Heracles, Hylas and the Uses of Reflection

Stephen R.L.Clark

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# ABSTRACT:

Gnostics and Neo-Platonists in late antiquity employed our fascination with shadows, reflections, moving images as a reminder of how far we have already fallen, seduced from heaven into a spatio-temporal and material world, and a warning of how much further we might fall, abandoning even this shared reality for more private fantasy. The images – especially statues and automata - also allowed another interpretation: by their means we might begin to clamber back to heaven. The paired images of Hylas and Heracles - the former lost to water nymphs, the latter raised up to heaven - are a cryptic guide to the Neo-Platonic cosmos. I shall be examining cinema – and near-future technology such as cyberspace and holography – for further uses of these metaphors. The late antique texts I consider include Plotinus’ *Enneads*, the Hermetic Corpus and Lucian’s defence of pantomime. Relevant films include *The Last Action Hero*, *Pleasantville, The Truman Show, The Incredible Shrinking Man, Dark City* and *The Matrix*. I draw some inspiration from Edgar Morin *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man,* and Stephen Mulhall *On Film.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

# Hylas and the Nymphs

Acquaintance, even conversation, with reflections is not now what once it was. What was once only imagined is now aggressively present: moving images from fantasy and memory besiege us. Two thousand years ago and more mirrors were bowls of water, or else polished obsidian and silver[[2]](#footnote-2). Our ancestors mostly looked *down* into them (that is why a mirror is *katoptron[[3]](#footnote-3)*), and might imagine themselves pulled down into the watery realm, literally *nympholeptoi*, nymph-caught, frenzied, besotted, like Heracles’ ward Hylas, who was pulled into the water by nymphs, and left only an echo for Heracles as he tried to find his ward[[4]](#footnote-4). Or, like Aesop’s dog, might be misled by the sight of a supposedly *other* dog with *another* and *better* bone (*Complete Fables*, 137). The story that we now more commonly remember concerns the sad fate of Narcissus, who was punished for despising the nymph Echo by being trapped in admiration of his own reflection in a pool (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.339-510). And according to the *Hermetic Corpus* the eternal Mind sees its own image reflected in the Earth, and falls in love (and so into the material world)[[5]](#footnote-5). But this was not because they knowingly admired *themselves.* Narcissus was not a narcissist! The story is told that the Apostle John, in his old age, failed to recognize the portrait of himself that a disciple had had an artist paint: he had never had reason or opportunity to notice what he looked like[[6]](#footnote-6). No doubt less saintly persons had at least some idea, silvered or sparkling, of their own features. But even those who might catch sight of themselves in some larger reflective surface, might not be able to see much: so in the temple of Despoina in Arcadia, Pausanias tells us,

On the right as you go out of the temple there is a mirror fitted into the wall. If anyone looks into this mirror, he will see himself very dimly indeed or not at all, but the actual images of the gods and the throne can be seen quite clearly.[[7]](#footnote-7)

There were also hand-held mirrors, or pretty boxes lined with silver pieces, but these would show very little even of the observer’s face – and certainly not, of course, the flickering eyes that we notice in others’ faces. “Even more than this - drinking-cups are now made in such a manner, as to be filled inside with numerous concave facets, like so many mirrors; so that if but one person looks into the interior, he sees reflected a whole multitude of persons” (Pliny, *Natural History* vol.9, 95). Heron of Alexandria is credited with the invention of “*polytheoron*” mirrors, reflecting the same image multiple times - a device, so Seneca says, that a rich Roman, Hostius Quadra, employed to allow himself multiple images of his various copulations[[8]](#footnote-8). What lies in the reflective surface, even if it is *our* reflection, is mysteriously different from the usual, and so also are the reflections of the ‘real things’ that stand behind us. Even when it is our own image that we wish to inspect, there are other things to see: those who seek to follow the Delphic instruction to ‘know yourself’[[9]](#footnote-9) - so St.Hesychios of Sinai (8th century?) was to say - find themselves, as it were, gazing into a mirror and sighting the dark faces of the demons peering over their shoulders.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The same is true of the shadows cast on the walls of Plato’s cave – not shadows of the prisoners chained in place but of the puppet show going on behind their backs[[11]](#footnote-11): shadows and reflections are alike the effects of something else unseen, though shadows are dark and reflections brighter than their surrounds. We cannot *touch* either, but can be absorbed, distracted, nympholept. Or perhaps – and this is a point to which I shall return - we can notice the shadows cast by the puppeteers themselves, the demons, and begin the process of detachment.

More modern technology allows us a wider range of metaphors. What we see in mirrors or pools of water are literal reflections of our more usual surroundings. Photography allows us to see unreversed images that are, in that respect, a little more like what we think we see directly (though the verisimilitude of photographs should not be exaggerated), and the images remain even when what they reflect has gone.[[12]](#footnote-12) Cinema has a still more independent life. In fact it may often be true that there never were exactly the realities whose cinematic images we see: films are cut and pasted to produce a plausible continuity of action; apparent interactions, apparent background settings, may be wholly fictional. The actors themselves may not know what they are portrayed as being and doing till they see the completed film. Actually, this is not altogether novel. It is likely – as later artists have testified – that Pheidias and Praxiteles borrowed different body parts from different models, and ‘air-brushed’ the scars of individual life. “Underneath such descriptions is an idea of a singular, universal body, an idealized composite of the ‘best’ features of real bodies”[[13]](#footnote-13). Note that Truman – whose story I shall address a little later - pieces together a picture of his idealized love from fragmented pictures. The temptation to believe that such constructs remind us of reality may be all the stronger just because they are not simple reflections. At least we more easily suspend our disbelief as we are told stories of film fans being drawn into the film,[[14]](#footnote-14) participating ‘for real’ in the fantasized events.

Those stories may be intentionally ambiguous: are we to suppose that the fans are trapped, like Hylas, and divorced forever from their proper place and friendships? Or – sometimes – rescued, like Dorothy from the Land of Oz? Or is the film world truly a *better* world, even if its existence is a function of the imagination? On the one hand Pleasantville is transformed by the presence of teenagers with a more ‘modern’ sensibility. On the other, one of those same teenagers (Jennifer/Mary Sue) apparently prefers to stay within that dream. The ‘real’ world here presented – itself of course a part of a film reality – is less open to revision and reform: we can’t change the world of our own experience merely by *wanting* it to be different.

