

Eros and Psyche

Ascent

Having attempted to look upon Cupid (Eros) by the light of an oil lamp and in the process having burnt him, Psyche has lost her beloved, and finds herself exiled from the beautiful palace, and from his nocturnal embraces. In her initial state of confusion she attempts to drown herself in a river, but it sends a wave to impel her to the bank, upon which Pan sits – and he has advised her, pregnant though she was, to search the whole earth for Cupid and to try to win him back

But before she had travelled far, with painful steps pursuing an unknown path, she drew near to a city in which the husband of one of her sisters was king. This, as soon as she understood, she desired that her arrival might be announced to her sister. Psyche was accordingly introduced to her, and when the embraces of mutual salutation were over, to her sister inquiring the cause of her visit, she thus began: “You doubtless remember the advice you gave me, I mean, that I should destroy with a razor the beast that lay with me under the name of a husband, before, through voracious gluttony, he destroyed me: but soon as, by the assistance of the conscious light, I beheld his countenance, I saw a spectacle perfectly wonderful and divine, the very son himself of the Goddess Venus, Cupid himself I say, sunk in gentle sleep. And while struck with astonishment at the sight of such a mighty good, and disturbed through too great an abundance of pleasure, I laboured under the want of enjoyment, by a most dire misfortune, the boiling oil bubbled to the summit of the lamp, and leaped on the shoulder of the God. Being immediately awakened by the pain, when he beheld me armed with the weapon and the light, ‘From whence,’ said he, ‘proceeds this dire wickedness of thine? Immediately quit my bed, and depart from my sight. I will now immediately join myself in marriage to your sister (mentioning you expressly by name,) and then he ordered Zephyr to blow me beyond the boundaries of his habitation.’”

Psyche had scarcely ended her narration, when the sister, agitated by the incentives of lust and baneful envy, having deceived her husband by a preconcerted fiction respecting the death of her parents, immediately set sail for the rock on which Psyche had been exposed; and though another wind then blowed, yet, elated with blind hope, she exclaimed, “Receive me, Cupid, a wife worthy thy embraces; and thou, Zephyr, receive thy mistress.” Then leaping up as high as she was able, she fell headlong from the mountain, unable even when dead to arrive at the palace of Cupid. For her limbs were torn in pieces by the rocks as she fell, and her bowels became, as they deserved to be, food for birds and beasts of prey. Nor was the vengeance which remained to be inflicted slow in its approaches: for Psyche with wandering steps arrived at another city, where her other sister reigned, who, deceived, and sinning in the same manner, hastened to the rock, and died just in the same way her sister had done before.

In the meantime, while Psyche wandered over various realms, anxiously searching after Cupid, he, through the pain of the wound from the lamp, lay groaning in the bedchamber of his mother. Then that extremely white bird, the sea-gull, who swims with his wings on the waves of the sea, hastily merged himself in the profound bosom of the ocean. There,

placing himself near Venus, as she was bathing and swimming, he informed her that her son was severely burnt, that he was groaning with the pain of the wound, and that his cure was doubtful. That, besides this, the whole family of Venus was every where reviled; in the first place, Cupid, because he had retired to a mountain, in order to have illicit connection with a girl; and, in the next place, said he, yourself, by thus withdrawing to swim in the sea. Hence it is said, continued the bird, that there is no longer any pleasure, elegance, and festivity to be found, but that every thing is inelegant, rustic, and horrid; that nuptial ties, social friendships, and love of children, are no more; but in their place have succeeded enormous filth, and the bitter loathing of sordid compacts. Thus did this loquacious and impertinent bird defame the son of Venus, by murmuring scandal in her ear.

But Venus, being enraged at the information, demanded to know the name and nature of her sons secret lover, and on hearing that it is the mortal, Psyche, exclaimed, "Does he then love her who is the rival of my beauty, and who is emulous of my name?" Thus complaining, she immediately emerged from the sea, and hastened to her golden bedchamber, where she found her son sick, as she had been told, and so vehemently raving through the pain, that she heard him before she reached the doors. "This is fine conduct, indeed!" said she, "and very agreeable to *our* dignified birth, and *your* temperance: that you should trample on the precepts of your mistress and mother, and, so far from tormenting my enemy with sordid love, take her to your licentious and immature embraces, on purpose that I might suffer the indignity of having my enemy for my daughter-in-law."

