

*Porphyry*  
***Homeric Cave of the Nymphs***

**Translated by Thomas Taylor**

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What are we to understand by the Cave, in the island of Ithaca, which Homer describes in the following verses?

*High at the head a branching olive grows,  
And crowns the pointed cliffs with shady boughs.  
A cavern pleasant, though involv'd in night,  
Beneath it lies, the Naiades delight.  
Where bowls and urns, of workmanship divine,  
And massy beams in native marble shine;  
On which the Nymphs amazing webs display,  
Of purple hue, and exquisite array.  
The busy bees, within the urns secure  
Honey delicious, and like nectar pure.  
Perpetual waters thro' the grotto glide,  
A lofty gate unfolds on either side;  
That to the north is pervious by mankind:  
The sacred south t'immortals is consign'd.<sup>1</sup>*

*I.e.*

“an olive with spreading branches stands at the head of the Ithacensian port; and near it is a cave both pleasant and obscure, which is sacred to the nymphs who are called Naiads. Within the cavern, bowls and capacious amphora are formed from stone, in which the bees deposit their delicious honey. There are likewise within the cave long stony beams, on which the nymphs weave purple webs wonderful to the sight. Perpetual waters flow within the grotto. But there are two gates: one towards the north gives entrance to mortals descending: but the other towards the south which is more divine, is impervious to mankind; and alone affords a passage to ascending immortals.”

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<sup>1</sup> There are three editions of this excellent work. The first Greek and Latin are by Holstenius, Cantab. 1655; the second by Barnes, prefixed to his Homer; and the third by some German editor, which I have not seen.



That the poet does not describe this cave according to truth is evident from hence, says Cronius, that none of those who have handed down to us the situation of that island make any mention of such a cave. This likewise, says he, is manifest, that it would be very absurd for a mortal man, such as Homer, to expect, that in describing a cave fabricated merely by poetical licence, and thus arbitrarily opening by a new art a path to gods and men in the region of Ithaca, he should gain the belief of mankind. It is equally as absurd to suppose, that nature herself should point out in this place, one path for the descent of all mankind, and again another path for all the gods. For indeed the whole world is full of gods and men: but it is impossible to be persuaded that in the Ithacensian cave men descend, and gods ascend. Cronius, having promised thus much, affirms that it was evident not only to the wise, but also to the vulgar and unlearned, that the poet under the veil of allegory, concealed some mysterious signification. But the investigation of the particular meaning of these gates, and of the cave of the nymphs, he leaves to others more disposed to such curious enquiries, as likewise why it is both pleasant and obscure, since darkness is by no means delightful, but is rather productive of aversion and horror. Also why it is not simply sacred to nymphs, but it is accurately added, which are called Naiads. Why likewise the cave is represented as containing bowls and urns, when no mention is made of their receiving any liquor, but the bees are said to deposit their honey in these vessels, as in hives? Then again, why are oblong beams placed here for the nymphs; and these not formed out of wood, or any other ductile matter, but from stone, as well as the bowls and urns? Which last circumstance is indeed less obscure; but that on these stony beams, the nymphs should weave purple garments is wonderful not only to the sight, but to the auditory sense. For who would believe that goddesses weave garments in a cave involved in darkness, and on stony beams; especially while he hears the poet affirming that the purple webs of the goddesses were exposed to human inspection. Besides this too is wonderful, that the cave should have a double entrance; one prepared for the descent of men, the other for the ascent of gods. And again, that the gate pervious by men should look to the north, but the portal of the gods to the south. Since the reason of this distribution affords just matter for surprise and enquiry: and why an eastern and western situation was not preferred. For almost all temples have their entrance and statues towards the east: but those who enter them look towards the west, when standing with their faces turned to the statues they honour and worship the gods. Hence since this narration abounds with obscurities, it follows that it is neither a fable, rashly devised for the purpose of procuring delight, nor contains a true and certain description of a place: but that something is signified by the poet, under its obscure disguise; who likewise places, with a mystic intent, an olive at the entrance of the cave. All which particulars the ancients thought very laborious to investigate and explain, and we who succeed them are of the same opinion, while endeavouring from our own inventions to unfold the concealed meaning of the allegory. Hence those men appear to have written very negligently concerning the situation of the place, who believe both the cave and its contents to be a mere poetical figment. But the best and most accurate writers of geography, and among these Artemidorus the Ephesian, in the fifth book of his work, which consists of eleven books, thus writes:



“The island of Ithaca, containing an extent of 85 stadii,<sup>2</sup> is distant from Panormus, a port of Cephalenia, about 12 stadii.<sup>3</sup> It has a port named Phorcys; in which there is a shore, and on that shore a cave sacred to the nymphs, in which the Phaeacians are reported to have placed Ulysses.”

By no means therefore is this cave a mere Homeric figment. But whether the poet describes it according to its real nature, or adds something of his own invention, yet the same questions remain to be solved; whether you are disposed to investigate the intention of the poet, or of those who consecrated the cave. Since neither did the ancients consecrate temples without fabulous symbols; nor is it usual with Homer to relate any thing rashly concerning their peculiarities. For indeed, by how much the more any one endeavours to shew, that this description of the cave is not an Homeric fiction, but was consecrated to the gods, before Homer’s time; by so much the more he evinces, that this sacred cave is filled with ancient wisdom. On which account it is highly worthy our investigation, and necessary that its symbolical consecration and obscure mysteries should be rendered evident by the light of philosophical enquiry.

