereof.”¹⁰

It is the nature of pure reason not to be deflected; it is only the emotional element which may be cajoled. Wherefore the multitude of things in the universe and their relationship furnish the bulk of the subject-matter in the initiations and prophecies. There is a multitude of the discordant elements, but a relationship is the unity of things existing. Now, as to initiations, let not our law-abiding discourse noise them abroad; there is no offence, however, in explaining divination.

⁷ Plato, *Republic* 462c

⁸ [Containing $\frac{9}{8}$ of a thing. — ED. PHIL.]

⁹ Plato, *Timaeus* 36a, b

¹⁰ *Iliad* xv, 106



3. The whole of this art has already been praised as much as is possible, but now it is time to appropriate the best part that is in it, and to linger over its speculative side. We must regard a characteristic of obscurity as common to all its forms, nor must we consider as disproof any one of them what is observed in the whole cycle of nature. Our words attempted to show that this element of obscurity is sacred, just as in the initiations the unutterable is sacred. In like manner oracles are uttered as not to be intelligible to all men, and for this was the oracle at Pytho called Loxias (the ambiguous). Thus, when the god gave out that a wooden wall¹¹ would be the salvation of the Athenians, the people meeting in assembly would have heard the oracle in vain, had not Themistocles read its meaning.¹² Not for this reason, therefore, should divination by dreams be dismissed, for it shares obscurity with oracles as with other phenomena. We ought to seek this branch of knowledge before all else; for it comes from us, is within us, and is the special possession of the soul of each one of us. "Mind holds the shape of things that be," says the ancient philosophy, and we might add that those which come into being also have a soul, since mind is to soul as real being is to becoming. No, taking the first term with the third, and the second with the fourth, and stating them in this inverse order, we shall no less arrive at the truth, following the definitions of science.

In this way that what we postulated will be demonstrated, namely that the soul holds the forms of things that come into being. It holds, indeed, all, but it produces only what is befitting, and it reflects as in a mirror the image, by means of which the living beings grasps those things that remain there. Therefore, as we do not understand the activities of the mind before the controlling force has announced them to the multitude, and whatever has not come to that controlling force is hidden from the living being; so then we shall not have a perception even of the forms in the first soul, before the impress of them comes to the imagination. And this very imagination seems to be a sort of life in itself, a little lower down in the scale, and having its basis in a peculiar property of nature. It has even its own sense-perceptions, for we see colours and we hear sounds, and we have an overpowering sense of touch, at times when the organic parts of the body are at rest. Perhaps this form of the sense-perception is the more hallowed. In this way we constantly enter into relationship with gods who give us counsel and answer us in oracles, and take care of us in other ways. So then, if any one, in his dreams, receives the present of a treasure, I shall not be at all surprised; or if a man quite uncultured should fall asleep and, meeting the Muses in his dream and exchanging question and answer with them, should become a cunning bard. This has happened in our own time and does not seem to me very astounding. I pass over the plots I have been revealed, and the number of people whom the dream in the guise of a physician has cured of illness. But whenever a dream open up to the soul a path conducting it to the most perfect points from which to view existing things, a soul that has never yet aspired, nor has given its mind to

¹¹ Herodotus, vii, 141, 143

¹² [Cf. "The oracle at Delphi had told the Athenians that 'the divine Salamis would make women childless,' — yet, 'when all was lost, a wooden wall should still shelter the Athenians.' Themistocles told his countrymen that these words clearly indicated a fleet and a naval victory as the only means of safety." William Smith's *A Smaller History of Greece*, Pt. 2, 5 @ <http://www.fullbooks.com/A-Smaller-History-of-Greece.html> — ED. PHIL.]



the assent,¹³ it would be indeed the climax of the occult force in existing things that this dream should override nature and unite to the realm of the mind the man who has wandered so far from it that he knows not whence he has come.

And if any one deems the way upward a great undertaking, but disbelieves in the imagination, for that even by its means the happy union may ne'er be gained, let him listen to the sacred oracles which tell of the diverging paths, after hearing, of course, the whole list of the available resources for the ascent, in virtue of which it is possible to make the seed within us grow:

“To some,”

it is written,

“he gave the revelation of the light to be a lesson,
Others even in their dreams, He made fruitful with His courage.”

Do you see? He makes a distinction between the happy possession of knowledge and its acquirement. One man learns, he means, while awake, another while asleep. But in the waking state man is the teacher, whereas it is God who makes the dreamer fruitful with His own courage, so that learning and attaining are one and the same. Now to make fruitful is even more than to teach.

4. Let this be taken as presenting the worthiness of the imaginative life, even in small matters, as against those who despair of it. It is not to be wondered at that they understand it in this way, owing to the exceptional nature of their knowledge, since they adhere to what has been abjured by the oracles, for the oracle says,

“I reckon not of sacrifices or of entails,
These be all baubles,”

and exhorts us to flee from them. But these men, as though they were above the common herd, attempt to practice arts whose province relates to the future, some taking up one, some another; they despise dreams as being too obvious, and as matters in which it honours come equally to the ignorant and to the wise. But is not a man wise, precisely because he gains a greater share out of a possession common to all? Surely the other good things, nay, even the greatest are set before us as the most open to all. Amongst things visible there is nothing more august in splendour than the sun, and at the same time nothing more universal. And if to look upon a god with one's own eye is a happy thing, the approach to Him by the imagination comes of a gaze more magnificent still. For this is the perception of perceptions, inasmuch as the imaginative *pneuma* is the most widely shared organ of sensation, and the first body of the soul. There it lurks in its fastness, and directs the government of the living being as from a citadel, for about it nature has constructed all the functions of the brain. Hearing and sight are not senses, but only subservient organs of the common sense-perception, like doorkeepers of the living being who announce to their mistress the things perceived outside, and from which things these external organs of sense receive knocks at the door. And this is the perfect sense-perception in all its parts, for it hears and sees with its whole *pneuma* and has power over all the remain-

¹³ Plato, *Republic* 517b



ing senses. It divides its powers, assigning one to one place and another to another. These powers stretch out from the living being, each one separately, and, like straight lines radiating from a centre, return to meet in the centre again, all of them one in their common root though many in their outgoings. Most animals in character, therefore, is perception through the organs projected without, nor is it sense-perception at all before it comes in contact with the chief perception (*i.e.*, imagination). But the more divine which cleaves to the soul is the direct perception.