The angry Goddess, threatens to disown Cupid and considers sending for Sobriety who would "rifle his quiver, disarm his arrows, unbend his bow, extinguish his torch, and punish his body with still sharper remedies." Having thus given vent to her passion, full of venereal bile, she rushed impetuously out of doors. But Ceres and Juno immediately attended her, and, perceiving her angry countenance, asked her why she did so great an injury to the gracefulness of her sparkling eyes, by such a sullen contraction of her brows? To whom Venus thus replied: "You are come very opportunely to be the executioners of that violence which has taken possession of my ardent breast. I beg, therefore, that with the utmost care and diligence you will inquire after the fugitive Psyche; for the infamous report respecting my house, and the conduct of my unworthy son, cannot be unknown to you."

Then the two Goddesses, being ignorant of what had happened, thus endeavoured to mitigate the raging anger of Venus: "What offence has your son committed, that you so violently oppose his pleasures, and are impatient to destroy her whom he loves? What crime, we beseech you, can he be charged with in loving, without restraint, a beautiful virgin? Can you be ignorant of his sex and youth? Or have you, indeed, forgot how old he is? What, because he carries his years elegantly, would you always consider him as a boy? Is it possible, that you, who are his mother, and besides this a woman of understanding, can be determined always to pry inquisitively into his sport, blame his luxury and amours, and reprobate, in your beautiful son, your own arts and delights? But what God or man will suffer you to disseminate every where among the people amorous desires, when you restrain the gallantry of your own house, and thus shut up the public shop of female vices?" The fear of his darts induced them to pay this flattery to absent Cupid, in a

gracious patronage of his cause. But Venus, indignant that her injuries were thus ridiculously treated, with haughty mien and hasty step, passed on to the ocean.

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In the meantime, Psyche was driven about from place to place, variously wandering, and with restless mind enquiring after her husband; her desire of finding him increasing in proportion to the difficulty of the search. For, though she had incurred his anger, she hoped she should be able to appease him by suppliant prayers, if she could not allure him by the tender blandishments of a wife. Perceiving, therefore, a temple on the summit of a lofty mountain, "How can I tell," said she, "but this may be the residence of my lord;" and immediately she directed her hasty steps thither, incited by hope and desire, though spent with unceasing toil. And now, having gained the highest ridges of the mountain, she enters the temple, in which she saw ears of corn, some of which lay in a heap, some were twisted into garlands, and some were mingled with ears of barley. Here, likewise, were scythes, and all the instruments of harvest, but scattered in a confused and careless manner, and thrown, as is usually the case in the heat of summer, out of the weary hands of the reapers.

Psyche, on seeing this confusion, carefully separated the mingled heaps, and properly arranged them, when separated, believing that she ought not to neglect the temples and ceremonies of any divinity, but that she should implore the benevolent pity of all the Gods. The bountiful Ceres, whose temple this was, finds her thus anxiously and sedulously employed, and addresses her, at a distance, as follows: "Alas! miserable Psyche, Venus, full of rage and indignation, inquires after thy footsteps with anxious search, dooms thee to the most severe punishment, and importunately demands revenge, with all the powers of her divinity. Canst thou therefore now busy thyself about my affairs, or think of any thing else but thy own safety?"

Then Psyche, throwing herself at the feet of the Goddess, watering them with abundant weeping, and sweeping the ground with her dishevelled locks, entreated pardon of her divinity with numerous prayers. "I beseech thee," says she, "by thy fruit-bearing right hand, by the joyful ceremonies of harvest, by the occult sacred concerns of the *cistæ*, by the winged car of thy ministrant dragons, the furrows of the Sicilian soil, the rapacious chariot, and the detaining earth, by the dark descending ceremonies attending the marriage of Proserpine, and the ascending rites which accompanied the luminous discovery of thy daughter, and by other arcana which Eleusis, the Attic sanctuary, conceals in profound silence, support the soul of Psyche thy suppliant! Suffer me to conceal myself in that heap of corn, for a few days, till the raging anger of so great a Goddess is mitigated by time; or at least permit me to stay here till my bodily powers, weakened by long-continued labour, become invigorated by an interval of rest."

To this prayer Ceres thus replied: "I am moved by your weeping supplications, and desire to assist you; but I cannot with propriety incur the displeasure of a kindred Goddess, to whom I am united by an ancient league of friendship. Depart, therefore, from this temple immediately, and take in good part my not detaining and making you a prisoner."