Antiquity then with great propriety consecrated caves and dens to the world, whether taken collectively as the universe, or separately according to its parts. Hence they considered earth as the symbol of that matter from which the world is composed; so that, according to the opinion of some, matter and earth are the same; by the symbol of a cave, signifying the formation of the world from matter. For indeed caves are most commonly spontaneous productions, congenial with the earth herself, and comprehended by one uniform stone; whose interior part is concave, and whose exterior parts are extended over an immense space of earth. But the world being self-born (*i.e.* produced by no external cause but from a principle within), and in perfect symphony with itself, is allied to matter which they call, according to a secret signification, a stone and a rock. For like these hard bodies it is sluggish and inert, and receives the impression of ornamenting form: at the same time they considered it as infinite on account of its formless nature. But since it is continually flowing, and of itself destitute of the supervening investments of species by which it is formed and becomes visible, the flowing waters, darkness, or, as the poet says, obscurity of the cavern exhibit apt symbols of what the world contains on account of that matter with which it is connected. Hence through the dark union of matter, the world is obscure and dark, but from the presence and supervening ornaments of form (from which it derives its name) it is beautiful and pleasant. The world therefore may with great propriety be called a cave; agreeable indeed, at its first entrance, on account of its participation of form, but involved in the deepest obscurity to the intellectual eye which endeavours to discern its dark foundation. So that its exterior and superficial parts are pleasant, but its interior and profound parts obscure: and its very bottom is darkness itself. After the same manner the Persians, mystically signifying the descent of the soul into an inferior nature and its ascent into the intelligible world, initiate the priest or mystic in a place which they denominate a cave. For according to Eubulus, Zoroaster first of all among the neighbouring mountains of Persia, conse-

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<sup>2</sup> *I.e.* about ten Italian miles.

<sup>3</sup> *Viz.* a mile and a half.



crated a natural cave, florid and watered with fountains, in honour of Mithras the father of all things: a cave in the opinion of Zoroaster bearing a resemblance of the world fabricated by Mithras. But the things contained in the cavern, being disposed by certain intervals, according to symmetry and order, were symbols of the elements and climates of the world. We find too that after Zoroaster it was usual with others to perform initiatory rites in caves and dens, whether natural or artificial. For as they consecrated temples, groves, and altars to the celestial gods; but to the terrestrial gods and to heroes altars alone, and to the subterranean divinities vaults and cells; so to the world they dedicated caves and dens; as likewise to nymphs, on account of the waters trickling, and dispersed through caverns, in which the nymphs called Naiads, as we shall shortly observe, preside. But the ancients not only considered a cave as the symbol of this generated and sensible world, but as the representative of every invisible power: because as a cave is obscure and dark, so the essence of these powers is unknown. Hence Saturn fabricated a cave in the ocean itself, and concealed his children in its dark retreats. Thus Ceres educated Proserpine with her nymphs in a cave; and many other particulars of this kind may be found by any one who peruses the writings of Theologists. But that caves are attributed to nymphs, and especially to Naiads, who dwell near fountains, and are called Naiads from the waters over whose flowing streams they preside, the hymn to Apollo indicates in these words:

“The nymphs residing in caves shall deduce fountains of intellectual waters to thee, (according to the divine voice of the Muses,) which are the progeny of a terrene spirit. Hence waters bursting through every river, shall exhibit to mankind perpetual effusions of sweet streams.”<sup>4</sup>

From hence as it appears to me the Pythagoreans, and after them Plato took occasion to call the world a cave and a den. For the powers which are the leaders and guides of souls thus speak in a verse of Empedocles.

*We will enter into this cave covered with rocks.*

And Plato in the seventh book of his *Republic*, [514b] speaking of the condition of mankind in this sensible world, says,

“Behold men as if dwelling in a subterranean cavern, whose entrance opens through the whole cave to the admission of the light.”

But when the other person in the dialogue says, you relate an absurd similitude, he subjoins:

“It is requisite, friend Glaucus, to apply this similitude to all that has been previously said: assimilating this terrene habitation which is the object of corporeal sight, to the dark residence of a prison: but accommodating the fire shining in the recesses of the cavern to the solar light.”

And thus it is sufficiently evident, that theologians have considered a cave as a symbol of the world, and of the powers it contains. But we observed that they likewise considered a cave as the symbol of an intelligible essence; led to this opinion by rea-

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<sup>4</sup> These verses are not to found in any of the hymns now extant, ascribed to Homer.



sons very different from the former. For they placed it as a symbol of the sensible world, because caverns are dark, stony and humid; resembling in all these respects the world on account of the obscure nature of that matter from which it is composed, the continual impression of forms to which it is obnoxious, and the constant flowing of all its parts. But a cave resembles intelligible essence, both because invisible to the eyes and sense, and because its substance is solid, firm, and durable. And in the same manner particular virtues or powers are inconspicuous, especially such as are united with matter. For they did not consider a cave as the symbol of a material and immaterial nature on account of its figure as some have suspected: (since every cave is not circular as appears from this Homeric cavern with a double entrance) but from surveying the natural condition of caves, involved in the depths of obscurity and night, and formed from the union of a hard and stony substance. Again, since a cave has a twofold similitude, it must agree in some particulars with sensible substance, but in others with an intelligible essence. Thus the present cave since it contains perpetual waters, in this respect resembles a substance united with matter, and not that which is immaterial and intelligible. On this account the cave is not sacred to mountain divinities, to those who dwell on hills, or to other deities of this kind, but to Naiads so called by the Greeks from νάματα [namata], fountains; because they preside over waters: and this term is commonly applied to all souls passing into the humid and flowing condition of a generative nature. These souls they considered as incumbent on the water, which is nourished by a divine spirit as Numenius affirms: and hence a prophet said, *that the spirit of God moved on the waters*. The Egyptians likewise on this account place all daemons, not connected with any thing solid or stable, but raised on a sailing vessel; and it is known that humor invades the sun itself, and all animals descending into generation. Hence Heraclitus observes

“that it appears delightful, and not mortal to souls, when they are born connected with humidity.”

And he says in another place, speaking of unembodied souls,

“we live their death, and we die their life.”

Hence the poet calls men existing in generation *διερούς*, *i.e.* ‘humid’, because their souls are drenched in moisture. On this account too, such souls delight in blood and humid seed: but water administers nutriment to the souls of plants. Besides, according to the opinions of some men aerial and celestial bodies, are nourished by the vapours of fountains and rivers and other exhalations. Thus the Stoics assert that the sun is nourished by the exhalation of the sea; the moon from the effluvia of fountains and rivers; but the stars from the exhalation of the earth. Hence according to them the sun is a certain intellectual composition formed from the sea; the moon from river waters; and the stars from terrene exhalations. It is necessary therefore that souls, whether they are corporeal or incorporeal, while they attract bodies, must verge to humidity, and be incorporated with humid natures; especially such souls, as from their material inclinations ought to be united with blood, and confined in humid bodies as in a watery tegument. Hence the souls of the dead are evocated by the effusion of bile and blood: and souls insnared by corporeal love, and attracting to their nature a humid spirit, condense this watery vehicle like a cloud; for a cloud is nothing more than humour condensed in the air. But the pneumatic part thus con-



densed, through too great an abundance of humour becomes the object of corporeal sight. And among the number of these we must reckon those apparitions of images, which from a spirit coloured by the influence of imagination, present themselves to mankind. But pure souls are averse from generation; on which account the same Heraclitus observes

“a dry soul is the wisest.”