We may be pulled in to the imaginary world, for better or for worse. And the inmates of that imaginary world may break out into our consensus reality – again, for better or for worse (as Jack Slater and Mr. Benedict, from *The Last Action Hero*). The story that pagan Neo-Platonists told is that this is our actual history and situation. We have *already* been pulled down into an unreal world, and need to clamber back again to truth. But perhaps there is already a real difference between that story and the more modern version: in the older story we grew tired of ‘being together’ and so each preferred to descend into a world we could each call ‘our own’. We begin our laborious ascent again when we begin to see that there are realities outwith our personal sensa, that there are real beings and a real world not dependent on our own perceptions, feelings and imaginings. But films – considered as an image of a subordinate reality – are offered, exactly, as *shared* dreams. At its simplest the film (and similar entertainments) give us a common stock of stories, pictures, charms and countercharms suitable for a mass of people with little *personal* in common. Our remote ancestors lived in relatively small tribes, bonded by gossip and familiar stories, often embedded in the landscape they inhabited. Writing enabled larger groups to form and prosper, retaining a common history about days and lands far off. Film brings all these imaginings firmly before us, in ways much less amenable to private, parochial rewrites: we can speculate harmlessly about the motives and back stories of imaginary characters, now that we mostly do not live alongside our cousins or share familiar faces. Soap operas, ‘reality TV’, sagas such as *Buffy, Harry Potter* or *X-Men,* and gossip about a ‘stars’ – or the Royal Family- link us together – in a way.

So the moral is now somewhat different from the older: nowadays we might prefer to notice that our Fall is not simply a fall into a private realm – as Heracleitos suggested, “the waking share one common world, whereas the sleeping turn aside each man into a world of his own”.[[15]](#footnote-15) We suspect instead that the sleeping turn into *another* ‘common’ world, manufactured for us from familiar dreams. “At last, for the first time, by means of the machine, in their own likeness, our dreams are projected and objectified. They are industrially fabricated, collectively shared” (Morin 2005: 218). Would that please Platonists? Presumably not entirely. Even if the stories are not overtly wicked – encouraging bad behaviour and bad attitudes in all those who admire their heroes – they can only represent the most superficial of realities: how heroes *look* or are supposed to look; how scientists or sages *seem* to reason (wild guesses, jargon, bad temper and a lot of hand-waving), rather than actual hard logical or experimental effort. The stories may divert or amuse – but (exactly) they do *divert* us from a proper engagement with reality. They divert us, that is, from our moral and intellectual duties in the world we mostly think is real. And – at least for Platonists – they also mimic our original diversion, fall, into the world of current experience. Reflections and shadows mostly stand for the temptations of sense, pulling us into the world as we plot it for ourselves, full of stereotypes, centred on our individual selves, flattering self-images or tribal loyalties. The reflections are of real things, and maybe real puppeteers, manipulating us from behind: we need somehow to turn around and see.

One of the most overtly Gnostic of recent films, *The Truman Show*, imagines how a victim of the unscrupulous Demiurge, confined to his little island by fear, mistaken love and ignorance, may slowly realize that those he thought were friends are actually his jailers, that the world of his experience makes no sense, and that there are some clues as to how he might break free. His audience – as represented in the film – may cheer at his eventual escape, but are themselves as besotted with the fiction as before: they too are captives in an artificial world, numb to their own realities – and perhaps (for once the possibility that we are massively deceived is aired it tends to fester) themselves in need of a great awakening. Even if we are not so badly deceived as Truman, maybe we are all deceived together – as we can imagine the inmates of *The Matrix* are. How shall we tell Reality, and do we need to bother?

# Animated Images

The fables I have been mentioning – of spectators drawn into the fictional world of films or fictional agents emerging from the film-world into our realities – may be interpreted allegorically, as stories about our real Fall into the material world from the higher noetic realm. They are also (and more easily for those with other metaphysical assumptions) be interpreted *morally*, reminders that we should ourselves abandon all the fictions and come back to everyday existence – rather as Odysseus must leave fairyland behind, and the offer of immortality, to return to wife, family, household, kingdom. Dorothy must return to Kansas. We have to leave the cinema – and this may be the primary inspiration of these films, composed self-reflectively by the film-makers in philosophical mode. That common moral can be improved: by watching the stereotypes and fantasies that too often govern us laid out on the screen we may come to recognize their effects in ‘real life’ and begin to feel our independence from them. Once we have *seen* the devils that stand behind us, or at least their images, we may find courage and sense enough to ignore or overthrow them. The world as we ordinarily experience it is ruled by unvoiced assumptions, foolish hopes and fears, stereotypical judgments about this and that. Waking up to the ‘*real* world’ may not, after all, be merely a return to common sense. Like Markandeya in the Hindu story we may fall out of the sleeping Vishnu’s mouth – as it were from the maw of the multiplex – into “the immense silence of the night of Brahma” to discover truth[[16]](#footnote-16)!

Can our imagination help us in this enterprise? Plotinus does not only speak of shadows and reflections but of inner statues, real presences barnacled by time and needing hard work to repair and scrub them clean. Reflections may suck us down, but statues, it appears, may help us rise. Just so, on the one hand he was himself opposed to having his portrait painted, as it focused attention on the least significant of his properties[[17]](#footnote-17). On the other hand, he accepted the familiar trope that Pheidias’ Olympian Zeus looked just the way Zeus *would* look if he chose to be incarnate.[[18]](#footnote-18) Or so people had thought since Pheidias made his mark:

In times past, because we had no clear knowledge, we formed each his different idea, and each person, according to his capacity and nature, conceived a likeness for every divine manifestation and fashioned such likenesses in his dreams; and if we do perchance collect any small and insignificant likenesses made by the earlier artists, we do not trust them very much nor pay them very much attention. But [Pheidias]by the power of [his] art first conquered and united Hellas and then all others by means of this wondrous presentment, showing forth so marvellous and dazzling a conception, that none of those who have beheld it could any longer easily form a different one.[[19]](#footnote-19)