Psyche, being thus repulsed, contrary to her hopes, and oppressed with a double sorrow, retired from the temple, and in a dark grove of the valley, beneath the mountain, beheld a fane of elegant structure; and, unwilling to omit any way, though dubious, which might

lead to better hope, and determined to implore the pardon of every God, she suppliantly approached the sacred doors. Here she perceived splendid gifts, and parts of garments interwoven with golden letters, fixed to the branches of the trees, and the pillars of the temple; the letters signifying, that these were votive offerings for benefits received, and exhibiting the name of the Goddess to whom they were dedicated.

Then Psyche, throwing herself on her knees, and embracing the altar, having first wiped away her tears, thus prayed: "O sister and wife of the mighty Jupiter! O thou whom all the east venerates under the name of Zygia, and all the west denominates Lucina! be thou, Juno, the saviour in this my extreme misfortune, and deliver me, weary with the toils of such long-continued labours, from the fear of my present impending danger; for I know that thou art accustomed voluntarily to relieve the distresses of the pregnant."

Juno immediately presented herself to Psyche supplicating, in all the august dignity of her divinity, and said, "I would most willingly have my daughter-in-law, Venus, yield to your prayers; but decency will not permit me to act contrary to the will of Venus, whom I have always loved as my own daughter. Besides, the law forbids me to receive into my protection any fugitive servant, without the consent of her mistress."

But Psyche, now terrified with this second shipwreck of her fortune, and despairing of being able to recover her volatile husband, having laid aside all hope of safety, thus consulted with her own thoughts. "What other relief for my sorrows can now be either attempted or procured since even Goddesses cannot, though willing, afford me assistance? To what place shall I again direct my wandering steps, when entangled in such inextricable nets? Concealed in what habitations or darkness, can I escape the inevitable eyes of the mighty Venus? My soul, bravely renounce all thy vain little hopes, voluntarily surrender thyself into the hands of thy mistress, and try, though late, to mitigate her rage by the modesty of thy behaviour. Besides, thou mayest perhaps find him in the house of his mother, whom thou hast so long sought for in vain." Being thus prepared to enter on her dubious duty, or rather certain destruction, she considered with herself how she should begin her supplications to Venus.

Venus, meanwhile had directed her steps to the royal palace of Jupiter, and proudly demanded the necessary assistance of the vocal God Mercury, asking him to proclaim news of her runaway slave, clearly describing the marks by which she may be known, that no one may plead ignorance for the crime of unlawfully concealing her." At the same time, she gave him a small volume, in which the name of Psyche was written, and every other particular respecting her, after which she immediately returned home. Nor was Mercury negligent in the performance of her commands; for, running every where, through all nations, he cried her in the following words: "If any one can seize in her flight, or discover where a fugitive king's daughter, a servant of Venus, and of the name of Psyche, lies concealed, let him or her repair to Mercury, the crier, at the temple or Venus Murtia, and receive, as a reward of the discovery, seven sweet kisses from Venus herself, and one exquisitely delicious touch of her charming tongue."

Mercury having thus executed the proclamation of Venus, Psyche abandoned all thoughts of any farther delay. And now, as she approached the gates of her mistress, she was met by one of the servants of Venus, named Custom, who immediately exclaimed, as loud as

she was able, "At length, then, most wicked slave, do you begin to know that you have a mistress? And do you likewise pretend to be ignorant of the great fatigue we have endured in endeavouring to find you out? But it is well that you have fallen into my hands; for now you have entered within the very gates of purgation, to receive, without delay, the punishment of such obstinacy."

After she had thus reviled Psyche, she audaciously twisted her hands in her hair, and dragged her along without resistance. But Venus, as soon as she beheld her thus brought into her presence, burst into a loud laugh, such as agitates those who are transported with vehement rage; and, shaking her head, "At length," says she, "have you thought proper to come and pay your respects to your mother-in-law? Or did you rather come to see your sick husband, who is yet dangerously ill through the wound which you gave him? But take courage, for your reception will be such as a good mother-in-law ought to give. Where then," said she, "are my servants Solicitude and Sorrow?" These, immediately attending, in obedience to the commands of their mistress, scourged and inflicted other torments on the miserable Psyche, and afterwards brought her again into the presence of Venus.

Then Venus, again laughing: "Behold," said she, "her swelling belly moves my compassion, since it is through this that she is to make me a happy grandmother. Happy, indeed, am I, who, in the very flower of my age, shall be called a grandmother! And the son of a vile slave shall be dignified with the appellation of the grandson of Venus! Though, indeed, I foolishly call him my grandson, for marriages unequal, and, besides this, made in a village, without any witnesses, and without the father's consent, can never be deemed legitimate; so that thy offspring must be a bastard, even if I should suffer thee to bring him into the light."