But souls thus desiring to be mingled with body, and attracting a humid vapour, by their propensity to generation render their pneumatic part moist and wet, and by thus verging to the ever-flowing waters of generation, are deservedly called Naiads. Hence it is customary with the Greeks to call nymphs γαμουμενας [married], as those who are copulated to generation; and to wash in a bath whose waters are derived from fountains or perpetual rills. This world then is sacred and pleasant to nymphs, *i.e.* to souls proceeding into a material nature, and to genii participating of generation, although it is naturally dark and opaque; on which account some are of opinion that souls are composed from a certain aerial opacity. Hence a cave is a habitation peculiarly adapted to such souls; since it is both pleasant and obscure, like this material region, in which souls reside. A cave likewise through which perpetual waters flow is well adapted to nymphs, the divinities of waters. The present cave therefore must be allowed sacred to souls, and to those more particular powers denominated nymphs, who from their being praefects of rivers and fountains are called πηγαίαι [pegaiai] and ναϊδές [naides], *i.e.* fountain and river divinities. What then are the different symbols, some of which correspond to souls, and others to the divinities of waters, by which it may be manifest that this cave is at the same time dedicated and consecrated to both? We reply that the stony bowls and urns are symbols of the aquatic nymphs. For vessels of the same form are symbols of Bacchus; but their composition is testaceous, that is, from baked earth. And indeed such as these are correspondent to the gift of this god; since the fruit of the vine is brought to a proper maturity by the celestial fire of the sun. But the stony bowls and urns are most admirably accommodated to nymphs residing over waters which flow from rocks. And what symbol is more proper to souls descending into generation, and the tenacious vestment of body, than as the poet says,

“Nymphs weaving on stony beams purple garments wonderful to behold?”

For the flesh is generated in and about the bones, which in the bodies of animals may be compared to stones. On which account these textorial instruments are fabricated from stones alone. But the purple garments plainly appear to be the flesh with which we are invested; and which is woven as it were and grows by the connecting and vivifying power of the blood, diffused through every part. Besides, purple garments are tinged with the blood of animals; and flesh is produced and subsists from blood. Add too that the body is a garment with which the soul is invested; a circumstance indeed wonderful to the sight, whether we regard its composition, or consider the connecting band by which it is knit to the soul. Thus according to Orpheus, Proserpine, who presides over every thing generated from seed, is represented weaving a web; and the ancients called heaven by the name of πέπλος [peplos], which is as it were the veil or tegument of the celestial gods. But why are the amphora represented filled with honey-combs, and not with water? For in these as he says the bees



deposit their honey. But the word *τιθαιβωσσειν* [tithaibossein], signifies nothing more than *τιθεναι την βοσιν*, *i.e.* to deposit aliment. And honey is the nutriment of bees.

Indeed, theologists have made honey subservient to many and various symbols, because it is indued with a variety of powers: for it possesses a purging and preserving quality. Hence bodies are kept from putrefaction by its use, and ulcers of long standing are purified: besides it is sweet to the taste, and bees produced from putrid oxen collect it by a wonderful art from flowers. On this account when in the sacred rites called *λεοντικα* [leontika], those who are initiated pour honey instead of water on their hands, it is signified by this practice, that their hands should be pure from every sorrowful, noxious, and abominable concern. Thus, others purify the initiated by a purgatorial rite from fire, but are averse from water as the enemy of fire. Besides they purify the tongue from all the defilement of evil with honey. But when the Persians offer honey to the guardian of fruits, they regard its preserving power as a symbol of its similitude to a divine nature. In like manner when the poet pours nectar and ambrosia into the nostrils of the slain, for the purpose of preserving the body from putrefaction, some have interpreted honey as the aliment of the gods. For Homer in a certain place calls nectar yellow; which is also the colour of honey. But whether or not honey is to be taken for nectar, we shall hereafter more accurately examine. Again, we find in Orpheus that Jupiter employs stratagems against Saturn from honey. For Saturn full of honey is intoxicated, his senses are darkened as if from the effects of wine, and he sleeps: just as Porus, according to Plato, is distended with nectar; for wine (says he) was not yet known. But night admonishes Jupiter to employ the stratagem of honey, according to Orpheus, in these words,

“As soon as you behold him spread under the lofty oaks, intoxicated with the sweet honey, produced by the bees, bind him in chains.”

Saturn, therefore, intoxicated with honey is bound by Jupiter; and castrated in the same manner as Caelum. But the theological poet intimates by this fable that the divine essences are, as it were, bound, and drawn down by delight into the fluctuating empire of generation; and that when resolved in pleasure, they produce certain powers by their seminal virtue. Thus Saturn castrates Caelum, who, by his desire of coition descends to earth. But the intoxication of honey signifies among theologists nothing more than the desire of coition; by the ensnaring power of which Saturn is castrated. For Saturn and his orb is the first of the celestial spheres, which moves contrary to the course of Caelum or the heavens. But certain virtues descend as well from the heavens as from the wandering stars, and the influences of the heavens are received by Saturn, and those of Saturn by Jupiter. Hence, since honey is assumed in purgations, and as an antidote to putrefaction, and aptly represents the pleasure and delight of descending into the fascinating realms of generation, it is accounted a symbol well adapted to nymphs the divinities of waters; signifying the nature of the waters over which they preside free from putrefaction: intimating likewise the purgative quality of the waters and their co-operating in the business of generation. For water promotes generation. The poet, therefore, very properly represents the bees as depositing their honey in bowls and urns: since bowls signify fountains; and on this account a bowl or cup is placed next to Mithras instead of a fountain. But we draw the waters of fountains in Amphora; and fountains and rivers are proper to aquatic



nymphs, and especially to the nymphs called by the ancients souls, which antiquity likewise peculiarly denominated μέλισσας [melissas], *i.e.* artificers of sweetness or bees: for souls are, indeed, the authors of all the pleasure peculiar to our nature.