Now if we hold our bodily senses in esteem by reason of our understanding, and because we know best what we have actually seen, and spurn imagination as more faithless than sense-perception, we seem to resemble those who forget that even the eye does not reveal all things truthfully. One eye reveals nothing, and another falsifies, both in a way contrary to the nature of the things seen, and because of the medium through which they are seen. For according to the distance of the observer, objects seem greater or less. Those under the water appear larger, and an oar blade once immersed strikes the eye as broken. And the eye, through its own lack of power produces this effect, for when bleared it represents everything in confusion and indistinctness, nor may a man who is diseased in his imaginative *pneuma* expect to have clear or well-defined images. What his disease is, by what things the imagination becomes bleared and dulled, and by what things it is purged and purified, so as to return to its natural condition, all this you must learn of the cryptic philosophy, through which the imagination becomes inspired when once purified by the initiations.

The extraneous bodies which have entered in, must make their way out again before the god brings in the imagination. Whoever keeps this purified by a life in accordance with nature has an instrument ready to his hand, and one that is thus again common to all, for this *pneuma* comprehends our spiritual disposition and is, therefore, not without sympathy for it, like our oyster-shell which after all, is opposed to the better part of the soul's organization. But its first special vehicle becomes light and ethereal when the soul is exalted, whereas when that is debased, it becomes heavy and falls to the earth. Now this is, in a word, the borderland between unreason and reason, between the bodiless and the body, and is a boundary common to both, and through this the divine elements are brought into contact with those furthest removed from them. For this reason it is difficult for philosophy to apprehend its nature, for it borrows anything that is suitable to its purpose, taking it from either of the extremes, as it were from neighbours, and so images in one nature things that dwell far apart.

5. Nature has poured the richness of the imaginative essence into many parts of existing things; it descends even to the animals which have as yet no understanding, and is no longer the vehicle of the more divine soul, but itself rests upon the forces beneath, being itself the reason of the animal; and many things this creature thinks and does befittingly through its agency. Thus a cleansing takes place even in creatures without reason, with the result that a better force enters in. Whole races of demons also have their existence in such a life as this. For whereas these throughout all their being are phantasmic, making their appearance as images in things that are coming into being, in the case of man most things come by imagination and that



alone, though in truth a good many in company with another, for we do not form thought-concepts without imagination, unless it so be that some man in a rare moment of time grasps even an immaterial form.

To go beyond the imaginative would be no less difficult than happy to achieve.

“For,”

the master¹⁴ says,

“happy the man to whom understanding and prudence come even in old age,”

speaking of prudence bereft of imagination. But the life in question (*i.e.* dream life) is founded on imagination or on that intellect which makes use of imagination. This envelope of soul-matter which the happy have called the enveloping soul, is in turn god, demon of every sort, and phantom, and in it the soul pays its penalties, for the oracles are agreed about this, to wit, the similarity of the soul’s way of life in another world to the imaginings of the dream condition; and philosophy concludes that our first lives are but the preparation for second lives, and that the best conduct in the case of souls lightens it (*i.e.* the *pneuma*), whereas the worst imparts a stain to them. Through the attractive forces of nature, therefore, the soul is drawn upwards by reason of its own warmth and dryness. This is the winged flight of the soul, and we shall find that the expression of Heraclitus, “The wise soul is dry,” signifies naught else than this. On the other hand, when it becomes thick and moist, it sinks into the hollows of the earth by its downward momentum, lurks in holes, and is finally pushed into the regions below the earth for this spot is the most suitable to the spirits clogged with moisture, and there the life is ill-starred and full of vengeance. But it is possible through labour and time and other lives that it may become purified and rise to the surface, for becoming a thing of dual nature, it runs in a double channel of life and partly consorts with the worst, partly with the better. Now descending from the spheres, the first soul takes a lease of this other one, embarking in it as in a boat, and so associates with the world of body.

It enters upon this struggle, either to conduct that soul above with it, or at least not to remain with it below. Difficult indeed is this, and possibly it may leave the other behind, as incapable of accompanying it, a thing scarcely permitted us to believe in view of the revealed mysteries, for the ascent would be shameful for souls who do not return property their own, but leave upon earth that they have borrowed from above. And this might happen to one or two people as a gift of initiation and of God’s grace, but it is in the course of nature that the soul which has one become engrafted thereon, either band to the oar with the other or draws it away, or is drawn away by it, but in any case remains with it until the soul’s ascent to the regions whence it came; or weighed down by reason of its evil, it drags below with it the soul which has already permitted it to grow too heavy. And it is this with which the oracles menace the seed of mind within us saying,

“Bend thou not down far below to the world mid obscurity gleaming,
Always spread out are its depths, a treacherous region where Hades
Lurks in the gloom and delighteth in phantoms, never in reason.”

¹⁴ Cf. Plato, *Philebus* 21d-e



How can a life unstable and unintelligent be a thing of beauty to the mind? To the phantom, indeed, because of the nature of its *pneuma* at that moment, the region below is befitting; for like rejoices in like. But if one comes into existence from the conjunction of both, the mind also would be swamped with sensual pleasures. Yet it would be the very last of evils, not even to perceive an evil that is present; for this is the way of those who seek not to rise above evil. And just as a hardened tumour, by reason of its no more paining us, fails to remind us to cure ourselves, so repentance is an uplifting force. A man finding his situation intolerable, plans flight, and the will is the most important part of purification; for thus his words and deeds alike stretch out hands towards the goal. But when will is lacking, every purificatory initiation is lifeless, severed as it is from the greatest covenant. And for this reason here and there, the minglings (of good and evil) furnish the greatest and the best service to the order of the universe, when, for a change, they bring grief to man and so purify his soul from frivolous enjoyment. Even things unjustly called misfortunes contribute greatly in loosening the hold that we keep on the lower elements. The first providence is revealed to those who have intellect by the same principles which cause distrust in it to those who lack intellect. Nor is it possible that the soul should ever be turned away from matter, if it does not fall foul of any misfortune in this world.