Having severely chastised her in various ways, she then took wheat, barley, millet, poppy-seed, vetches, lentils, and beans, and, mixing them into one globular heap, she thus spoke to her: "You seem to me a servant so deformed, as to be incapable of deserving your lover by any other means than the diligent performance of menial employments. I will, therefore, myself make trial of your abilities as a housewife. Take and separate this mass of seeds, and having properly disposed the several grains apart from each other, give me a proof of your expedition, by finishing the task before evening." Thus spoke Venus, and immediately after departed to a wedding supper.

But Psyche, astonished at the prodigious command, sat silent and stupid, without moving a hand to the disordered and inextricable mass. Then a little ant, a native of the fields, vehemently commiserating such prodigious difficulty and labour, and execrating the step-mother's cruelty towards the wife of the mighty God Cupid, rapidly summoned together the populous tribe of neighbouring ants, and thus addressed them: "Take pity, ye active nurslings of the all-parent earth! Take pity, and with prompt celerity, assist the wife of Love, a beautiful young woman, who is now in a dangerous situation."

Immediately the six-footed people rushed forth to her assistance in undulating tribes, and with the utmost diligence separated the whole heap, grain by grain, and, having properly sorted the confusedly mingled species, rapidly vanished from her sight.

But Venus, on the commencement of night, returns from the nuptial banquet, moist with wine, fragrant with rich ointments, and having her body elegantly bound with shining roses.

And as soon as she saw the diligence which had been exerted on the wonderful labour, "Most vile creature," said she, "this is not the work of your hands, but of his whom, to your own and his misfortune, you have pleased;" and, throwing her a piece of household bread, she retired to rest.

In the meantime, Cupid was very closely confined to his bedchamber, in the interior part of the house, partly lest he should injure his wound by petulant luxury, and partly lest he should associate with his beloved. Thus the lovers, being separated from each other under one roof, passed away, exhausted with grief, the cruel night. But as soon as Aurora had ushered in the morning, Venus having called Psyche, thus addressed her: "Do you perceive yonder grove which stretches itself to a considerable distance along the margin of a river, whose deepest whirlpools look down upon a neighbouring fountain? There shining sheep of a golden colour wander about, feeding without a shepherd. I think it fit that you should bring me immediately a flock of that precious wool, whatever may be the difficulty of procuring it."

Psyche willingly rose, not with any intention of executing this command, but to procure rest from her misfortunes, by hurling herself headlong from the rock into the river. But when she came to the brink, a reed, the sweet nurse of music, being divinely inspired, thus prophetically spoke in soft and harmonious murmurs: "Psyche! exercised in mighty sorrows, neither pollute my sacred waters by thy most miserable death, nor yet venture to approach the formidable sheep on the opposite bank, while, borrowing heat from the burning radiance of the sun, they are transported with savage rage, and are the destruction of mortals, either by their sharp horns, stony foreheads, or venomous bites. But when the meridian sun has driven the cattle to the shade, and the serene spirit of the flood lulled them to rest, then you may hide yourself under yonder lofty plane tree, which drinks of the same river with myself, and as soon as the sheep have mitigated their fury, on shaking the leaves of a neighbouring grove, you will find the woolly gold every where sticking to the roots of the trees." Thus the simple and humane reed taught the wretched Psyche how to accomplish this dangerous enterprise with safety.

Psyche, therefore, observing all the directions, found her obedience was not in vain, but returned to Venus with her bosom full of the delicate golden fleece. Yet she was not able to procure the approbation of her mistress by this her second perilous labour. But Venus, smiling bitterly with severe eyebrows, thus addressed her: "I am not ignorant that you are not the performer of this task also; but I will now try whether you are endued with a courageous mind and singular prudence. Do you see the summit of yonder lofty mountain, from which the dusky waters of a black fountain fall, and which, confined in the channel of the neighbouring valley, irrigate the Stygian marshes, and supply the hoarse streams of Cocytus? Bring me immediately in this little urn, liquid dew drawn from the most inmost influx of the lofty fountain." Thus speaking, she gave her a vessel of polished crystal, and at the same time threatened her more severely than before.