Hence Sophocles does not speak improperly, when he says,

“The swarm of the dead utters a buzzing noise.”

But the priestesses of Ceres, as ministers to the terrene goddess, were formerly called bees; and her daughter Proserpine μελιτιώδη [meltitode], or delicious, alluding to the sweetness of honey. Besides the moon who is the queen of generation was denominated by the ancients a bee, and likewise a bull: for the exaltation of the Moon is Taurus, and bees are generated from oxen; on which account they are called βουγενεῖς [bougeneis], which name is likewise attributed to souls proceeding into generation. Also the god Mercury is esteemed a stealer of oxen, who is secretly conscious of generation. Besides honey is considered as a symbol of death, in the same manner as gall is of life; whether they indicated by such similitudes that the life of the soul dies by the noxious embraces of pleasure, but enjoys life from bitterness, which by its disgusting sensation prevents the soul from sinking into that drowsy oblivion produced by corporeal delight (on which account they sacrificed gall to the gods); or whether the symbol originated from considering that death is the end of evils, but that the present life is laborious and bitter. But it is here necessary to observe that they did not promiscuously call all souls descending into the whirl of generation bees; but only those who, while residing in this fluctuating region, acted justly; and who, after being in a manner acceptable to the divinities returned to their pristine felicity. For the bee is an animal, accustomed to return to its former place; and is studious of justice and sobriety, on which account libations with honey are called νηφάλιοι [nephalioi] or sober. The ancients likewise refrained from sitting on beans, which they considered as a symbol of generation proceeding in a regular series without being intercepted; because this leguminous vegetable is almost the only one, amongst other fruits, whose stalk is perforated throughout without any intervening knots. We must, therefore, admit that honeycombs and bees are symbols, as well peculiar as common to nymphs the divinities of waters; and at the same time to souls wedded to the humid and fluctuating nature of generation.

But let us now return to the cave and consider its double entrance. The most ancient of mankind then, before temples were raised to divinity, consecrated caves and dens to the gods. Hence the Curetes in Crete dedicated a cave to Jupiter; in Arcadia a cave was sacred to the Moon, in Lyceum to Pan, and in the island Naxos to Bacchus. The worship of Mithras too, wherever this god was known was performed in caves. But with respect to this cave of the nymphs in Ithaca, Homer was not alone content with saying that it had two gates, but he adds that the one looks to the north, and the other, more divine, to the south; concerning which he does not mention whether it is pervious to the descent of either immortals or mankind, as is the case with the northern entrance, but he only says,

“The other of these tends to the south, which is not pervious to men, but is alone open to immortals.”



It remains, therefore, to investigate either the secret meaning of those who first instituted this cave, according to the poets' description; or what occult signification Homer himself intended to convey, if it is nothing more than a fiction of his own inventing. Since then, the present cave in an eminent degree is a symbol and image of the world, as Numenius and his familiar Cronius affirm, it is necessary, in order to elucidate the reason of the position of the gates, to observe that there are two extremities in the heavens; *viz.* the winter-solstice, than which no part of heaven is nearer to the south; and the summer-solstice which is situated next to the north. But the summer tropic, that is, the solstitial circle is in Cancer, and the winter tropic in Capricorn. And since Cancer is the nearest to the earth, it is deservedly attributed to the moon, which is itself proximate to the earth. But since the southern pole by its great distance is inconspicuous to us, Capricorn is ascribed to Saturn, who is the highest and most remote of all the planets. Again, the signs from Cancer to Capricorn are situated in the following order; the first is Leo called by astrologers the house of the sun; afterwards Virgo, or the house of Mercury; Libra of Venus; Scorpius of Mars; Sagittarius of Jupiter; and Capricornus or the house of Saturn. But from Capricorn in an inverse order, Sagittarius is attributed to Saturn; Pisces to Jupiter; Aries to Mars; Taurus to Venus; Gemini to Mercury; and last of all Cancer to the Moon. From among the number of these theologians consider Cancer and Capricorn as two ports; Plato calls them two gates. Of these, they affirm that Cancer is the gate through which souls descend, but Capricorn that through which they ascend, and exchange a material for a divine condition of being. [See endnote 1] Cancer is, indeed, northern and adapted to descend: but Capricorn, is southern, and accommodated to ascent. And, indeed, the gates of the cave which look to the north are with great propriety said to be pervious to the descent of men: but the southern gates are not the avenues of the gods, but of souls ascending to the gods. On this account the poet does not say it is the passage of the gods, but of immortals; which appellation is also common to our souls, whether in their whole essence or from some particular and most excellent part only they are denominated immortal. It is reported that Parmenides mentions these two ports in his book, concerning the nature of things: as likewise that they were not unknown to the Egyptians and Romans. For the Romans celebrate their Saturnalia when the sun is in Capricorn, and during this festivity the servants wear the shoes of those who are free, and all things are distributed among them in common; the legislator intimating by this ceremony, that those who are servants at present, by the condition of their birth, will be hereafter liberated by the Saturnalian feast, and by the house attributed to Saturn, *i.e.* Capricorn; when reviving in that sign, and being divested of the material garments of generation, they return to their pristine felicity, and to the fountain of life. But since the path beginning from Capricorn is retrograde, and pertains to descent; hence the origin of the word *Januarius* or *January* from *Janua*, a gate, which is the space of time measured by the sun while, returning from Capricorn towards the east, he directs his course to the northern parts. But with the Egyptians the beginning of the year is not *Aquarius*, as among the Romans, but *Cancer*. For the star *Sothis* (*Sirius*) borders on *Cancer*, which star the Greeks denominate *Kυνος* [*Kynos*], or the *Dog*. When this star rises they celebrate the *calends* of the month, which begins their year; because this is the place of the heavens where generation commences, by which the world subsists.