“The wise men of old … made temples and statues in the wish that the gods should be present to them”[[20]](#footnote-20): the temples and statues that they made were richly imagined ones, whether they were entirely ‘within their minds’ or placed out in the world for all to see – as the *Hermetic Corpus* suggests[[21]](#footnote-21). Quite what those latter animated statues were remains obscure[[22]](#footnote-22). It is possible that they were powered by whatever technical trick to deceive or amuse the faithful (as is normally the case in science fiction). Maybe the Emperor Julian’s favoured teacher, Maximus, that “theatrical wonder-worker”, really *did* make a statue of Hecate laugh and the torches in her hands to light up[[23]](#footnote-23). Maybe flickering candlelight gave the impression that the decorated surfaces of the statue moved, so enabling the viewers “to experience the *eikon* as being the archangel before [them]: an *empsuchos graphe”* (Pentcheva 2010: 184). Maybe Iamblichus was right to insist that “the divine images occur not only within the imagination of an inspired devotee, but may be apparent also to the observers of ritual”[[24]](#footnote-24). Or else they were only subjectively *perceived* to be moving, as devout Hindus or Catholics may also see their statues’ giving signs of life – and insofar as the supposedly physical world is a composite or idealization of common perceptions, why should we be surprised that some can see what others don’t, any more than we are surprised that some of us cannot distinguish red and green? We may at first find it easier to suppose that they were only privately *imagined* images – and this does indeed fit better with Plotinus’s own use of them, when he insists that we must scrub and polish our *internal* statues. Modern technology enables us to make the metaphor visible – and will do so the more successfully as we move into full hologrammatic entertainment[[25]](#footnote-25), whether in a virtual cyberspace or in live role-playing games assisted by clever robots – *Tron* or *Westworld*! I remark in passing that the more we expect such artforms to be created the more we may suspect that we are already, literally, living in such a dream – a wholly artificial world devised by Gamers for whatever purpose of entertainment, education or control (see Bostrom 2003).

But consider first how the moving statues of our imagination are probably intended by Plotinus and his fellows, as well as reflected even in modern film. Is it odd to think that such imaginings might embody real spirits? Possibly not – as any art object, even a static one, must in a way be animated. Nilus the Scholastic puts words into the mouth of a sculpture: “I laugh because I marvel how, put together out of all sorts of stones, I suddenly become a satyr”[[26]](#footnote-26). When what is intended is more than a fantasy, the matter becomes more serious still. Nilus again: “How daring it is to picture the incorporeal! But yet the image leads us up to spiritual recollection of celestial beings.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Greatly daring was the wax that formed the image of the invisible Prince of the Angels, incorporeal in the essence of his form. But yet it is not without grace; for a man looking at the image directs his mind to a higher contemplation. No longer has he a confused veneration, but imprinting the image in himself he fears him as if he were present. The eyes stir up the depths of the spirit, and Art can convey by colours the prayers of the soul.[[28]](#footnote-28)

What is represented in such images, what makes them distinct images, are the presences we most revere and fear. As a cultured Hellene, Plotinus would be expected to think of these images – virtues or the powers that lie behind such virtues – in human form: non-humans usually represent the lesser powers of the soul which need to be controlled or extirpated[[29]](#footnote-29). We may also suspect that the images are female – as most contemporary statues or pictures of the virtues were female (Stafford 2000: 27-35). But as an Egyptian Plotinus may have been ready to use the same techniques as “the wise men of old,” who symbolized the character and properties of their gods by adding animal heads or bodies. As an Alexandrian he may also have been as well acquainted as Numenius with the Hebrew tradition[[30]](#footnote-30). The sphere “all faces, shining with living faces”(*Ennead* VI.7 [38].15, 25) to which he likened the cosmos may have been inspired by *Merkabah* mysticism, resting on Ezekiel’s vision:

On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was on him there. As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures. This was their appearance: they were of human form. Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another; each of them moved straight ahead, without turning as they moved. As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; such were their faces(*Ezekiel* 1.2-11).

We are fortunate to live in a time when this vision could be represented in the cinema (though the *Merkabah* mystics would certainly advise against the experiment)! The difference between the Hebraic and the Hellenic vision here is profound, and profoundly significant – but that is another story.

In Plotinus’ day – leaving aside automata – his chief reliance had to be on ‘pantomime’, as his contemporaries understood that form. ‘Pantomimes’ were professional dancers, equipped to put characters and emotions on display by *phorai, schemata* and *deixeis* (that is, movements, poses and gestures)[[31]](#footnote-31). Their reputation amongst respectable Romans – and some philosophers - was not good. After all, by taking on the overt characters of the madman, fool or woman, they were at odds with Plato’s warning against actors’ portrayal of characters one ought *not* to imitate[[32]](#footnote-32).

And therefore when any one of these pantomimic gentlemen, who are so clever that they can imitate anything, comes to us, and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sweet and holy and wonderful being; but we must also inform him that in our State such as he are not permitted to exist; the law will not allow them. And so when we have anointed him with myrrh, and set a garland of wool upon his head, we shall send him away to another city (Plato, *Republic* 3.398ab).

And the imitations might, in a sense, be all too real.

Demons … are said to dance because dance is a constantly changing movement of the limbs. As the dancers come on stage with different masks (or characters) at different times, so demons, *using us like masks*, sometimes dance [the role of] the angry man, sometimes [the role of] the man full of desire and obsessed with the joys of the flesh, sometimes the liar. And this is what happens to us as we receive within ourselves the multifarious workings of demons and bend our hearts and our limbs in accordance with their will.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Ezekiel too, I should acknowledge, saw in a vision how the elders of Israel, each in the imagined privacy of their hearts, were secretly worshipping “monstrous abominations:” reptiles, beasts and vermin, and the sun itself(*Ezekiel* 8.6-18). But not everyone agreed that the dancers served abominations, even if they sometimes portrayed them.