But Psyche, with the utmost celerity, ascended to the very summit of the mountain, presuming that there at least she should find the period of her most miserable life. However, when she arrived at the confines of the vertex, she saw the deadly difficulty of the vast undertaking. For a rock enormously lofty, and inaccessibly rugged, vomited from its middle the horrid waters of the fountain, which, immediately falling headlong in winding

streams, rushed suddenly through a narrow channel into the neighbouring valley. On the right and left hand they creep through hollow rocks, over which fierce dragons stretch out their long necks, and with unwinking vigilance keep a perpetual watch. And now the vocal waters shook themselves, and exclaimed as they rolled along, "Depart; what do you attempt? Look and see what you do; take care, fly, or you will perish."

Psyche, therefore, petrified through the impossibility of accomplishing the task, though she was present in body, was absent in mind, and being perfectly buried under the huge bulk of the inextricable danger, was even deprived of the benefit of tears, the last solace of the wretched. But the sorrow of the innocent soul is not concealed from the penetrating eyes of Providence. For the rapacious eagle, that royal bird of Jupiter, on a sudden flew to her with expanded wings, calling to mind his ancient obligations to Cupid, for enabling him to elevate to heaven the Phrygian cup-bearer [Ganymedes] to Jupiter; and reverencing the divinity of Cupid, in the labours of his wife, deserted the lofty paths of Jupiter, and bringing with him seasonable assistance, thus addressed her: "Can you, in other respects of an undesigning disposition, and unexperienced in attempts of this kind, ever hope to steal one drop of this most holy and no less terrible fountain? Have you not heard, at least, that these Stygian waters are formidable even to Jupiter himself, and that as you swear by the divinity of the Gods, so they are accustomed to swear by the majesty of Styx?¹ But give me that little urn." Immediately, therefore, taking it in haste, and poising it on his moving wings, he sailed between the cheeks of raging teeth, and the three-forked vibrating tongues of the dragons, and steering his course to the right and to the left, drew off the reluctant waters, which previously admonished him that he might depart in safety, because he pretended Venus herself wanted some of the water, and had ordered him to procure it. And on this account, his access to the fountain was facilitated.

Psyche, therefore, joyfully receiving the full urn, returned with the utmost celerity to Venus. Yet she was not able, even by the accomplishment of this dangerous enterprise, to appease the anger of the raging Goddess. For, threatening her with still more severe endurance, she thus addressed her, a smile, the harbinger of ruin, accompanying her words: "You appear to me to be a profound and malevolent magician, or you never could with so much dexterity have performed my commands: but there is one task more, my dear, which you ought to perform. Take this box, (she immediately gave it her), and direct your course to the infernal regions and the deadly palace of Pluto. Then presenting the box to Proserpine, say, Venus requests you to send her a small portion of your beauty, at least as much as may be sufficient for one short day; for she has consumed all the beauty she possessed, through the attention which she pays to her diseased son. But return with the utmost expedition; for it is necessary that I should adorn myself with this beauty of Proserpine, as I must go to the theatre of the Gods."

Psyche was now truly sensible, that she was arrived at the extremity of her evil fortune; and clearly perceived that, all further pretences being laid aside, she was impelled to immediate destruction, since she was forced to direct her steps to Tartarus and the shades below. Hence, without any farther delay, she ascended a lofty tower, that she might from

¹ Styx, considered according to its first subsistence, appears to me to be that cause by which divine natures retain an immutable sameness of essence. The immutability, therefore, of divine energy, is signified by the Gods swearing by Styx.

thence hurl herself headlong: for she considered that she should thus descend by a straight road, and in a beautiful manner, to the infernal regions. But she was no sooner arrived there, than the tower suddenly addressed her in the following words:

“Why, O miserable creature, dost thou seek to destroy thyself by falling headlong from hence? And why dost thou rashly sink under this thy last danger and endurance? For as soon as thy breath shall thus be separated from thy body, thou wilt indeed descend to profound Tartarus, but canst not by any means return from thence. Listen, therefore, to me. Near Lacedæmon, concealed in devious places, seek Tenarus; for there you will find the cavity through which Pluto breathes, and the impassable road presents itself to the view through the yawning gates. As soon as you have passed the threshold of this cavity, you proceed in a direct path to the palace of Pluto. You ought not, however, to pass through those shades with empty hands, but should take a sop of barley bread, soaked in hydromel, in both your hands, and in your mouth two pieces of money. And now, when you have accomplished a good part of your deadly journey, you will meet a lame ass laden with wood, with a driver as lame as himself, who will ask you to reach him certain cords to fasten the burden which has fallen from the ass; but be careful that you pass by him in silence. Then, without any delay, proceed till you arrive at the dead river, in which Charon, immediately demanding his fee, in his patched boat ferries over the passengers to the farthest shore.