On this account the doors of the Homeric cavern are not dedicated to the east and west, nor to the equinoctial signs, Aries and Libra, but to the north and south, and particularly to those ports or celestial signs which are the nearest of all to these quarters of the world: and this because the present cave is sacred to souls, and to nymphs the divinities of waters. But these places are particularly adapted either to souls descending into generation, or to such as are separating from it. On this account they assigned a place congruous to Mithras, near the equinoctial; and hence he bears the sword of Aries, because this animal is martial, and is the sign of Mars: he is likewise carried in the Bull, the sign of Venus; because the Bull as well as Venus is the ruler of generation. But Mithras is placed near the equinoctial circle, comprehending the northern parts on his right, and the southern on his left hand. Likewise to the southern hemisphere they added the south, because it is hot, and to the northern hemisphere, the north, on account of the coldness of the wind in that quarter. Again, it was not without reason that they connected winds with souls sinking to generation, and again separating themselves from its stormy whirl: because, according to the opinion of some, souls attract a spirit, and obtain a pneumatic substance. Indeed, Boreas is proper to souls passing into generation: for the northern blasts recreate those who are on the verge of death; and refresh the soul reluctantly detained in the body. On the contrary, the southern gales dissolve life. For the north, from its superior coldness, collects into one, detains and strengthens the soul in the most moist and frigid embraces of terrene generation: but the south dissolves the humid bands, and by its superior heat, having freed the soul from the dark and cold tement of the body, draws it upward to the incorporeal light and heat of divinity. But since our habitable orb verges mostly to the north, it is proper that souls born in this turbulent region should be conversant with the north wind; and those who depart from hence with the south. It is, indeed, on this account that wind blowing from the north is immediately on its commencement vehement; but the south, on the contrary, is more vehement towards the end. For the former hangs directly over the inhabitants of the north pole, but the latter is more distant, and the blast from places very remote is more tardy than from such as are near; but when it is gradually collected it blows abundantly and with vigour. Hence, because souls enter into generation, through the northern gate, they have feigned this wind to be amatorial; and hence the poet:

“Boreas changed into the form of a horse mingled himself with the mares of Erichthonius; and they big with young produced twice six foal.”<sup>5</sup>

And they report that he committed a rape on Orithyia, from whom he begot Zetis and Calais. But attributing the south to the gods, when the sun is at his meridian, they draw the curtains before the statues of the Gods in temples; and conceal them from the view, observing the Homeric precept, that it is not lawful for men to enter temples when the sun is inclined to the south:

“for this path is open to immortals alone.”

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<sup>5</sup> *Iliad* xx, 223, &c.



Hence when the god is at his meridian they place a symbol of midday and of the south in the gate of the temple.<sup>6</sup> Besides, in other gates it was esteemed unlawful to speak at all times; because they considered gates as sacred. On this account too the Pythagoreans, and wise men among the Egyptians, forbade any person to speak while passing through gates or portals; for at that time the divinity who is the principle of the universe is to be worshipped in silence. But Homer was not ignorant that gates are sacred, because he represents Oeneus in the place of supplication knocking at the gate.

*Before his gates the aged Oeneus came,  
And suppliant shook their well-compacted frame.*

*Iliad ix, 579*

Besides he knew that the gates of heaven were committed to the care of the hours, commencing in cloudy places; and which are opened and shut by the clouds: for he says,

*Whether they unfold, or close a dense cloud.*

*Iliad viii, 395*

Hence likewise they are said to resound because thunders roar through the clouds.

*Heaven's gates spontaneous open to the powers,  
Heavens sounding gates kept by the winged hours.*

*Iliad viii, 393*

Besides Homer elsewhere makes mention of the gates of the sun, signifying by these Cancer and Capricorn: for the sun proceeds as far as these signs, when he descends from the north to the south; and from thence ascends again to the northern parts. But Capricorn and Cancer are situated about the milky circle, Cancer occupying the northern extremity of this circle, and Capricorn the southern. Again, according to Pythagoras *the people of dreams* [see endnote 2] are souls, which are reported to be collected in the milky way; the appellation of which is derived from souls nourished with milk after their lapse into the whirls of generation. Hence those who desire to evocate departed souls sacrifice to them with milk sweetened with honey: convinced that by the allurements of pleasure, these souls would desire to pass into generation, with the very beginning of which milk is generally produced.

Besides the southern regions produce small bodies because being attenuated by the heat they are diminished and dried up: and by a contrary reason all bodies generated in the north are large, as is evident in the Celtae or Gauls, Thracians, and Scythians; and these regions are humid and abound with much pasture. For the word Boreas is derived from the Greek βορά [bora], which signifies aliment. Hence also the wind which blows from a land abounding in nutriment is called βορράς [borras] or nutritive. From these causes therefore the northern parts are properly adapted to the class of souls obnoxious to mortality and generation; but the southern quarter to immortals, exempt from the mutability inseparable from the flowing realms of gen-

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<sup>6</sup> In the original: ἰστάσιν οὖν καὶ σύμβολον τῆς μεσημβρίας καὶ τοῦ νότου, ἐπὶ τῇ θύρᾳ μεσημβριάζοντος τοῦ Θεοῦ. Which Holstenius translates most erroneously as follows: "Austrum igitur meridei symbolum flatuunt: cum Deus meridiano tempore ostio immineat."



eration: in the same manner as the east is attributed to the gods, and the west to daemons. Hence since diversity is the origin of nature, the ancients considered every thing with a double entrance, as the symbol of nature. For the progression of things is either through an intelligible or a sensible nature. And if through a sensible nature, either through the sphere of the fixed stars, or through the orbs of the planets; and again either with an immortal or a mortal motion. Likewise one centre or hinge of the world is above the earth, but the other is subterranean; and one part of the heavens is eastern, and another western. In like manner some parts of the world have a dexter, and others a sinister position. Thus too night is opposed to day; and the harmony of the universe consists from the amicable junction of contrary and not similar natures. Plato also makes mention of two gates, one of which affords a passage to those ascending into the heavens, the other to those descending on the earth: and theologians place the sun and moon as the gates of souls, which ascend through the sun and descend through the moon. So, according to Homer,

*Two urns by Jove's high throne have ever stood,  
The source of evil one, and one of good.*

*Iliad xxiv, 527*

But Plato, in his *Gorgias* [493a], by vases understands souls, some of which are beneficent and others malignant, and again some are rational and others irrational. But souls are denominated vases because they are capacious of certain energies and habits, after the manner of vessels. In Hesiod too we find one vase shut, but the other opened by pleasure, who diffuses its contents, and leaves nothing but hope behind. For in whatever concerns a depraved soul, diffused about the dark and turbulent nature of matter, deserts the proper order of its essence; in all these, it is accustomed to nourish itself with the pleasing though delusive prospects of hope.