It is [the pantomime’s] profession to show forth human character and passion in all their variety; to depict love and anger, frenzy and grief, each in its due measure. Wondrous art!—on the same day, he is mad Athamas and shrinking Ino; he is Atreus, and again he is Thyestes, and next Aegisthus or Aerope; all one man's work.[[34]](#footnote-34)

This is an art that needs more science than Plato ever imagined, and may be concerned to comprehend and *control,* not merely to *exhibit* demons. According to Lucian of Samosata it required

the highest standard of culture in all its branches, and involving a knowledge not of music only, but of rhythm and metre, and above all of your beloved philosophy, both natural and moral, the subtleties of dialectic alone being rejected as serving no useful purpose. Rhetoric, too, in so far as that art is concerned with the exposition of human character and human passions, claims a share of its attention. Nor can it dispense with the painter's and the sculptor's arts; in its close observance of the harmonious proportions that these teach, it is the equal of an Apelles or a Phidias. But above all Mnemosyne [Memory], and her daughter Polyhymnia [the Muse of Dance], must be propitiated by an art that would remember all things. Like Calchas in Homer, the pantomime must know all “that is, that was, that shall be”; nothing must escape his ever ready memory. Faithfully to represent his subject, adequately to express his own conceptions, to make plain all that might be obscure;—these are the first essentials for the pantomime, to whom no higher compliment could be paid than Thucydides's tribute to Pericles, who, he says, “could not only conceive a wise policy, but render it intelligible to his hearers”; the intelligibility, in the present case, depending on clearness of gesticulation. For his materials, he must draw continually, as I have said, upon his unfailing memory of ancient story; and memory must be backed by taste and judgement. He must know the history of the world, from the time when it first emerged from Chaos down to the days of Egyptian Cleopatra.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Pantomimes, in brief, were supposed – by their supporters at least – to provide a route to understanding of the sort that more usual philosophers also professed: one relying on learning and practice rather than direct inspiration.

Lesbonax of Mytilene [a first century rhetorician] called pantomimes “manual philosophers”, and used to frequent the theatre, in the conviction that he came out of it a better man than he went in. And Timocrates, his teacher, after accidentally witnessing a pantomimic performance, exclaimed: “How much have I lost by my scrupulous devotion to philosophy!” I know not what truth there may be in Plato's analysis of the soul into the three elements of spirit, appetite, and reason: but each of the three is admirably illustrated by the pantomime; he shows us the angry man, he shows us the lover, and he shows us every passion under the control of reason; this last—like touch among the senses—is all-pervading. Again, in his care for beauty and grace of movement, have we not an illustration of the Aristotelian principle, which makes beauty a third part of Good? Nay, I once heard someone hazard a remark, to the effect that the philosophy of Pantomime went still further, and that in the *silence* of the characters a Pythagorean doctrine was shadowed forth (Lucian 1905: 258-9).

Could Plotinus have agreed? Apparently so, since “the activity of life is an artistic activity, like the way in which one who is dancing is moving; for the dancer himself is like the life which is artistic in this way and his art moves him.”[[36]](#footnote-36) The dancer, in the Classical Mediterranean as well as in Hindu India, sought to embody spirits, but also to keep them under an overriding control. According to Libanius, “the dancer does not imitate (*mimeomai*) but makes present (*paristemi*) in himself the divinities he plays.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Animated statues and pantomimic dancers get our attention, and thereby evoke the spirits or the gods that they embody. Without soul, as Plotinus said, there is only an unmeaning, undifferentiated darkness (*Ennead* V.1 [10].2, 1, 13-23, 26-28). To *identify,* not merely to internalize: unless they were already present in us we should never see them in the seemingly outer world. One presence in particular, *pace* Ezekiel, lies at the centre of the Plotinian imagination:

One must not chase after it, but wait quietly till it appears, preparing oneself to contemplate it, as the eye awaits the rising of the sun; and the sun rising over the horizon (“from Ocean,” the poets say) gives itself to the eyes to see. But from where will he of whom the sun is an image rise? What is the horizon which he will mount above when he appears? (*Ennead* V.5 [32].8, 3-8).

Plotinus is not unusual in thus honouring the Sun as the primary sign and symbol of the first origin of all things. The Sun was widely worshipped (or at least honoured), by Essenes, by Apollonius of Tyana, and the Emperor Vespasian (Stoneman 1992: 145-6). The cult of Sol Invictus, absorbing Elagabal of Emesa as well as Sol Indigenes of Rome, was publicized under the emperor Aurelian (270-75 AD), after Plotinus’s death, in an effort to find a focus for imperial dreams - the figure of the Emperor himself having plainly failed to secure an abiding loyalty (Halsberghe 1972:132, 135-75). Julian, rejecting Constantine’s appeal to the Christian churches for a similar end, attempted to reinvent a solar paganism[[38]](#footnote-38), and some solar rhetoric and celebrations were absorbed in Christian ritual and rhetoric: “thine be the glory, risen, conquering Sun (or Son)”.

We must bring that imagined sun within us – or realize that it is already there:

Were not the eye itself a sun,

No sun for it could ever shine:

By nothing godlike could the heart be won,

Were not the heart itself divine.[[39]](#footnote-39)

“Can we desire or recognize something of which we are *entirely* incapable?” (Williams 1961: 5) But even that image must at last be stripped away and we move past the images of the outer sanctuary (*Ennead* VI.9 [9].11). We need at last to abandon even these high images, of heroes, virtues, stars. John Chrysostom was alert to the dangers, specifically of “the image (*eidolon*) of the mime actress and its effect on the male soul”:

Even when the show is over and she has gone away, the image of her is stored up in your soul, her words, her gestures, her glances, the way she walks, the rhythm, the enunciation, the lewd songs.[[40]](#footnote-40)

She serves, in short, as a nymph of the destructive sort! But even more respectable images may have their dangers, encouraging us to make ourselves the heroes of our own pleasant story.

In reference to icons, we should be confident that every work made in the name of God is good and holy. But stay away from idols and statues. For these as well as their makers are evil and portentous. An icon of a holy prophet is one thing, a statue or a small figure of Cronos, Aphrodite, the Sun or the Moon is another.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Free-standing statues in general are suspect, but even icons may be corruptly viewed. In the Russian Orthodox tradition the fault is ‘*prelest’*, the spiritual pride that mistakes our gravest faults, suitably enhanced and decorated, for virtues (see Florensky 1996: 47-9).

But perhaps Plotinus has an answer. Those faults themselves *were* virtues, once.

When [the soul] is there [that is, in the intelligible realm] [she] has the heavenly love, but here love becomes vulgar; for the soul there is the heavenly Aphrodite, but here becomes the vulgar Aphrodite, a kind of whore. And every soul is Aphrodite. ... The soul then in her natural state is in love with God and wants to be united with him; it is like the noble love of a girl for her noble father (*Ennead* VI.9 [9].9, 28ff).