“To this squalid old man give one of the pieces of money which you carry with you; yet in such a manner, that he may take it with his own hand from your mouth. While you are passing over the sluggish river, a certain dead old man, floating on its surface, and raising his putrid hand, will entreat you to take him into the boat. However, be careful that you are not influenced by an unlawful piety. Having passed over the river, and proceeded to a little distance from thence, certain old women, weaving a web, will request you to lend them a helping hand; but it is not lawful for you to touch the web. For all these, and many other particulars, are snares prepared for you by Venus, that you may drop one of the sops out of your hands. But do not suppose that this would be a trifling loss; since the want of only one of these sops, would prevent your return to light. For a huge dog, with three necks, and heads sufficiently large, fierce, and formidable, barking with his thundering jaws, terrifies in vain the dead, whom he cannot injure; and always watching before the threshold and black palace of Proserpine, guards the empty house of Pluto. Having appeased this dog with one of your sops, you may easily pass by him, and then you will immediately enter into the presence of Proserpine herself, who will receive you in a very courteous and benignant manner, desire you to repose yourself on a soft seat, and persuade you to partake of a sumptuous banquet. But seat yourself on the ground, and having asked for a piece of common bread, eat it. Then telling your message, and receiving what you came for, bribe the cruelty of the dog by the remaining sop. Afterwards, having given to the avaricious ferryman the piece of money which you have reserved, and passed his river, you will return to the choir of the celestial stars. But, above all things, I think you should particularly be cautious not to open or even look on the box which you carry, or explore that concealed treasury of divine beauty.” In this manner the propitious tower delivered its prophetic admonitions.

Psyche, therefore, without delay, proceeded to Tenarus, and taking in a proper manner her pieces of money and her sops, ran down the infernal avenue. Here, having passed by

the lame ass in silence, given the ferryman his fee, neglected the entreaties of the floating corpse, despised the fraudulent prayers of the spinsters, and lulled the rage of the horrid dog with a sop, she penetrated the palace of Proserpine. Nor did she accept the delicate seat or delicious banquet; but humbly sat at the feet of Proserpine, and being contented with a piece of common bread, delivered her embassy from Venus. Immediately after this, she received the box secretly filled and shut; and having barred the barking of the dog by the fraud of the remaining sop, and given the ferryman the other piece of money, she returned from the infernal regions much more vigorous than before. Then again enjoying and adoring the fair light of day, though she was in haste to finish her errand, she was seized with a rash curiosity: "Behold," said she, "what a foolish bearer am I of divine beauty, who do not even take the least portion of it, that I may by this means appear pleasing in the eyes of my beautiful lover." As she ended this soliloquy, she opened the box; but it contained no beauty, nor indeed any thing but an infernal and truly Stygian sleep, which being freed from its confinement, immediately invades her, oppresses all her members with a cloud of profound sleep, and detains her, fallen down in the very place where she opened the box; so that she lay motionless, and nothing else than a sleeping corpse.

But Cupid, being now recovered of his wound, and not enduring the long absence of his Psyche, gliding through the narrow window of the bedchamber in which he was confined, and having his wings invigorated by repose, flew far more swiftly than before; and dispelling the sleep from the prying fair, and again concealing it in its ancient seat, the box, roused Psyche with an innoxious touch of one of his arrows. "And behold," said he, "miserable creature, thou wouldst again have perished by a similar curiosity. Now, however, strenuously perform the task imposed on thee by my mother, and I myself will take care of the rest." Having thus spoke, the lover raised himself on high with the rowing of his wings, and Psyche immediately carried the present of Proserpine to Venus.

In the meantime, Cupid, wasting away through excess of love, and dreading the sudden severity of his mother, returns to his armoury, and having with rapid wings penetrated the summit of heaven, supplicates the mighty Jupiter, and defends his cause. Then Jupiter, stroking the little cheeks of Cupid, and kissing his hand, thus addressed him: "Though you, my son, endued with the authority of a master, never pay me that reverence which has been decreed me by the synod of the Gods, but perpetually wound this breast of mine, by which the laws of the elements and the revolutions of the stars are governed, injuring my reputation and fame by base adulteries, and sordidly changing my serene countenance into serpents, fire, wild beasts, birds, and cattle; yet remembering my own moderation, and that you have been nursed in these hands of mine, I will accomplish all that you desire."