Therefore we must suppose that the much talked-of-good fortunes are an invention of the lords of the underworld for the ambush of souls. Consequently, what Lethaeon potion there may be to the souls that have departed this life, let another tell us, but to a soul entering life such a potion is certainly offered in that which is sweet and cloying here on earth. For, descending into the first life voluntarily as a maid of service, this soul, instead of serving, becomes enslaved. Its mission was to fulfil a service to the constitution of the universe, for the laws of Adrastea impost this upon it; but, bewitched by the gifts of matter, it undergoes an experience very like that of free men who have entered into a contract of service for an agreed-upon period, but who, captivated by the beauty of some handmaiden, desire to remain in their employment at the price of slavery to the master of the beloved. We too, when at any time from the depths of our hearts we take delight in what is of the body and lies at its portals, deeming it good, seem to confess to the nature of the matter, that it is fair. Now matter receives our assent as a secret contract, and even if we plan to depart as free men, affirms that we are fugitive slaves. She tries to bring us back and arrests us as runaways, reading over to us the while our contract. Then, indeed, have we most of all need of strength and the help of God for our souls, for it entails no light struggle to take exception to, and perchance to violate, one's own contract. Then, indeed, are the penalties of matter stirred up even beyond that which was predestined against those who have rebelled against her laws. This is really the meaning of the so-called labours which sacred legends tell us that Heracles endured, and in general any other man who has attempted to gain his freedom by force, until the day when they have transported the spirit to the realm to which the hands of nature cannot attain.

But if the leap ends within the confines of matter, there is a fall, and more severe contests become necessary, for matter then treats souls mercilessly as aliens, and even if they renounce the upward path, she exacts punishment for the attempt itself, and keeps pouring out lives, but no longer from both those jars which Homer darkly shadows forth as being two portions of matter. According to that passage of his



poem, Zeus is the god ruling over matter, and the dispenser of the ambiguity of destiny, and the good that comes from his has never been unmixed, though ere now it has happened to a man to partake of the more evil portion unalloyed. No, all lives go in an erring course, one which has not risen after the first fall. But observe in how great an interval of space this *pneuma* dwells. The argument said that, when the soul fell below, it was weighed down and sank until it encountered the murky darkly-gleaming spot, but that when the soul rises the *pneuma* accompanies it as far as it is able; and it is able to follow until it has come to the farthest opposite point. Listen to the oracles as they speak of this also:

“Refuse it will not consign to the chasm abysmal of matter;
Leave but a part in the clear-shining space given o’er to the image.”

This place is the opposite of the one encircled in gloom. And yet one might be more sharp-sighted in this case. It does not seem to bring up to the spheres the nature that has come from thence unaccompanied, but to bring with it what it snatched from the extremes of fire and air, when it come down to its phantom condition here below, before donning its earthly shell, and this, according to the oracle, it conducts above together with the strongest part, for the divine body could not be the off-scourings of matter. It would be logical that those things which have a common nature and are contributory to one end should not be altogether ungovernable, particularly when their domains are those of neighbours, just as fire is next to the surrounding body, and is not, like earth, the farthest from it all.

But if the better elements yield place to the worse and rejoice in community with them, and if an uncontaminated body has been contributory to the slime, as if appropriated by the element to the stronger of the conjunction of the two, possibly the inferior ones also, not struggling against the soul’s energy, but docile and reasonable, meeting it themselves half-way, and keeping the medial nature undistracted, would, under the leadership of the first nature, become etherealized, and then would be borne aloft with it so as to traverse, if not the whole of the way, at least the summit of the elements, and so taste of the world of light. “For it has a certain portion in it,” the oracles say:

in a word, it takes its place in some one division of the orb of the world.

6. Let what has been said suffice concerning the destiny which the elements play. It is open to you to believe it or to disbelieve. But as to the corporeal essence which has come from thence, there is nothing to prevent it, when the soul ascends according to the law of nature, from rising out of its fallen state, from ascending with it and becoming linked with the spheres, that is to say, being carried up as if to its own natural state of being. There are, then, these two extreme lots, the one encircled by the darkness and the other encircled by the light, which occupy the limits of good and evil fortune. But in the hollow gulf of the universe how many intermediate places do you think there are, partly obscure and partly luminous, in all of which the soul has its habitation, together with this spirit envelope (*pneuma*), changing with its ideas and morals and life? When it hastens aloft to its native nobility, it is a store-house of truth, for it is pure, brightly shining, and unmixed, being a goddess and, if it so desires, a prophetess; but when it falls, it becomes befogged, it lacks definiteness, it



speaks falsely, for then the misty element of the spirit envelope (*pneuma*) does not comprise the vitality of existing things.

And being in a medial position it would miss some truth although it might reach others. You might thus discern to what rank the demoniac nature belongs. To state the truth either entirely or almost entirely, it is divine, or near to the divine. Error in predictions of the future is a never-ending experience; passion and ambition belong to those who wallow in matter. It is in this way that the new-boiled wine puts on the guise both of a god and a superior demon and leaps in and takes possession of the country reserved for the greater nature. Now since man has a soul, we might from that source discover what his position may be. Of a man's imaginative *pneuma* is pure and well-defined, and whether he is waking or sleeping receives true impressions of things, it promises him a better lot, so far as the soul's formation is concerned. Then again it is not least by the visions which it emits and around which it lives, when undisturbed by another outside force, that we investigate what is the state of the spiritual *pneuma*, and philosophy, the while, furnishes us with tests to this end, so that we must of necessity cherish it and together see it to that we do not at any time wander. Now the best nurture for us is that we should become active by the for of application, anticipating the onsets of weird and headlong visions, and that the emanation of life should be, as far as possible, once for all intellectual: for this is to be turned towards the best and delivered from the worst, and to hold intercourse with (material) things only as necessity entails. Intellectual application is the most incisive weapon against those things which combine to injure the *pneuma*, for this mysteriously refines it and raises it towards God; and when it has become adapted to it, draws the divine spirit-envelope (*pneuma*) by its kindred nature to association with the soul. In like manner, whenever it becomes compressed by reason of its density and grows too small to fill the places assigned to it by the providence which has moulded man, to wit, the cavities of the brain; then since nature abhors a vacuum in existing things, an evil spirit-envelope (*pneuma*) enters in; and what suffering for the soul with such an ill-omened guest at its board!

For as to those places which have come to exist for this very purpose of belonging to the *pneuma*, it is their nature to be occupied by a worse or by a better one. In the one case there is a penalty for the godless who have defiled the divine part in them, in the other there is the goal of piety or whatsoever is near to that goal.