The more usual archetype of that particular filial love is the virginal Athena (or still more alarmingly, Electra!): by invoking Aphrodite (and by implication rewriting the background story) Plotinus may be emphasising his recurrent theme – that our animating principles may have been corrupted, but can still be cured. Every soul is Aphrodite: every living being, that is, is rightly conceived as beautiful – and also, perhaps, as dangerous since the Fall. In the words of Hildegard of Bingen, before Adam fell “what is now gall in him sparkled like crystal, and bore the taste of good works, and what is now melancholy in man shone in him like the dawn and contained in itself the wisdom and perfection of good works; but when Adam broke the law, the sparkle of innocence was dulled in him, and his eyes, which had formerly beheld heaven, were blinded, and his gall was changed to bitterness, and his melancholy to blackness”[[42]](#footnote-42).

And what is the eventual goal of this endeavour but to see things ‘as they are’?

One must not then suppose that the gods and the “exceedingly blessed spectators” in the higher world contemplate propositions (*axiomata*), but all the Forms we speak about are beautiful images in that world, of the kind which someone imagined to exist in the soul of the wise man, images not painted but real. This is why the ancients said that the Ideas were realities and substances (*Ennead* V.8 [31].5f).

That is also why Plotinus’ appeal to ‘intellect’ is – emphatically – not in praise of abstract reasoning. Intellect “out of its mind” with joy is as close as we can hope to be to God[[43]](#footnote-43). We are being invited, in short, to join “the dance of immortal love”, to put aside our ordinary preconceptions, beliefs, perceptions and allow the real Forms to take shape in our souls, or rather to be noticed. The nympholept may be more than inspired – they may be divinized. Even Hylas, according to the story, was the object of a cult for the citizens of Kios, bullied into the practice by an irate Heracles[[44]](#footnote-44)!

So where does this leave Film? Those who are tugged ‘down’ into the Other World are at once an allegory of the Soul’s original fall into this material world and a moral lesson, to turn round again to face our actual duties. Those who are encouraged – by dance or spectacle or moving statues - to take on or embody or let slip the demonic aspects of their own nature may both indicate the *dangers* of false pride and passion, but also make a way to retrieve the lives we have, perhaps, forgotten. Even if we avoid *prelest*, of course, not every imagining is great art. Charles Williams remarked that some poems, at most, remind us that “man has a capacity for heroism”, but do not truly awaken it. “They thrill us, and thrills are good, only one cannot live by thrills”[[45]](#footnote-45). Other, greater works may stir at least “our desire for, our recognition of, that capacity”, even if – for that very reason – we are made to realize how hard it is to be heroic, and how far a *genuine* heroism differs from mere confidence, mere success.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Films, like other fictions, can inspire – but what they inspire, how much, and in what mode, will rest with us. And it may be that ‘intellectuals’ are the least able to let themselves be inspired: it is much more likely that we shall find fault, diminish what the images pretend, and retreat to our own self-satisfaction. We don’t really *want* to be moved. We prefer to think that the moral must always be: ‘go home’. And that ‘home’ is always the familiar place. Elsewhere, perhaps, and otherwhen, only heroes even survive; elsewhere and otherwhen there are no comfortable answers, and the only hope (or else despair) “lies in the choice of pyre or pyre — to be redeemed from fire by fire”[[47]](#footnote-47).

# Escape Without Going Anywhere

And so back to Heracles – last seen howling after Hylas and bullying the Kians. Heracles was from the beginning portrayed as a muscle-bound barbarian with a club, unjustly treated, adulterous and sometimes homicidal – a suitable focus for all manner of wish-fulfilment fantasies. At the same time he was the rightful king, appointed to rid the world of monsters (mostly by careful wit, not violence), and raised up to Heaven after his painful death. Hylas is pulled into the watery realm by nymphs, and Heracles fails to find and rescue him from madness. But Heracles had more success, it is said, on another mythical occasion. Prometheus was bound naked to a rock, daily attacked by an eagle, until Heracles managed to release him. This, so Plotinus tells us, is an allegory, showing how our ‘higher self’ may free us from delusion, from the overwhelming attractions of the material world (*Ennead* IV.3 [27].14, 12-14). And he also rescues Alcestis from the grave. The *barbarous* Heracles, his mere shadow, Plotinus tells us, wanders the Underworld, imprisoned by his memories, while Heracles himself is spared those torments[[48]](#footnote-48). This was not an eccentric notion.

It is generally agreed that during the whole time which Heracles spent among men he submitted to great and continuous labours and perils willingly, in order that he might confer benefits upon the race of men and thereby gain immortality (Diodorus, *History,* vol.1, 1.2.4).

Socrates had sworn by him, and Xenophon’s band of mercenaries regularly prayed to “Zeus the Saviour and Heracles the guide” (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 4.8; 6.5). He was honoured in Carthage as well as Rome, and by emperors as well as wandering Cynics.

The imperial theology of the greatest of the persecutors [for example, Diocletian (244-311 AD)] had important features in common with the religion which they persecuted. Jupiter is the supreme god. His son, Hercules, acts as his executive representative, and is a benefactor of man. The resemblance to Christian theology is obvious[[49]](#footnote-49).

This judgment oddly neglects the many ethical and metaphysical dissimilarities (it is, for example, a sort of Nestorian solution to the problem of two natures)! But the central point is accurate. Heracles may be either the false hero, drunkard, bully, adulterer, or else the genuine world-protector, saviour and higher self. In this he is like our modern ‘stars’: “the star has two lives: that of his films and his real life” (Morin 2005: 40) – and who is to say which life – Jack Slater’s or Arnold Schwarzenegger’s (*Last Action Hero*) - is the more real? Their stories may – as Plato would have feared – encourage our worst features, or else open up a hope for something better than the dream and delirium of ordinary living. So also films and fictions in general: they may both allegorize and exemplify temptation, and also – sometimes – be a gateway to a better world, beside which ordinary life itself turns out a dream. Truman walks out of the film set, and Neo from the dream, helped – in both cases – by someone or something living outside the delusion. So perhaps the nymphs – including Sylvia/Lauren in *The Truman Show,* talking beside the lake - may, contrary to the original version, be the ones to *rescue* us? Not all ‘nympholepts’ are frenzied or befuddled: sometimes, as Socrates insisted, they may be inspired, and begin to speak in verse![[50]](#footnote-50) And maybe ‘stars’, whether they are conceived as merely lucky or as avatars of superheroes, are also sometimes ‘gateways’ (see Morrison 2012: 267-72). Maybe in a little while the very figures they portray in film – and with whom they are often oddly identified - will “free themselves from the screen and from the darkness of the theaters to go and walk in public spaces and the apartments of each and every person” (Morin 2005: 43). And maybe we need not wait: as Plotinus already taught us, “every man is double, one of him is the sort of compound being and one of him is himself.” [[51]](#footnote-51) The Cave of the Nymphs, where Odysseus finds himself on his return from fairyland to Ithaca, has passages both to the everyday world and to the celestial: which way he is meant to go may remain unsettled, even in Porphyry’s allegory.[[52]](#footnote-52) The Cave opens in both directions.