Since then every twofold division is a symbol of nature, this Homeric cavern has with great propriety two gates, numerically different; the one peculiar to gods and pure souls; but the other to such as are mortal and depraved. Hence Plato took occasion to speak of bowls, and to substitute vases for Amphora, and two gates, as we have already observed, in the place of two ports. Also Pherecydes Syrus mentions recesses, and dens, caves, gates, and ports, by which he insinuates the generation of souls, and their separation from a material nature. And thus much for an interpretation of Homer's cave, which we appear to have sufficiently explained, without adducing any farther testimonies from ancient philosophers and theologians, which would give an unreasonable extent to our discourse.

One particular however remains to be explained, and that is the symbol of the olive at the top of the cavern; since Homer appears to insinuate something egregious by giving such a position: for he does not merely say that an olive grows in this place, but that it flourishes at the head or vertex of the cave.

*High at the head a branching olive grows,  
Beneath a gloomy grotto's cool recess, &c.*

But the growth of the olive in such a situation is not fortuitous as some may suspect, since it finishes and contains the aenigma of the cave. For as the world was not produced by the blind concurrence of chance, but is the work of divine wisdom and an



intellectual nature, hence an olive, the symbol of divine wisdom, flourishes near the present cavern, which is an emblem of the material world. For the olive is the plant of Minerva, and Minerva is wisdom. And since this goddess was produced from the head of Jupiter, the theological poet gives a proper position to the olive, consecrated at the head of the port: signifying by this symbol that the universe is the offspring of an intelligible nature, separated indeed by a diversity of essence, though not by distance of place from his work; and by unremitting and ever present energies, not remote from any part of the universe, but situated as it were on its very summit, that is governing the whole with perfect wisdom from the dignity and excellence of his nature. But since an olive always flourishes, it bears a similitude peculiar and convenient to the revolutions of souls in this material region. For in summer the white part of the leaves is upwards, but in winter it is bent downwards. On this account also in prayers and supplications they extend the branches of an olive, presaging from this omen that they shall exchange the sorrowful darkness of danger for the fair light of security and peace. But the olive is not only of an ever-flourishing nature, it likewise bears fruit, which is the reward of labour, is sacred to Minerva, supplies the victors in athletic labours with crowns, and affords a friendly branch to the suppliant petitioner. Thus too the world is governed by an intellectual nature, and a wisdom ever flourishing and vigilant, who also bestows on the conquerors in the athletic race of life, the crown of victory, as the reward of severe toil, and patient perseverance: and the mighty builder who supports the universe by his divine energies invigorates miserable and suppliant souls, contending for the most glorious of all prizes, the olympiad of the soul.

In this cave therefore, says Homer, all external possessions must be deposited; here, naked and assuming a suppliant habit, afflicted in body, and casting aside every thing superfluous, sense too being averse from needless possessions, it is requisite to sit at the foot of the olive, and consult with Minerva, by what means we may most effectually amputate and destroy that hostile rout of passions, which lurk in the secret recesses of the soul. Indeed as it appears to me it was not without foundation that Numenius thought the person of Ulysses in the *Odyssey* represented to us a man who passes in a regular manner over the dark and stormy sea of generation;<sup>7</sup> and thus at length arrives at that region, where tempests and seas are unknown, and finds a nation

*Who ne'er knew salt, or heard the billows roar.*

Again, according to Plato, the deep, the sea, and a tempest are so many symbols of the constitution of matter: and on this account, I think, the poet called that port by the name of the marine god Phorcys.

*But it is the port of the ancient marine Phorcys.*<sup>8</sup>

Likewise his daughter Thoosa is mentioned in the beginning of the *Odyssey*. But from Thoosa the Cyclops was born, whom Ulysses deprived of sight that he might by this means while sailing over the stormy ocean be reminded of his sins, till he was

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<sup>7</sup> [For the text of this note see the final section entitled *On the wanderings of Ulysses*, p. 194.]

<sup>8</sup> Φόρκυντος δε τις εστι λιμῶν αλισιο γερόντος.



safely landed in his native country. On this account too, a seat under the olive is proper to Ulysses, as to one who supplicates divinity, and would please his natal daemon with a suppliant branch. For indeed it will not be lawful for any one to depart from this sensible life in a regular way and in the shortest time, who blinds and irritates his material daemon; but he who dares to do this will be pursued by the anger of the marine and material gods, whom it is first requisite to appease, by sacrifices, labours, and patient endurance; at one time by contending with perturbations, at another time by employing stratagems of various kinds, by all which he transmutes himself into different forms; so that at length being stripped of the torn garments by which his true person was concealed, he may recover the ruined empire of his soul. Nor will he even then be freed from molestation, till he has entirely passed over the raging sea, and taken a long farewell of its storms; till though connected with a mortal nature, through deep attention to intelligible concerns, he becomes so ignorant of marine and material operations, as to mistake an oar for a cornvan.

Nor it is proper to believe that interpretations of this kind are forced, and are nothing more than the conjectures of ingenious men: but when we consider the great wisdom of antiquity, and how much Homer excelled in prudence and in every kind of virtue, we ought not to doubt but that he has secretly represented the images of divine things under the concealments of fable. For it is not possible that this whole exposition could be devised, unless from certain established truths, an occasion of fiction had been given. But rejecting the discussion of this to another work, we shall here finish our proposed explication of the cave of the nymphs.

## Endnotes

1 Macrobius in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of his comment on Scipio's dream has derived some of the ancient arcana which it contains from the present part of this admirable work. What he has farther added, I shall translate on account of its excellence, and connection with the above passage of Porphyry.