Having thus spoke, he ordered Mercury immediately to summon all the Gods to attend; the celestial theatre being immediately filled, lofty Jupiter, sitting on his sublime throne, thus addressed the assembly of Gods: "Ye conscript Gods, whose names are registered in the white roll of the Muses, you are all well acquainted with that youth whom I have reared with my own hands, and the fiery impetus of whose first years I thought would have been restrained by some bridle or other. It is sufficient that he is every day defamed in conversation, for the adulteries and all manner of corruption of which he is the cause. Every occasion of this is to be taken away, and his puerile luxury ought to be bound in

nuptial fetters. He has made choice of a girl, and deprived her of her virginity. Let him, therefore, hold her, let him possess her, and embracing Psyche, always enjoy the object of his love.” Then turning his face to Venus, “Nor do you, my daughter,” said he, “be sorrowful on this occasion, nor fearful that your pedigree and rank will be disgraced by a mortal marriage; for I will now cause the nuptials not to be unequal, but legitimate, and agreeable to the civil law.” Immediately after this, he ordered Mercury to bring Psyche to Heaven; and as soon as she was arrived, extending to her a cup of ambrosia, “Take this,” said he, “Psyche, and be immortal; nor shall Cupid ever depart from thy embrace, but these nuptials of yours shall be perpetual.”

Then, without delay, the wedding supper was served in great abundance. The husband, reclining at the upper end of the table, embraced Psyche in his bosom; and in this manner, Jupiter was seated with Juno, and after them, the other Gods and Goddesses in their proper order. Then Jupiter was presented with a bowl of nectar, which is the wine of the Gods, by that rustic youth [Ganymedes], his cup-bearer; but Bacchus supplied the rest. Vulcan dressed the supper; the Hours purpled over every thing with roses, and other fragrant flowers; the Graces scattered balsam; the Muses sung melodiously; Apollo accompanied the lyre with his voice; and Venus beautifully danced with steps in unison with the delightful music. Thus Psyche came lawfully into the hands of Cupid; and, at length, from a mature pregnancy, a daughter was born to them, whom we denominate Delight.

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Some mythological and philosophical keys

The two sisters: “The descent of the soul into body separates it from divine souls, from whom it is filled with intelligence, power, and purity, and conjoins it with generation, and nature, and material things, from which it is filled with oblivion, wandering, and ignorance. For, in its descent, multiform lives and various vestments grow upon it, which draw it down into a mortal composition, and darken its vision of real being. It is requisite therefore that the soul which is about to be led properly from hence to that ever-vigilant nature, *should amputate those second and third powers which are suspended from its essence*, in the same manner as weeds, stones and shells, from the marine Glaucus; should restrain its externally proceeding impulses, and recollect true beings and a divine essence, from which it descended, and to which it is fit that the whole of our life should hasten.” (Proclus on the *First Alcibiades*, 234)

The second and third powers, Proclus explains, are the irrational nature and the *proaetic* part – that part which deliberates and makes choices about things which lie immediately within reach of our power to effect. This last may appear to be a most precious power – it is what we call freewill – but freewill, as useful and as necessary as it is for the soul as she deals with material life which for the human organism is full of choices, is not the power by which we reunite with the divine Eros. Freewill is involved with good and evil, but pure will is simply an engagement with the good alone.

Psyche and the anger of Venus. Synesius alludes to this part of the fable in the following passage from his admirable book *On Dreams*: “When the soul descends spontaneously to its former life, with mercenary views, it receives servitude as the reward of its mercenary labours. But this is the design of descent, that the soul may accomplish a certain servitude to the nature of the universe, prescribed by the laws of Adrastia, or inevitable fate. Hence when the soul is fascinated with material endowments, she is similarly affected to those who, though free born, are, for a certain

time, hired by wages to employments, and in this condition captivated with the beauty of some female servant, determine to act in a menial capacity under the master of their beloved object. Thus, in a similar manner, when we are profoundly delighted with external and corporeal goods, we confess that the nature of matter is beautiful, who marks our assent in her secret book; *and if, considering ourselves as free, we at any time determine to depart, she proclaims us deserters, endeavours to bring us back, and openly presenting her mystic volume to the view, apprehends us as fugitives from our mistress.* Then, indeed, the soul particularly requires fortitude and divine assistance, as it is no trifling contest to abrogate the confession and compact which she made. Besides, in this case force will be employed; for the material inflictors of punishments will then be roused to revenge by the decrees of fate against the rebels to her laws.” Venus is here understood to signify the nature of outward manifestation (for, says Plato in the *Phaedrus* writes that “Beauty alone is allotted the privilege of being the most apparent and lovely of all things”) and Psyche is that intellectual being which carries its nature into the manifested world.