7. We, therefore, have set ourselves to speak of divination through dreams, that men should not despise it, but rather cultivate it, seeing that it fulfils a service to life; and it is to this end that we have so much occupied ourselves with the imaginative nature. The immediate need for it here below has been perhaps clearly shown by our discourse, but a better fruit of a sane spirit is the uplifting of the soul, a really sacred gain; so that it becomes a sort of cult of piety to endeavour that this form of divination should be ours. Nay, some men already through some such motive, enticed by their passion for knowledge of the future, have had set before them, instead of a groaning board a sacred and modest one, and have hailed the joys of a couch pure and undefiled. For as to the man who would consult his bed as he does the tripod of the Pythian deity, far be it from him to make the night spent in it witnesses of unbridled passion. Rather does he bow before God and pray to Him. What is collected little



by little becomes much in the end, and that which happens through quite another cause terminates in a greater one. Thus those who did not set out at first with this object have come, in their advance, to love God and one day to be united to Him. We must not therefore disregard a prophetic art which journeys to divine things, and has, dependent on it, the most precious of all things which are in the power of man. Nor indeed has the soul that is united with God less need here because of the fact that it has been deemed worthy to handle better things. Nor is it heedless of the animal in us.

Nay, from its vantage ground it has a steady and much more distinct view of things below than when it is with them and is mingled with the inferior elements. Remaining unmoved, it will give to the animal in us the appearance of things that come into existence. This is, according to the proverb, “to descend without descending,” where the better takes unchallenged mastery of the worse. This art of divination I resolve to possess for myself and to bequeath to my children. In order to enter upon this no man need pack up for a long journey or voyage beyond the frontiers, as to Pytho or to Hammon. It is enough to wash one’s hands, to keep a holy silence, and to sleep.

“Then did she make all ablutions and dressing in purified raiment
Prayed she long time to Athene . . . ”¹⁵

8. We shall pray for a dream, even as Homer, perchance, prayed. And if you are worthy, the god far away is present with you. Nay, even what time the god sets little store on these matters, he comes to your side if only you are asleep; and this is the whole system of the initiation. In it no one has ever yet lamented his poverty, on the grand that thus he had less possession than the rich. On the other hand, some of the ceremonies which deal with foreknowledge choose their priests from the most heavily assessed as the Athenians choose their trierarchs. And great expense there must needs be, and, no less, happy opportunity, if we are to obtain a Cretan herb, an Egyptian feather, an Iberian bone, and, by Zeus, some prodigy begotten and nourished in a hidden corner of earth and sea,

“Where that the sun god sinks ’neath the earth and where he arises.”¹⁶

For surely this and much like it is said of those who practice external divination, and what ordinary person would be right enough for this out of his own resources? But the dream is visible to the man who is worth five hundred *medimni*, and equally to the possessor of three hundred, to the teamster no less than to the peasant who tills the boundary land for a livelihood, to the galley slave and the common labourer alike, to the exempted and to the payer of taxes.

It makes no difference to the god whether a man is an *eteoboutades* or a newly-bought slave. And this accessibility to all makes divination very humane; for its simple and artless character is worthy of a philosopher, and its freedom from violence gives it sanctity. That it is present everywhere and does not employ water or rock or a chasm in the earth, is its most divine quality, and that through divination of this sort

¹⁵ *Odyssey* iv, 750, 752, (759, 761)

¹⁶ *Ibid.* i, 24



we do not become occupied with one matter only, or lose opportunities through it, this also is the first thing worthy to say of it. For surely no one every left any important matter he might have in hand, to go home to sleep, to meet a dream by appointment. Time, however, which the living being must spend of his nature, inasmuch as our being in the waking state is insufficient to the support of its energy, time, I say, has come to convey to men, as the proverb has it, "the by-work which is greater than the work," for it links the desirable with the inevitable and well-being with being itself. As to these forms of foreknowledge, on the other hand, which come to us through all manner of instruments, we must be content if, having occupied the greater part of life, they make some concession to its remaining needs and activities. If you were to give yourself up to any of these things, you would scarcely find divination of use to you for your purpose, for it is not every place or every season in which one can receive the equipment for the initiation, nor is there every facility for carrying about with you the necessary implements. To speak nothing else but those things which the prisons were lately congested, they are loads for a wagon or a ship's hold. Combined with this there were other elements in the initiation, namely registrars and witnesses. For this would be a more accurate statement, since our time has made many denunciations through those who serve the laws, by whom once betrayed, such initiations become matters for the gaze and the hearing of an unholy mob.

Thus, in addition to the baseness of stooping to such practices, it is, I am persuaded, a course hateful to the god. For not to await voluntarily any one's coming, but to set him moving by pressure and leverage, this is like the employment of force, a thing which even when it has happened among men, the legislator has not allowed to pass unpunished. In addition to all these points, difficult enough to those who seek after the future in this way, there is also the chance of interruption of their activity, and to those who go abroad, the abandonment of the art; for it is no small matter, when moving everywhere, to pack and convey the properties necessary for its practice.

Of divination by dreams, each one of us is perforce his own instrument, so much so that it is not possible to desert our oracle there even if we so desired. Nay, even if we remain at home, she dwells with us; if we go abroad she accompanies us; she is with us on the field of battle, she is at our side in the life of the city; she labours with us in the fields and barter with us in the market place. The laws of a malicious government do not forbid her, nor would they have the power to do so, even if they wished, for they have no proof against those who invoke her. For how then? Should we be violating the law by sleeping? A tyrant could never enjoin us not to gaze into dreams, at least not unless he actually banished sleep from his kingdom; and it would be the act of a fool to wish for that which is impossible of fulfilment, and of an impious man to make laws which should be contrary to nature and to God. To her then we must go, woman and man of us, young and old, poor and rich alike, the artisan and the orator. She repudiates neither race, nor age, nor condition, nor calling. She is present to every one, everywhere, this zealous prophetess, this wise counsellor, who holdeth her peace. She herself is alike initiator and initiated, to announce to us good tidings; in such wise as to prolong our pleasure by seizing joy beforehand; to inform against the worst so as to guard against and repel it beforehand.