“Pythagoras (says he) thought that the empire of Pluto, began downwards from the milky way, because souls falling from thence, appear already to have receded from the gods. Hence he asserts, that the nutriment of milk is first offered to infants, because their first motion commences from the galaxy, when they begin to fall into terrene bodies. On this account, since those who are about to descend are yet in *Cancer*, and have not left the milky way, they rank in the order of the gods. But when by falling they arrive at the *Lion*, in this constellation, they enter on the exordium of their future condition. And, because in the *Lion*, the rudiments of birth, and certain primary exercises of human nature commence; but *Aquarius* is opposite to the lion, and presently sets, after the lion rises; hence, when the sun is in Aquarius, funeral rites are performed to departed souls; because he is then carried in a sign, which is contrary, or adverse to human life. From the confine, therefore, in which the zodiac and galaxy touch each other, the soul descending from a round figure, which is the only divine form, is produced into a cone by its defluxion. And as a line is generated from a point, and proceeds into length, from an indivisible,



so the soul from its own point, which is a monad, passes into the duad, which is the first protraction. And this is the essence which Plato in the *Timaeus* calls indivisible, and at the same time divisible, when he speaks of the fabric of the mundane soul. For as the soul of the world, so likewise that of man will be found in one respect ignorant of division, if the simplicity of a divine nature is considered; and in another respect capacious of division, if we regard the diffusion of the former through the world, and of the latter through the members of the body.

“As soon, therefore, as the soul gravitates towards body, in this first production of herself, she begins to experience a material tumult, that is, matter flowing into her essence. And this is what Plato remarks in the *Phaedo*, that the soul is drawn into body, staggering with recent intoxication; signifying by this the new drink of matter’s impetuous flood, through which the soul becoming defiled and heavy, is drawn into a terrene situation. But the starry cup, placed between Cancer and Lion, is a symbol of this mystic truth, signifying that descending souls first experience intoxication in that part of the heavens, through the influx of matter. Hence, oblivion, the companion of intoxication, there begins silently to creep into the recesses of the soul. For if souls retained in their descent to bodies the memory of divine concerns of which they were conscious in the heavens, there would be no dissension among men, concerning divinity. But all, indeed, in descending drink of oblivion; though some more, and others less. On this account, though truth is not apparent to all men on the earth, yet all exercise their opinions about it: because *a defect of memory, is the origin of opinion*. But those discover most, who have drunk least of oblivion: because they easily remember what they had known before in the heavens. Hence, that which is called *lectio* by the Latins, is called by the Greeks αναγνώσεις [anagnoseis], or repeated *knowledge*; because when we learn any truths, we recognize what we naturally knew, before material influxion, rushing into the body, had intoxicated the soul. But it is this *hyle* or matter which composes all that body of the world, which we every where perceive adorned with the impressions of forms. Its highest and purest part, however, by which divine natures are either sustained or composed is called *nectar*, and is believed to be the drink of the gods: but its more inferior and turbid part is the drink of souls. And this is what the ancients have denominated the river of Lethe. But according to the Orphic writers the νοῦς υλικός [nous hylikos] or *material intellect*, is Bacchus, who, proceeding from that indivisible part, is divided into particulars. Hence, in the Orphic mysteries, he is reported to have been torn in pieces, by Titanic fury, and the fragments being buried, are said to have risen entire, and collected into one; because intellect by passing into a divisible from an indivisible nature, and again returning from divisible to indivisible, both accomplishes the duties of the world, and does not desert the arcana of its own nature.

“The soul, therefore, falling with this first weight, from the zodiac, and milkyway into each of the subject spheres, is not only clothed with the accession of a luminous body, but produces the particular motions which it is to exercise in the respective orbs. Thus in Saturn, it energises according to a ratiocinative



and intellective power, which they call λογιστικόν [logistikon], and θεωρητικόν [theoretikon]: in the sphere of Jove, according to the power of acting, which is called πρακτικόν [praktikon]: in that of Mars, according to the ardour of courage, which is denominated θυμικόν [thymikon]: in the orb of the sun, according to a sensitive and phantastic nature, which they call αισθητικόν [aisthetikon] and φανταστικόν [phantastikon]: but according to the motion of desire, which is denominated επιθυμητικόν [epithymetikon], in the planet Venus: of pronouncing and interpreting what is perceives, which is called ερμηνευτικόν [hermeneutikon], in the orb of Mercury; and according to a plantal nature, and a power of acting on body, which is denominated φυτικόν [phytikon] when it enters the lunar globe. And this sphere, as it is the last among the divine orders, so it is the first in our terrene situation. For this body, as it is the dregs of divine concerns, so it is the first substance of an animal. And this is the difference between terrene and supernal bodies (under which last, I comprehend the heavens, the stars, and the other elements) that the latter are called upwards to be the seat of the soul, and merit immortality from the very nature of the region, and an imitation of sublimity; but the soul is drawn down to these terrene bodies, and is on this account reported to die, when it is inclosed in this fallen region, and the seat of mortality. Nor ought it to cause any disturbance, that we have so often named the death of the soul, which we have pronounced to be immortal. For the soul is not extinguished by its own proper death, but is only overwhelmed for a time. Nor does it lose the benefit of perpetuity, by its temporal demersion: since when it deserves to be purified from the contagion of vice, through its entire refinement from body; it will be restored to the light of perennial life, and will return to its pristine integrity and perfection.”

2 This assertion of Pythagoras that the people of dreams, δήμος ονείρων, are souls situated in the milky way, admirably contributes to elucidate the following passage in the 24th book of the Odyssey, respecting the descent of the suitors’ souls to the region of spirits:

*Πάρ δ’ ἴσαν Ωκεανού τε ροάς και Λευκάδα πέτρην,  
Ἡδέ παρ’ ηελίοιο πύλας και δήμον ονείρων  
Ἡσαν, αἴψα δι’ ἴκοντο κατ’ ασφοδελόν λειμώνα,  
Ἐνθά τε ναίουσι ψυχαί εἶδωλα καμόντων.*

*I.e.*

“But they passed beyond the flowing waters of the ocean, and the rock Leucas, and the gates of the sun, and the people of dreams: and they immediately came into meadows of asphodel, where souls the images of the dead reside.”

For it is evident from hence that the souls of the suitors passed through the galaxy, or the seats of the blessed, according to the most ancient theology: and I doubt not but Homer describes in these lines the complicated progression of an impure soul until it regains its original habitation in the stars, and again begins to gravitate to this terrene abode. This, I presume, will be manifest from the following elucidation of these admirable lines.