But if film images – and our own imagined *daimones* - are to be such a gateway perhaps we should recall the Orthodox warning about how to design and understand icons. There is an odd reversal in the passage from pagan to Christian Platonism. For Plotinus reflections, shadows, pictures more often stand for the lesser world, for delusion, while statues, automata and living pantomimes are at least reminders of the higher world. Orthodox Christians chose textured icons, ‘mixed-media reliefs’, and added that they must be designed and painted by those who at least *intended* holiness and would follow the tradition without adding personal, self-gratifying detail. Interestingly, some iconophiles have treated icons simply as symbolic structures, coded messages, but the probable majority opinion, or at least the earlier opinion, is that “icons come to life” and “exist on the verge of speech.”[[53]](#footnote-53) They are more like gateways themselves than mere *images* of gateways – not that they were exactly *transparent,* but rather “layered with a series of material covers, each reflecting light”.*[[54]](#footnote-54)* Eleventh-century Komnenian iconoclasm preserved the *paintings* as mere ‘likenesses’ of their original, where the more orthodox view was that the textured icons embodied a real presence, really attentive to the iconodule (Pentcheva 2010: 198-208). That is also how we imagine, or wish to imagine, film-entities.

People are drawn into films, in particular films about people drawn into films, and either learn the importance of returning ‘home’ to ordinary life or else begin to realize how much that ‘ordinary life’ is structured by the very tropes and stereotypes they were watching. Inspiring films may only inspire an exactly similar plotline, serving our individual or tribal fantasies: we carry the film out with us when we leave. The more optimistic fancy is that we might begin to live by *better* standards, and so make a better world – a fancy that Plotinus at least thought dangerous(*Ennead* II.9 [33].5, 24f). People really convinced that this world is a dream – like the imagined heroes of *The Matrix* – may treat us all as figments, due to be cleared away by the New Day Dawning, merely – for example – ‘Tory scum’ or ‘Western infidels’. That they themselves might need to be cleared away or radically transformed is a thought too harsh – for us as well as them. *Prelest* is difficult to detect in ourselves, and yet more difficult to escape.

According to Plato, “when a man drinks wine he begins to be better pleased with himself, and the more he drinks the more he is filled full of brave hopes, and conceit of his power, and at last the string of his tongue is loosened, and fancying himself wise, he is brimming over with lawlessness, and has no more fear or respect, and is ready to do or say anything.”[[55]](#footnote-55) But there is another sort of drunkenness, already mentioned. We may instead be “drunk with nectar”(*Ennead* VI.7 [38].35), exhilarated by grace. And the route to that inebriation, so Plotinus says, is – in a way – an easy one.

Let us fly to our dear country. What then is our way of escape, and how are we to find it? We shall put out to sea, as Odysseus did, from the witch Circe or Calypso – as the poet says (I think with a hidden meaning) – and was not content to stay though he had delights of the eyes and lived among much beauty of sense. Our country from which we came is There, our Father is There. How shall we travel to it, where is our way of escape? We cannot get there on foot; for our feet only carry us everywhere in this world, from one country to another. You must not get ready a carriage, either, or a boat. Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes, and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use (*Ennead* I.6 [1].8, 16-28.

Odysseus was right to refuse either to be a brute, for Circe, or a demigod, for Calypso. But his return to Ithaca was not simply to go home, but also to rescue Ithaca. The boldness and brutality of that rescue, in Homer’s story, may conceal the message (see Lamberton 1986). We should not after all think merely mortal thoughts, being mortal, but strive as far as possible to *immortalize* ourselves (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.1177b31-4). Paradoxically, in climbing (as it were) to heaven we simultaneously discover our own littleness, as Scipio did in one of the seminal stories of European culture. In his dream ascent he saw “stars which we never see from here below, and all the stars were vast far beyond what we have ever imagined. The least of them was that which, farthest from heaven, nearest to the earth, shone with a borrowed light. But the starry globes very far surpassed the earth in magnitude. The earth itself indeed looked to me so small as to make me ashamed of our empire, which was a mere point on its surface.”[[56]](#footnote-56) And the earth itself a mere blue dot.

Are there yet any films with this moral? It may be feared that even such Gnostic thrillers as remind us that we are ordinarily deluded – especially such Gnostic thrillers – encourage mere conceit, and contempt for our fellow dreamers. Science Fiction in general is sometimes a sort of cult, promising its devotees that they – unlike their stolid neighbours – are ready to live on into the Future, through the Singularity. There are occasional attempts at a better moral, as for example *The Tree of Life* (Terrence Malik 2011). But consider one other, much more vulgar, trope: by imagining oneself, one’s heroes, shrunk to smaller and smaller size, ‘down’ into the tiny, the microscopic, ‘the infinitesimal’, we discover that there are no privileged *scales* any more than privileged directions, times or places, that “there was no point of non-existence in the universe” (Matheson 2014:200), that our ordinary world is also unimaginably tiny by cosmic standards. At the very limit and conclusion of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) the battered – and very unlikeable - hero Scott Carey is at last enlightened:

I was continuing to shrink, to become... what? The infinitesimal? What was I? Still a human being? Or was I the man of the future? If there were other bursts of radiation, other clouds drifting across seas and continents, would other beings follow me into this vast new world? So close - the infinitesimal and the infinite. But suddenly, I knew they were really the two ends of the same concept. The unbelievably small and the unbelievably vast eventually meet - like the closing of a gigantic circle. I looked up, as if somehow I would grasp the heavens. The universe, worlds beyond number, God's silver tapestry spread across the night. And in that moment, I knew the answer to the riddle of the infinite. I had thought in terms of man's own limited dimension. I had presumed upon nature. That existence begins and ends is man's conception, not nature's. And I felt my body dwindling, melting, becoming nothing. My fears melted away. And in their place came acceptance. All this vast majesty of creation, it had to mean something. And then I meant something, too. Yes, smaller than the smallest, I meant something, too. To God, there is no zero. I still exist![[57]](#footnote-57)

Realizing his own smallness in the face of Everything and slowly shedding his vices, the protagonist at last realizes *God’s* glory, in the sphere that is full of living faces, shining with living faces, at all scales and times and places. We may be pulled, the shrinking man may be pulled, inexorably ‘downwards’ only that he, that we, may “hold infinity in the palm of [our] hand, and eternity in an hour”[[58]](#footnote-58). Sadly, the conclusion may, for most of us, be merely sentimental – a momentary thrill to be forgotten as we fall asleep once more. Just possibly, sometimes, some people may stay awake, caught up into the larger world, and out of the maw of the multiplex.