Appeals to Ceres (Demeter) and Juno (Hera): The wandering across the mundane world by the soul would be never ending if she did not transform the various experiences gained into spiritual lessons. The word must be seen as a divine drama for as was often said by the sages of the Platonic tradition, “all things are full of the Gods” – this was, perhaps, the first message to those who were initiated in the Mysteries of Eleusis. It was necessary, then, for Psyche to approach the temple of Ceres, the presiding Goddess of the Mysteries, and make her appeal in the explicit terms of the rituals of the Eleusinian sanctuary: the blessing of the Goddess is given without any active opposition to the will of Venus – the gift of the mysteries is not to remove the trials of life, but to allow them to be seen in a greater frame.

Hera is the great “pushing principle” – it is she who pushes the soul into the world in order to perform the heroic quest. Heracles (literally “the glory of Hera”) is forced into performing the round of 12 labours by her stratagems and Jason is encouraged to pursue the Golden Fleece by the inspiration of the Goddess. Proclus, in his *Scholia on the Cratylus* writes, “Homer says ‘Fair-eyed venerable Hera sent the sun to the streams of the ocean,’ for he calls the thick cloud produced by Hera, the setting of the sun. The assertion likewise that the end of this name will be conjoined with the beginning, if any one frequently repeats the name of the goddess, evinces the conversion of rational souls to her which proceed from her . . .” She presides over childbirth for the same reason.

Four tests. The trials and actions move to a different level once Psyche has presented herself to her tutelary Goddess. There are four labours set before her: the sorting of seeds, the gathering of the golden fleece; the capture of the Stygian waters, and the descent into Hades to beg a portion of Persephone’s “beauty”. How are we interpret them? From one point of view they follow the trajectory of dialectic which is primarily of question of “division and collection” (for she divides the mass of seeds – the living core of things – and collects the golden fleece of the sheep). Proclus says in his *Commentary on the Parmenides*, “The science of dialectic (as understood by Plato) is that which relates everything to real being, which collects and divides according to genera and species, and which in the *Republic* (511c) is called “an arduous undertaking” and (510c) “is that where the soul proceeds from hypothesis to an unhypothetical principle, and without those images about it, *by the species themselves*, makes its way through them.” But what are the “species themselves” that Proclus speaks about – they are the real beings which reside in the eternal order of existence, and which transcend the syllogistic reasoning of *dianoia* (discursive reason) – hence the Eagle of Zeus (or Jupiter) alone can negotiate with the Stygian waters, which are, as Taylor notes, the profoundly immutable. And beyond the being of eternity lies the super-essential unities

which are received by the “one of the soul” – can we see why the final test is centred on Persephone? Her name means “bringer of death” – or that divinity which passes through the separations of death (which is why Plato says everyone is terrified of her): Proclus says, “That Proserpine (Persephone) is denominated either through judging of forms and separating them from each other, thus obscurely signifying the ablation of slaughter, or through separating souls perfectly from bodies, through a conversion to things on high, which is the most fortunate slaughter and death, to such as are worthy of it.”

Does Psyche’s “failure” in the fourth test repeat her original mistake in the night of the Palace of Eros? Why does Eros leave as a result of the first but return as a result of the second?

“For the soul when looking at things posterior to herself,² beholds the shadows and images of beings, but when she converts herself to herself she evolves her own essence, and the reasons which she contains. And at first indeed, she only as it were beholds herself; but, when she penetrates more profoundly into the knowledge of herself, she finds in herself both intellect, and the orders of beings. When however, she proceeds into her interior recesses, and into the adytum³ as it were of the soul, she perceives with her eye closed, the genus of the Gods, and the unities of beings. For all things are in us psychically, and through this we are naturally capable of knowing all things, by exciting the powers and the images of wholes which we contain.

And this is the best employment of our energy, to be extended to a divine nature itself, *having our powers at rest*, to revolve harmoniously round it, to excite all the multitude of the soul to this union, and laying aside all such things as are posterior to *the one*, to become seated and conjoined with that which is ineffable, and beyond all things.”

Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, Book 1, chapter 3.

² That is to say material things.

³ The inner and most sacred part of the temple.