In the first place these souls are said to pass over *the flowing waters of the ocean*, and the *Leucadian*, or *white rock*. Now by this nothing more is meant than the flight of the suitors' souls to the extremity of the earth, in order to a subterranean descent: for, according to the most ancient opinion, the earth is bounded by the ocean; and the Leucadian rock may, as Eustathius observes, be some rock on the earth's extremity, which receives the last rays of the sun. Afterwards they are said to pass through *the gates of the sun*, by which, as Porphyry informs us above, we must understand the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn: and as Capricorn is subterranean, and affords a passage to ascending immortals, we must conceive that they enter through this prior to the tropic of Cancer. But in order to comprehend the perfect propriety of this transition, we must observe that the souls of the suitors on account of their impurity, are punished in the recesses of the earth, before they enter the celestial tropics, and pass into the meadows of Pluto. This the poet evidently evinces by the *screaking noise* which they utter, and the squalid paths through which they descend: a noise of this kind as Proclus well observes, (in Plat. Repub.)

“representing a species of life solely given to appetite and imagination.”

After they have been purified therefore by subterranean punishment, they are fit to ascend to *the people of dreams*, or the souls of the blessed situated in the milky way. However as the soul, on account of her middle nature, is incapable of a perpetual sameness of situation, but is formed for infinite circulations (as will be demonstrated in the following elements); hence Homer, without mentioning her duration among the gods, though it is doubtless very extended, agreeable to the mystic brevity of his Muse, makes her immediately pass into *the meadows of Asphodel*, where souls the images of the dead reside. Now these *meadows of Asphodel*, form the supreme part of Pluto's dominions: for, according to Pythagoras, as we are informed by Macrobius, in the preceding note, above, the empire of Pluto commences downwards from the milky way; so that these meadows are most probably situated in *the Lion*, the constellation into which souls first fall, after they leave the tropic of Cancer. But the description of the Asphodel perfectly corresponds with, and confirms the preceding exposition. For the Asphodel is a plant, bearing a naked *starry flower*, which comprehends an ovarium, or *orbicular figure*, after the manner of a cup. And what can more aptly symbolize with the stars, than such a flower? It was usual too with the ancients to scatter this plant in the tombs of the deceased; occultly intimating most probably, the similitude of this flower to the pristine and proper habitations of the soul. And hence it derived its appellation from σποδῶς, ashes, δια την των καιομένων νεκρών σποδόν, i.e. *from the ashes of burnt dead bodies*.

In these meadows, then, the *images of the dead* are said to reside. Now these εἰδῶλα or *images*, are no other than those vehicles of the soul, which have been so copiously, and admirably discussed by Synesius, in the preceding quotation from his book on dreams, and which, from their residence in the starry regions, must be luciform, ethereal, and pure. It is this phantastic spirit, or primary vehicle of the soul, which Virgil alludes to, in these beautiful lines:

. . . exinde per amplum  
Mittimur Elysium, et pauci laeta arva tenemus:  
Donec longa dies perfecto temporis orbe



*Concretum exemit labem, purumque reliquit  
Aetherium sensum, atque aura simplicis ignem.*

I.e.

“We are afterwards sent through ample Elysium, and a few of us possess the joyful plains: till a long period, when the revolving orb of time has perfected its circulation, frees the soul from its concrete stains, and leaves the ethereal sense pure, together with *the fire (or splendour) of simple ether.*”

For here he evidently conjoins the rational soul, or *the ethereal sense*, with its splendid vehicle, or *the fire of simple ether*; since it is well known that this vehicle, according to Plato, is rendered by proper purgation αυγοειδής [augoeides], or *luciform*, and divine. It must here however be observed that souls in these *meadows of asphodel*, or *summit of Pluto’s empire*, are in a falling state; or in other words through the secret influx of matter begin to desire a terrene situation. And this explains the reason why Hercules in the infernal regions is represented by Homer boasting of his terrene exploits and glorying in his pristine valour; why Achilles laments his situation in these abodes; and souls in general are engaged in pursuits similar to their employment on the earth: for all this is the natural consequence of a propensity to a mortal nature, and a desertion of the regions every way lucid and divine. Let the reader too observe, that, according to the arcana of the Platonic doctrine, the first and truest seat of the soul is in the intelligible world, where she lives entirely divested of body, and enjoys the ultimate felicity of her nature. And this is what Homer divinely insinuates when he says:

*Του δε μετ’ εισενοησα βίην Ηρακληείην  
Είδωλον αυτός δε μετ’ αθανάτοισι θεοίοισι  
Τέρεται εν θαλίης, και έχει καλλίσφυρον Ηβην. – κ. τ. λ.*

I.e.

“after this I saw the Herculean power, or image: but Hercules himself is with the immortal gods, delighting in celestial banquets, and enjoying the beautiful-footed Hebe.”

Since for the soul to dwell with the gods, entirely separated from its vehicle, is to abide in the intelligible world, and to exercise, as Plotinus expresses it, the more sacred contests of wisdom.

Should it be enquired why departed souls, though in a state of felicity are compared by Homer to *dreams* and shadows, I answer with Porphyry (apud Stob. p. 132) that they are shadows with respect to human concerns, both because they are destitute of body, and are void of memory: for after they have passed the Stygian river, they are entirely ignorant of their pristine life on the earth, though they recognize and converse with each other, as is evident from the discourses between Patroclus, Ajax, and Antilochus. Indeed together with memory, they lose all knowledge of corporeal resemblances, which are rendered apparent through the ministry of the phantasy. For since the phantasy consists from memory, as Plato asserts in the *Philebus* [40a], whatever we imagine perishes with the memory; and when this is taken away all the perturbations of the soul are removed, as she then becomes wholly intellectual, and passes into a state divinely prudent and wise. However, by means of the blood,



which, as we have before observed, is, according to Homer, the instrument of the phantastic soul, departed spirits recognize material forms, and recollect their pristine condition on the earth. And to the phantasy reasoning pertains; since it is nothing more than an aggregation of memory, collected through imaginations, into the judgment of universals. But this is very different from the *intellective energy*, acquired by the soul beyond Acheron, which Cocytus and Pyriphlegethon fill, from the whirling streams of the dreadful Styx. Let the reader, however, remember that the phantasy is twofold, communicating in its supreme part with the rational soul, and in its inferior part with sense; and that it is this inferior part which the soul deserts, when it acquires an intellectual condition of being.



The Cave of the Storm Nymphs (1903) Sir Edward John Poynter