For whatsoever things of use and of sweetness those hopes, which nourish the race of men, hold out to him, and as many things as fear controls, things ominous and withal gainful, all these things are found in dreams, nor by any other thing are we so enticed towards hope. And the element of hope is so abundant and so salutary in its nature, that, as acute thinkers maintain, men would not even be willing to continue life, if it were only to be such as they had at the beginning. For they would forswear life by reason of the terrible misfortunes abounding therein, had not Prometheus injected hopes into their nature, that drug of constancy, under the influence of which they esteem the anticipated to be more worthy of trust than that which is before their eyes. And these hopes have such force that he who is bound in fetters, whenever he permits the will of his heart to hope, is straightway unbound. He enters the army, straightway becomes a lieutenant, after a little, a captain. He then becomes a general, makes conquests, and sacrifices to the gods; his head crowned with garlands, he gives a banquet, a Sicilian or a Median, as he pleases; and in truth he is forgetful of his feet as long as he dreams of being a general.

Now all of this is the waking state of the dreamer, or the sleeping state of the awakened, for both are concentrated upon the same underlying state, to wit the imaginative nature, and whenever we wish to convert this into images, this one benefit is always at hand; good cheer anoints our life and, flattering our soul with illusive hopes, lifts it aloft from the perception of things ill to be borne. And when it spontaneously presents hope to us, as happens in our sleeping state, then we have in the promise of our dreams a pledge from the divinity. Thus any one who has prepared his mind to enjoy those greater things which the dream state held out to him, has twice profited, for the first thing he had delighted in the things beforehand, and that secondly he is in a position to use them wisely, when they have come his way, because of his previous examination of them, as things which befit his life.

Thus Pindar praised hope in song, when he said concerning a happy man that

“with him liveth sweet hope, the nurse of youth, the fosterer of his heart, hope who chiefly ruleth the changeful mind of man.”

One would say that no allusion is made here to the false hope which in a waking state we mould for ourselves, but all the words of Pindar in this passage are praises of only a small part of dreams. Now the divination of dreams which follows up the phenomenon with scientific methods gives us a stronger hope, and from this it seems not to belong to the slighter class. And so the Penelope of Homer assumes that there are two gates of dreams, and makes half of them deceptive dreams, only because she was not instructed in the matter. For if she had been versed in their science, she would have made them all pass out through the gate of horn. As it is, she has been represented guilty of ignorance about her very sight, for she distrusted it without reason.

“The geese are the wooers, and I that bird, the eagle,
I am Odysseus.”¹⁷

¹⁷ *Odyssey* xix, 548



He was under the same roof as she, and it was to him that she was babbling in the vision. I seem, therefore, to hear Homer say in such words as these, that it is not right to despair of dreams, and that we should not confuse the weakness of the interpreter with the nature of the visions themselves, nor is Agamemnon in the right when he brings a charge of deception against dreams, for he erroneously interprets the prophecy concerning the victory:

“Bade thee call them up to arms the flowing-haired, the Achaeans,
Summoning all their force: thou mayst capture the wide-wayed city.”¹⁸

He advances indeed to take the city without striking a blow, because he has misinterpreted the phrase, “with all their forces,” which means that he might take it, if he armed all the Greeks, even to the last man, whereas Achilles and the Myrmidon phalanx were out of the fighting, and they were the bravest of the army.

Let this suffice for my encomium on divination, and let us dismiss the subject.

9. Yet I have narrowly missed incurring a charge of ingratitude; for while I explained just now that it (*i.e.*, divination by dreams) is a good thing wherewith to journey or stay at home, to trade or command troops, and that it helps all men and all things, yet I have never made public what it has done for me personally. Certainly no other thing is so well calculated to join in man’s pursuit of wisdom; and many of the things which present difficulties to us awake, some of these it makes completely clear while we are asleep, and others it helps us to explain. And something of this sort happens. At one moment one seems like a man asking questions, at another the same man discovering in process of thought. It has frequently helped me to write books, for it has prepared the mind and made the diction appropriate to the thought. Here it cuts out something, there it brings in new matter instead. It has befallen me already to be admonished by it also in respect of the whole style of my language, when it runs riot and flames up with novel forms of diction, in emulation of the archaic Attic, which is foreign to us, and this by agency of a god who, at one moment tells me something, and again what something means, and at another show me how to smooth down the excrescences growing out of my language. Thus it has restored my diction to a state of sobriety, and has castigated my inflated style. Moreover when I am engaged in the chase, it has suggested to me stratagems of the hunter’s art against those wild beasts who show skill alike in running and hiding; and when in weariness I have been on the point of abandoning the quest, the dream has enjoined upon me a blockade of the quarry, and has promised me fortune on an appointed day, so that we have slept in the open more happily with confidence. And when the day appointed has come and fortune is with us at last, it has shown us swarms of netted game of wild beasts that have fallen to our spears.

My life has been one of books and of the chase, except what time I spent as an ambassador. Would that I had not been compelled to see three unspeakable years lost to my life! But even in them I derived the greatest profit from divination, and that on many occasions. For plots directed against me it made ineffective, plots of ghost-raising sorcerers. It exposed these to me, saved me from them all, and helped me in

¹⁸ *Iliad* ii, 11-12



the management of public office in the best interest of the cities, and it finally placed me, more undaunted than was ever any Greek, on terms of intimacy with the emperor.

One man may prefer one, another man another (system of divination), but dream divination is present to all, the good genius to every man, and one that contrives something for the minds of the awakened also. In this way is a soul a wise possession, that it is free from a whole flood of vulgar sensations which attract to it extraneous matter of every sort. Whatever ideas it has, and however many things it receives from the mind, all these, when left to itself, it makes over to those who are inclined towards that which is within, and it ferries across to them whatsoever comes from the godhead. For as it is itself of such a character, a cosmic god is also associated with it, from the fact that its nature comes from the same source.

10. Such categories of dreams, then, are more divine, and are either quite clear and obvious, or nearly so, and in no wise stand in need of the diviner's science. But they may come to the help only of such men as live according to virtue, whether that be acquired by wisdom or engrained by habit, and if at a given moment they should come to any other, it would be with difficulty, though they might so come.