But there is one last, wholly un-Plotinian twist. How do we know that the larger world is lovely? The world outside the Matrix is a wasteland, and most of ‘free humanity’ is housed in a dismal underground city far removed from the lively possibilities allowed at least *some* victims in the computer-generated fiction. In Alex Proyas’ *Dark City* (1999) our heroes momentarily see an expanse of sand and sunlight, which they think is the ‘Shell Beach’ of their implanted memories: it turns out to be only an electrically lit hoarding. Tearing it down in fury, and the brick wall behind it, they uncover only the void. Their whole constantly reimagined, constantly rebuilt, city is no more than an island, a star-ship, in the vaster, uninhabitable dark, an “image constantly reimaged” in another sense than the Plotinian(see *Ennead* II.3 [52].18, 17). The hero “is a Glaucon who comes to realize that Socrates’ tale of an upper, more real world, is itself a shadow, a forgery” (Loughlin 2004: 46-8). The best reality for us is only the one we make – and that is how that film concludes, with the former makers and inventers overthrown and the city rebuilt again according to *our* heart’s desire. “Imagination” said Blake, is “the real and Eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow, and in which we shall live in our Eternal or Imaginative Bodies, when these Vegetable Mortal Bodies are no more”.[[59]](#footnote-59) Blake himself believed, with Plotinus, that the real world was not only *our* imagination, and wrote, in 1827, that “in The Real Man The Imagination which Liveth for Ever” he was “stronger and stronger as [his] Foolish Body decay[ed]”[[60]](#footnote-60). Moderns, it appears, have rather less hope of this. If they are right then we may prefer after all to live a fantasy than to break out from the cave[[61]](#footnote-61). But maybe the fantasy, as moderns must consider it, is true, and the larger, waking world after all is lovable.