It is not for some trifling purpose that a dream of this higher order will come to the chance recipient. Further, a frequent and a very widely shared class will be the enigmatic. To this the science of divination must be applied, for its genesis was, so to speak, strange and portentous, and as it has sprung from such sources, its development is most obscure. Now its character is as follows. From all that nature possesses, all things that are, that have come into being and that shall be (since this too is a phase of existence), from all these things, I say, images flow and rebound from their substance. For if each perceptible thing is form coupled with matter, and if we discover an escape of matter in the combination, reasoning shows that the nature of the images is also canalized, so that in both cases perceptible things renounce the dignity of real being. Now the imaginative *pneuma* is a powerful reflecting mirror of all the images that flow off in this way. For, wandering in vain and slipping from their base, on account of the indefiniteness of their nature, and because they are recognized by no being of real existence, whenever these fall in which psychical *pneumata*, the which are images indeed, and have a seat fixed in nature, then they lean upon them and take their rest as though at their own hearthstone. Of those things, therefore, which have come into being, inasmuch as they have already passed into the activity of existence, the images sent forth are distinct, until in the fullness of time they become faint and evanescent. Of existing things, inasmuch as they are still standing, the images are more tenacious of life and more distinct, but those of future events are more indefinite and indistinguishable. For they are the advanced waves of things not yet present, efflorescences of the unfulfilled nature, as it were, riddles of closely stored seeds, skipping away and darting out.

Thus also art is needed with a view to coming events, for the images which proceed from them are only shadowed, and the symbols are not as clear as in the case of already existing things. Nevertheless they are of a wonderful nature, even as they stand, wonderful in that they have come into existence from things that have not yet existed.



11. But it is high time that we should say of this art how it may help us. The best way is to prepare the divine *pneuma* in such wise that it may be worthy of the direction of mind and of God, and not be a recipient of obscure energies. And the best culture is the one leading through philosophy, which brings a calm from passions, for when once disturbed by these the *pneuma* is occupied, as it were a territory; and through a wise and temperate life, one that least maddens the animal nature and that has least tendency to bring it into the last body. For turmoil would reach even to the first body, but this ought to be kept unperturbed and unmoved. But since this is an easy prayer for every one to join in, but is of all things the most difficult to cooperate in attaining, then as we wish sleep to be unprofitable to none, come now, let us seek a definition even for indefinable things; in a word, let us put together an art of divining dream-images. Now it is something in this wise. When mariners sailing the sea come suddenly upon a rock, and presently disembarking see a city of men, as often as they see the same rock, they will take it as a sign of the city. And just as when, in the case of generals, we know from the scouts that they themselves will appear, though we do not see them (for that from the same indication they have always in the past appeared on the scene); so on each occasion we obtain from the dream-images a signal of the activity of coming events.

For these are forerunners of those same things, and like things are forerunners of like. Therefore it is the skippers fault if, when the same rock becomes visible, he fails to recognize it, or is unstable to say what land the ship moving; and as such a man sails without a chart, in the same way the man who has often seen the same sight, if he fails to observe of what experience or fortune or event it is prophetic, such a man makes as foolish a use of his life as does the skipper in question of his ship. Thus we predict storms in a time of perfect atmospheric peace, the moment we see haloes about the moon, because on many occasions when we have observed this appearance a tempest has followed.

“When that a halo is single, then mayst thou foretell calm and windstorms;
Broken the halo, then know that ’tis wind; when it fadeth, calm weather.
Once that the moon is surrounded by haloes twain a storm cometh,
And should that ring grow to triple encirclement, storms rage the greater;
And even greater, if darkened; yet greater, if broken the halo.”¹⁹

Aristotle and reason assert that in every case sense-perception create memory, memory experience, experience to turn science. So let us treat the path to dreams. To this end many books have already been collected by certain men, devoted to such observation. But for my part, I laugh at all these books and think them of little use. For not like the last body, which is a combination of associated elements, can it (divination) accept a (system of) art and logic altogether comfortable to its nature, inasmuch as the body generally experiences the same results from the same causes, because the difference between bodies of like nature is small, and that amongst them which is contrary to nature is not diseased without our knowledge, nor do we adopt such a standard as this.

¹⁹ Aratus, *Phainomena* 812



This is not the case with the imaginary *pneuma*. In the first nature also things differ from another, because one thing belongs appropriately to one sphere, another to another, in proportion to the extent of the mingling.

“Happy are they of a truth, nay happiest are they of all those
Souls whosoever are poured adown upon the earth from high heaven;
And they are happy, they also, although no renown be their portion,
So many as thyself, Oh Sovran, who shinest resplendent,
Spring into life e’evn from Zeus and from might Necessity’s spindle.”

Now this is what Timaeus set forth darkly, when he assigned to each soul its proper star; but those souls which left their proper nature, by loving to dwell in the region of matter, one of them more, another less, each of these, for as much as it has been unfortunate in its inclination, has sullied its *pneuma*, whose life is passed in error, and in a disease of the *pneuma*, a disease unnatural to the latter on account of its nobility, although natural to the animal being (for that itself was animated through a *pneuma* of this sort) unless it be that its nature is the grade in which it is enrolled of its own choice, through its practice of good and evil; for nothing is so versatile as the *pneuma*.

How then in the case of things dissimilar by nature, law, and experience, could the same things be revealed by the same images? This is impossible; it could not be. How could troubled and limpid waters, stagnant and moving water be alike affected by the same shape? And if the difference of colour, and the movements show themselves in various configurations, in this way alone would it be one in character, namely in always diverging from the clear-cut image. Now if such a difference exists, if accordingly some Phemonoe, or somebody’s Melampus, or any individual you please, pretends to make some general definition and arrangement concerning such phenomena, let us ascertain from such men whether it is natural that the plane mirror, the distorted, and that made from dissimilar materials, should reflect a like image of the thing shown. Such men as these have not even done, I think, any philosophical thinking at all on the nature of the *pneuma*, although that which is proper to it, in whatsoever state it may be, they consider to be a rule and standard for everything. Now for my own part, I do not deny there is an element of likeness in dissimilar things; but I affirm that the obscure becomes all the more obscure by dispersion. The image of the thing which leaped out prematurely was, I presume, even in the beginning difficult to find out. It is even more difficult in an individual character to capture that which is like a general image.

12. For this reason we must dismiss the idea that all men are under the same laws; rather must each man hold himself as material for the art. Let him inscribe on his memory the affairs in which he has been involved, and the nature of the visions which have preceded them.

Mastery in the art is acquired without difficulty where necessity is involved in the practice. The need reminds one of the practice, and especially on every occasion that it is well off for material. For what could be more abundant than dreams, and what more fascinating? These induce even fools to pay heed to them. It would therefore be shameful for those who have lived ten years beyond adolescence to stand in need of



any other diviner, shameful that they should not have accumulated an abundant store of technical principles. It should be a wise proceeding even to publish our waking and sleeping visions and their attendant circumstances; the things to do, I say, unless the culture of the city is like to be too rustic for so novel an enterprise. We shall therefore see fit to add to what are called "day books" what we term "night books," so as to have records to remind us of the character of each of the two lives concerned; for our argument already laid it down that certain life exists in imagination, at one moment better, at another worse than the intermediate, according to the relation of the *pneuma* to health and disease. If in this way, therefore, we make profitable the observation by which the art is developed, and if nothing slips our memory, in other respects also the result will be a refined pastime; it will be paying oneself the compliment of a history of one's waking and sleeping moments.

And to those who occupy themselves with public speaking, I do not know any other foundation to replace this as a comprehensive basis for exercise in the power of speech; for if the sophist of Lemnos says that the day books are good teachers of effective oratory on every subject, for that they do not overlook matters of lesser importance, but compel one to go through the trivial and the serious alike, is it not worth while to value night books as a subject for oratory?

Any one can see how great the work is, on attempting to fit language to visions, visions of which those things which are united in nature are separated, and things separated in nature are united, and he is obliged to show in speech what has not been revealed. It is no mean achievement to pass on to another something of a strange nature that has stirred in one's own soul, for whenever by this phantasy (of dreaming) things which are expelled from the order of being, and things which never in any possible way existed, are brought into being — nay, even things which have not a nature capable of existence, what contrivance is there for presenting a nameless nature to things which are *per se* inconceivable? Again, it (the phantasy) neither makes these forms appear numerous and all present at the same moment, nor yet does it present them after an interval, but exactly as the dream itself might have them and pass them on to us; for we believe whatever it wills us to believe. To survive at all and without cutting a sorry figure amidst all this, would be proof of a masterly rhetoric. It conducts itself wantonly even against our understanding itself, becoming the cause of something more than thought. For we are not indeed insensible to the visions; rather our approbations and partialities strong, and not least our detestations. And the many trickeries that are bound up with this, attack us in our sleep. Pleasure is at that moment most of all a thing full of charm, such as to impart to our souls loves or hatreds even in the waking state. If any one were to utter no lifeless words, but rather to accomplish that for the sake of which the discourse was seriously undertaken, he would need stirring language to put his auditor into the same condition and amidst the same thoughts as himself.

Now in dreams one conquers, walks, or flies simultaneously, and the imagination has room for it all; but how shall mere speech find room for it? So a man sleeps and dreams; he sees a dream, and arises from it still sleeping, as he thinks, and shakes off his dream while still recumbent. He philosophizes a little on the vision that has appeared to him, according to his knowledge; and this is a dream, but the other is a



double dream. Accordingly he believes it not, and thinks now he is awake and that what appears to him is really alive. Forthwith a fierce struggle ensues, and a man dreams that an attack is made on himself, then he has left all behind and he is waking up, again that he has made trial of himself and has discovered the deception. In such a way must the sons of Aloeus be suffering the punishment for piling up the mountains of Thessaly against the gods. But there is no law of Adrastea in the way of the sleeper, to forbid him from rising from earth more happily than Icarus, from soaring above the eagles, or reaching a point above the loftiest spheres themselves. So one looks steadily upon the earth from afar, and discovers a land not visible even to the moon. It is also in his power to hold converse with the stars and to meet the unseen gods of the universe. That which is difficult to describe takes place easily, namely that the gods are visibly manifest, nor do the gods even feel even a particle of jealousy. The dreamer has not even descended to the earth after a short interval; he is already there. Nothing is so characteristic of dreams as to steal space and to create without time. The sleeper then converses with sheep and fancies their bleating to be speech, and he understand their talk. So new and so extensive a wealth of subjects is there for one who has the courage to let loose his language upon them.

13. I even think that myths take their authority from dreams, as those in which peacock, fox, and sea hold converse. But these are small things compared with the independence of dreams. And although myths are a very small part of dreams, nevertheless they were approved by the sophists as a preparation for the work of eloquence. And for these men to whom myth is the beginning of their art, the dream ought to be its appropriate end. And there is this in addition, that one has not worked the tongue in vain, as in the case of myths, but that he has become wiser in judgement. Let every man, then, with leisure and ease proceed to write a narrative of whatsoever happens in his waking and sleeping states. Let him spend some of his time on this. Of the time so spent the greatest help will be found in his knowledge of letters. Let him put together the art of divination which we have extolled, than which nothing could be of more varied service to him. Above all we must not discard even the style, which follows in the wake of subject-matter, for the philosopher this would be mere child's-play, in which the tension of the string would be relaxed, even as the Scythians deal with their bows. And let us recommend it to the orator as the summit of his eloquence. Of a truth they do not seem to me to employ their powers opportunely upon Miltiades and Cimon, and also on certain nameless persons; again, on rich and poor opposed to one another in politics, on which matters I have seen even old men disputing with their colleagues in the lecture-room. True, the two sat there with all the high seriousness of philosophy, and each tugged at his beard, that as far as one could guess weighed a talent. All this dignity did not prevent them from indulging in abuse and anger, or from tossing their hands about wildly, the while they delivered interminable speeches on behalf of men, their intimate friends, they had not even any existence in nature. What state could anywhere exists of such a sort as to accord to a chief the privilege of killing a political enemy, and if at ninety years of age one is engaged in fighting a phantom, to what season does one postpone truth of speech? In fact these men do not seem to me to understand even the word "practice" because it professes to work with another end in view, but consider the training to be an end in itself, and they are delighted with the road, as if it were the goal to which



they were proceeding, for they have made the training a contest. It is just as if any one who had sparred in the palaestra could demand that (his practice) be heralded abroad as the pancration at Olympia.

So complete a drought of thought and such a deluge of words have possessed these men that some of them who are able to speak, have nothing worth saying; they must needs take delight in themselves, like Archilochus and Alcaeus, each whom spent his eloquence on his own private life. Yet the course of time preserves the memory of both of their sorrows and their joys, for they have not produced words hanging in the void on artificial themes, like this young and wise generation. Nor have they accord their own proper virtue to others, as did Homer and Steichorus, who made the heroic race more glorious by their poems (and we have profited by their zeal for virtue), but have been some completely neglected in themselves that we are unable to say anything about them except that they were great poets. Whosoever therefore aspires to be spoken of man in the future, and is conscious of the power to create immortal works on the tablets, let him courageously follow our lawless style of composition. Then let him commend himself to time: it is a noble guardian whenever anything divine is entrusted to it.