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1. An earlier version was read to the D-Society at the University of Cambridge in October 2015, and was improved by its auditors. I offer further meditations on Plotinus’s use of myth and metaphor in Clark 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Ayfre 2004: 87, acknowledges the point about ancient mirrors, ‘with a tain that is always a little fluid’ (cited by Cooper 2013: 80). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Plato, *Cratylus* 414c suggests that “*katoptron*” has an intrusive *rho*: the word should be *katopton*, with its suggestion that we look *downwards* into the reflective surface. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. SeePlotinus, *Ennead* I.6 [1].8, 9: we might thereby sink down into Hades and consort with shadows; see also III.6 [26].7, 41-2 on “falling into falsity, like things in a dream or water or a mirror”. All quotations from Plotinus are drawn from Armstrong 1966-88. On Hylas see Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 1.1172-1272; Theocritus, *Idyll* 13; Virgil, *Eclogues* 6.41-2; Propertius, *Elegies* 1.20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Poimandres* 1.14: Copenhaver, 1992: 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Acts of John* 26-9 (2nd century): see Tsakiridou 2013: 210-11; Iozzia 2015: 3-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 8.37.7-8, cited by Addey 2007: 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Seneca *Naturales Quaestiones* 1.16.3-5, discussed by Bartsch 2006: 103-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Plotinus *Ennead* VI 7 [38]. 41, 22f: the injunction is ‘said to those who because of their selves’ multiplicity have the business of counting themselves up and learning that they do not know all of the number and kind of things they are’. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hesychios, ‘On Watchfulness and Holiness’ §23: Palmer et al 1979: 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Plato *Republic* 7.514a-517b. This is probably the best known of Plato’s myths, and most often mentioned in discussing modern cinema. The point of his story is two-fold: first, that the prisoners or captive audience do not see the real causes of what is happening before them; second, that they are not likely to be persuaded of the truth by anyone who comes back into the cave in the hope of enlightening them. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. Plotinus *Ennead* VI.4 [22].10; VI.5 [23].8, 17; III.6 [26].7, 25; III.6 [26].13, 35; IV.5 [29].7, 44; VI.2 [43].22, 34. Cf. Plato *Timaeus* 50c4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Barcan 2004:34. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, for example, *Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen 1985), *Stay Tuned* (Peter Hyams 1992), *Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan 1993), *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross 1998). Even mirrors of course can be perceived as gateways into another realm (as they were for Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*), and one that is like the fabled land of the dead, all values subtly reversed. Hillman 1979: 39 mentions an Egyptian fable that digestion too is reversed in the Underworld, so that excrement leaves through the mouths of the antipodean dead – a story making clear the parallel between Plato’s reversed world (*Statesman* 269d9ff) and the Antipodes, and the unvoiced implications of *his* fable. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Heracleitos 22B89DK: cited by Hillman 1979: 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Zimmer 1946: 38-9; see also Doniger O'Flaherty 1984: 111: “the vision of reality may be the only true sanity, but it *feels* like madness”! [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Life* 1.5-20: Amelius apparently had a portrait drawn in secret by the painter Carterius, presumably to help his own imagination of the greater soul. Porphyry, it is implied, understood better than Amelius that it was Plotinus’ *spirit,* not his bodily appearance that deserved remembrance: see Edwards 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Ennead* V.8 [31].1, 39-41. See Rich 1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Dio Chrysostom, “Man’s First Conception of God”: *Discourses* vol.2, 59 (12.53). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ennead* IV.3 [27].11 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See *Asclepius* 24: Copenhaver 1992: 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Johnston 2008; Uzdavinys 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Eunapius, *Lives,* 435. See further Uzdavinys 2010: 143-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 3.8.117, 1-3, cited by Clarke 2001: 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. More is already involved in the shared hallucination, so to speak, of the cinema than merely cameras and projectors, as is observed by Baudry 1986. The newer technologies will be even more like guided dreams (and some films, self-referentially, already trade on this plotline: e.g *Inception* (Nolan 2010)). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Nilus the Scholastic (5th century), *Planudean Appendix* (*Greek Anthology* bk.16), epigram 247, quoted by Mathew 1963: 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Nilus “On an image of the archangel”: Paton, *Greek Anthology* 1.34, 1.33: quoted by Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics,* p.117. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Agathias (536-82), Paton, *Greek Anthology,* 1.34, quoted by Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics,* p.78. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. A similarly unthinking anthromorphism is displayed in Wittgenstein’s aphorism: ‘The human body is the best picture of the human soul’: Wittgenstein 2009: 366[iv.25]. Even Plato did not altogether agree with that – see *Phaedrus* 246-8 on the soul as composed of horses, charioteer and chariot. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Numenius of Apamea described Plato as Moses in Attic garb. Plotinus was accused of plagiarizing him. See Dodds 1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Plutarch, “Table Talk”9.747bc: *Moralia* vol.9, 289-91; see Webb 2009: 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Plato *Republic* 10.605; see also *Ion* 541e; *Euthydemus* 288b. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ps-Basil of Caesarea (4th century AD), *Commentary on Isaiah* 13.276, cited by Webb 2009: 163-4 (my italics). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Lucian “On Pantomime”1905: 2.258 (see <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/luc/wl2/wl219.htm>, accessed 12/11/2015)). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Lucian, “On Pantomime” 1905: 2.251. See Mulhall 2007 and Mulhall 2016: 85-103 for a persuasive argument that the creators of film may themselves be philosophers, working through – on film – the problems of representation and embodiment intrinsic to their craft (and life). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Ennead* III.2 [47].16, 23-7; see also VI.1 [10].27, 20, where a more active Matter than usual, capable of becoming everything, is “like the dancer who in his dance makes himself everything”. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Libanius, ‘Reply to Aristides on Behalf of the Dancers’ [*Orations* 64], 116: Webb 2009: 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Julian, *Oratio* 4: *Hymn to Helios:* *Works,* vol.1, pp.353-442; see Smith 1995: 139-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Goethe in *Minor Poems,* after *Ennead* I.6 [1].9, 30-2; cf. Plato, *Republic* 6.508b3-509a1. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. John Chrysostom, *De Davide et Saule* 3, PG 54.697: Webb 2009: 179 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. John of Damascus *Orationes de imaginibus tres* 3.73, quoted by Papaioannou 2013: 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Klibansky et al 1964: 80, citing Hildegard of Bingen 1903: 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Ennead* VI.7 [38].35; see also VI.7 [38].30,24ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Sourvinou-Inwood 2005: 109-11; Pache 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Williams 1961: 4-5. Cf. Chesterton 2015: 124:“In literature to be dispassionate is simply to be illiterate. To be disinterested is simply to be uninterested. The object of a book on comets, of course, is not to make us all feel like comets; but the object of a poem about warriors is to make us all feel like warriors” [4th January 1905]. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. A recent essay by the author and actor Michael Witwer on the supposed ‘Bane of Banality’ (<http://www.tor.com/2015/10/12/the-bane-of-banality-frodo-baggins/>: accessed 20/10/2015) comprehensively misses Tolkien’s moral insight by suggesting that Frodo is a wimp, a failure, a disappointment – as though a better story would have involved a Fearless Hero triumphantly accomplishing his task, without significant assistance. This is exactly the error of *prelest,* or the preference for ‘thrills’. It is encouraging that everyone who comments on Witwer’s essay points out his error. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. T.S.Eliot *Four Quartets: Little Gidding* [1942][4, lines 5-7], after John of the Cross 2003: 69 [2.12.1]: ‘this dark night of loving fire, as it purges in the darkness, so also in the darkness enkindles the soul. We shall likewise be able to see that, even as spirits are purged in the next life with dark material fire, so in this life they are purged and cleansed with the dark spiritual fire of love’. Eliot’s verse, incidentally, refers back to the fabled death of Heracles, consumed by ‘the intolerable shirt of flame’ woven by Deianeira in mistaken love. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Ennead* IV.3 [27].27 after Homer, *Odyssey* 11.601ff; see also IV.3 [27].32, 24f; I.1 [53].12, 32-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Liebeschuetz 1979: 242-3. De Blois 1976: 149-50 notes that it was Plotinus’s patron Gallienus who revived Heracles as a focus for imperial loyalty, and his own self-image (he also invoked Mercury, “Genius Populi Romani”, Demeter, Zeus and the Sun: 150-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Plato *Phaedrus* 238c; see Connor 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Ennead* II.3 [52].9, 31-3; see Clark 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Porphyry 1917: *De antro nympharum* 10-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Tsakiridou 2013, 3-4, contrasting the accounts of Nicephorus of Constantinople and St.John Damascene. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Pentcheva 2010:194. Pentcheva pays particular attention (2010: 183-198) to the writings of Michael Psellos (1018-78?) on the icon as *empsuchos graphe,* “animated inscription”*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Plato, *Laws* 1.649. But cf. *Laws* 2.666: “The other story implied that wine was given man out of revenge, and in order to make him mad; but our present doctrine, on the contrary, is, that wine was given him as a balm, and in order to implant modesty in the soul, and health and strength in the body.” [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. ‘Dream of Scipio’: Cicero *Republic* Bk 6, ch.3, tr. Andrew P.Peabody: <http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/bl/bl_text_cic_scipiodream.htm> (accessed 12/11/2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp3iHjGBfT4>, accessed 18/09/2015. The film version of Matheson’s book was written by him, and directed by Jack Arnold. There is apparently a reboot on the horizon, probably with better special effects. In the novel Carey does not expect anyone else to follow him ‘down’, but rather hopes that his ‘new world’ might also contain its own native intelligence. Nor is there any mention of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Blake ‘Auguries of Innocence’ [1803]: 1966: 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Blake *Jerusalem* plate 77: 1966*:* 717. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Blake ‘To George Cumberland, 12th April 1827’: 1966: 878. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. As Puddleglum, not quite sincerely, suggests in Lewis 2009: 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)