Synesius' Letter to Hypatia

*To the Philosopher.*²⁰

I have brought out two books this year. One of them as I was moved thereto by God Himself, the other because of the slander of men.



Some of those who wear the white or dark mantle²¹ have maintained that I am faithless to philosophy, apparently because I profess grace and harmony of style, and because I venture to say something concerning Homer and concerning the figures of the rhetoricians. In the eyes of such persons one must hate literature in order to be a philosopher, and must occupy himself with divine matters only. No doubt these men alone have become spectators of the knowable. This privilege is unlawful for me, for I spend some of my leisure in purifying my tongue and sweetening my wit.

The thing which urged them to condemn me, on the charge that I am fit only for trifling, is the fact that my *Cynegetics*²² disappeared from my house, how I know not, and has been received with great enthusiasm by certain young men who make a cult of Atticisms and graceful periods. Moreover, some poetical attempts of mine

seemed to them the work of an artist who reproduces the antique, as we are wont to say in speaking of statues.

There are certain men among my critics whose effrontery is only surpassed by their ignorance, and these are the readiest of all to spin out discussions concerning God. Whenever you meet them, you have to listen to their babble about inconclusive syllogisms. They pour a torrent of phrases over those who stand in no need of them, in

²⁰ [Letter No 154. Background to writing *De Insomniis* in p. 23, ¶ 2 & 3 from end. Illustration below depicts Synesius attending one of Hypatia's lectures. — ED. PHIL.]

²¹ [People in white mantles are pagan philosophers; those in black, Christian monks and philosophers.]

²² [A book on dog-breeding.]



which I suppose they find their own profit. The public teachers that one sees in our cities, come from this class. It is a very Horn of Amalthea²³ which they think themselves entitled to use. You will, I think, recognize this easy-going tribe, which mis-calls nobility of purpose. They wish me to become their pupil; they say that in a short time they will make me all-daring in questions of divinity, and that I shall be able to declaim day and night without stopping.

The rest, who have more taste, are sophists, much more unfortunate than these. They would like to be famous in the same way, but unfortunately for them they are incapable even of this. You know some who, despoiled by the office of the tax-collector, or urged thereto by some one calamity, have become philosophers in the middle of their lives. Their philosophy consists in a very simple formula, that of calling God to witness, as Plato did, whenever they deny anything or whenever they assert anything. A shadow would surpass these men in uttering anything to the point; but their pretensions are extraordinary. Oh, what proudly arched brows! They support their beards with the hand. They assume a more solemn countenance than the statues of Xenocrates. They are even resolved to shackle us with a law which is altogether to their advantage; to wit, that no one shall be in open possession of any knowledge of the good. They esteem it an exposure of themselves if any one, deemed a philosopher, knows ho to speak, for as they think to hide behind a veil of simulation and to appear to be quite full of wisdom within.

These are the two types of men who have falsely accused me with occupying myself in trivial pursuits, one of them because I do not talk the same sort of nonsense as they do, the other because I do not keep my mouth shut, and do not keep the “bull on my tongue,” as they do. Against these was my treatise composed, and it deals with the loquacity of the one school and the silence of the other. Although it is the latter in particular that it is addressed, namely to the speechless and envious men in question (do you not think with some comeliness of from?), none the less it has found means of dragging in those other men also, and it aims at being not less an exhibition than an encomium of great learning. Nor did I abjure their charges, but for their still great discomfiture I have often courted them.

Next, passing as to the choice of a life, the work of praises that of philosophy as being the most philosophic of choices; and what sort of choice it must be regarded, learn from the book itself. Finally, it defends my library, also, which the same men accused, on the ground that it conceals unrevised copies. These spiteful fellows have not kept their hands even off things like these. If each thing is in its proper place; and all things have been handled in season; if the motives behind each part of the undertaking are just; if it has been divided into a number of chapters in the manner of the divine work the *Phaedrus*, in which Plato discusses the various types of the beautiful; if all the arguments have been devised to converge on the one end proposed; if, moreover, conviction has anywhere quietly come to the support of the flatness of the narrative, and if out of conviction demonstration has resulted, as happens in such cases, and if one thing follows another logically, these results must be gifts of nature and art.

²³ [The “horn of plenty” from Greek myth.]



He who is not undisciplined to discover even a certain divine countenance hidden under a coarser model, like that Aphrodite, those Graces, and such charming divinities as the Athenian artists concealed within the sculpted figures of a Silenus or a Satyr, that man, at all events, will apprehend all that my book has unveiled of the mystic dogmas. But the meanings of those will easily escape others because of their semblance to redundancy, and their appearance as being thrown into the narrative too much by chance, and as it might seem roughly.

Epileptics are the only people who feel the cold influences of the moon. On the other hand only those receive the flashes of the emanations of the intellect, for whom in the full health of the mind's eye God kindles a light akin to his own, that light which is the cause of knowledge to the intellectual, and to knowable things the cause of their being known. In the same way, ordinary light connects sight with colour. But remove this light, and its power to discern is ineffective.

Concerning all of this I shall await your decision. If you decree that I ought to publish my book, I will dedicate it to orators and philosophers together. The first it will please, and to the others it will be useful, provided of course that it is not rejected by you, who are really able to pass judgment. If it does not seem to you worthy of Greek ears, if, like Aristotle, you prize truth more than friendship, a close and profound darkness will overshadow it, and mankind will never hear it mentioned.

So much for this matter.

The other work [*On Dreams*] God ordained and He gave His sanction to it, and it has been set up as a thank-offering to the imaginative faculties. It contains an inquiry into the whole imaginative soul, and into some other points which have not yet been handled by any Greek philosopher. But why should one dilate on this? This work was completed, the whole of it, in a single night, or rather, at the end of a night, one which also brought the vision enjoining me to write it. There are two or three passages in the book in which it seemed to me that I was some other person, and that I was one listening to myself amongst others who were present.

Even now this work, as often as I go over it, produces a marvellous effect upon me, and a certain divine voice envelops me as in poetry. Whether this my experience is not unique, or may happen to another, on all this you will enlighten me, for after myself you will be the first of the Greeks to have access to the work.

The books that I sending to you have not yet been published, and in order that the number may be complete, I am sending you also my essay concerning the Gift. This was produced long ago in my ambassadorial period. It was addressed to a man who had been great influence with the emperor and Pentapolis profited somewhat from the essay, and also from the gift.

