0. In this paper I would like to present some very preliminary research into a topic that arose while working on a larger project concerning the Gnostic antecedents of Plotinus’ mysticism. Over the course of this project, I have come to the conclusion that Plotinus’ ‘ascent’ to the One might best be understood in the context of the visionary ascent in Platonizing Sethian Gnosticism. Here, however, I will restrict the focus to a single, peculiar feature of Plotinus’ transcendental epistemology: the term *pronoein*, “pre–intellection,” and the cluster of concepts to which this term is related. Although the research is far from complete, it will become apparent that the Plotinus’ concept of pre–intellection has a substantial pre–Plotinian history in Gnostic protological, soteriological, and mystical speculation.

1. Throughout his works, Plotinus repeatedly denies that the One can be an object of intellection, even of reflexive self–thought, on the grounds that the resulting logical duality between subject and object, however minimal, would compromise the supreme principle’s absolute unity. In various places, however, he grants that there can nevertheless be *some* kind of transcendental apprehension of the One. Usually he describes the ultimate phase of mystical ascent in terms of the transcendence or abdication of intellection, but occasionally he suggests that an apprehension of the One may be attained by means of an extraordinary faculty of Intellect itself. At V.3[49].10.41–44, [which is passage 1 on the handout], Plotinus uses the peculiar verb *pronoein* to describe this faculty of transcendental apprehension: “There will not be thinking of it, but touching, and, as it were, only an unutterable and unthinkable contact— ‘pre–thinking’ (*pronoousa*)— Intellect not yet having come into being, and what is touching is not thinking.” Although this is Plotinus’ only use of *pronoein* in this sense, elsewhere he employs a number of similar images which imply an extraordinary faculty of mystical apperception that is not merely superior to intellect in terms of value, but that is also— to use a temporal metaphor— *anterior* to intellection itself. Thus in the remarkable description of the mystical–erotic attainment of the One at VI.7[38].35.19–38 [passage 2 in the handout] Plotinus equates the faculty by which we apprehend the One— the *nous erôn* or “loving Intellect”— not with the ordinary epistemic activity of *nous*, but rather with “the power by which it was going to think” (*hêi dunamei emelle noein*). The use of the verb *mellein*, which indicates an intended or future action, suggests that
the moment of transcendental apperception— the mystical union with the One— precedes intellection, and somehow recapitulates the primordial moment of ontogenesis just prior to the constitution of Intellect proper. Thus, for instance, in a description of ontogenesis earlier in the same treatise, at VI.7[38].16.10–22, he refers to the prenoetic efflux of the One prior to its reversion upon its source as “not yet Intellect” (ou̱pò nous) [passage 3], while later, at V.3[49]11.1–16, it is “sight not yet seeing” (opsis ou̱pò idousa) [passage 4]. In other words, the pronoousa of V.3[49].10.43 would appear to refer to an atemporal moment at which the unbounded, prenoetic dunamis emerging from the One has not yet reverted upon and apprehended its source, and thus still abides in an ineffable, pre–epistrophic “contact” with the supreme principle itself. The mystical faculty is therefore a prefiguration of Intellect— or “pre–thinking”— through which the human aspirant replicates or co–experiences the One’s own ineffable self–apprehension.

2. Whence, then, Plotinus’ curious concept of mystical “pre–intellection,” pronoein? We may start with the most obvious parallel, which happens to be post–Plotinian. The related verb proennoein occurs in a similar context in Porphyry’s Sententiae 26, where it describes a (presumably mystical) apprehension of the hyperontic first principle [this is passage 6 in the handout]. By “holding fast to being,” — or so Porphyry implies— “we preconceive the nonbeing above being” (proennooumen to huper to on mê on). In his 1968 Porphyre et Victorinus, Pierre Hadot noted that a similar term occurs in the Anonymous Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides, where— if we accept Hadot’s emendation— the commentator insists that one can apprehend the transcendent First One by “standing upon an ineffable preconception of him” (stênai epi tēn autō arrhēton proennoia) [this is passage 7 in the handout]. Hadot further compared this to Victorinus’ use of the term praeintellegentia, where this is used among other similar constructions to describe not mystical apprehension but rather the self–intellection of God the Father [passage 8]. In any case, according to Hadot— who considered the Anonymous Commentary to be post–Plotinian, and for this and other reasons attributed it to Porphyry— the latter’s use of proennoein in these two passages would be largely, if not entirely, dependent upon the Plotinian parallel in V.3[49].10, and would suggest a correspondence between, on the one hand, the preternatural intellection by which we grasp the divine and, on the other hand, the self–intellection of the deity itself [this is passage 9 on the handout].

3. The question remains, however, how it is that Plotinus himself arrived at this conception. Following a suggestion of Walter Scott in his edition of the Hermetica, Hadot conjectured that this concept originated in the Stoic notion of prolépsis or “preconception.” Now apparently the Stoics used the
originally Epicurean term *prolēpsis* in a technical sense to mean a universal faculty of pre-empirical knowledge that allows one to recognize the presentations of sense-data and/or to intuit what cannot be perceived either with the senses or with reason [see passage 10]. Among the Roman Stoics, the term seems also to have been closely related to the so-called *koinai ennoiai* or “common conceptions”: that is, the innate intuitions supposedly shared by all humans, such as, for example, a belief in the gods. Hadot suggested that this overarching conception, if not precise terminology, was later transformed by the Neoplatonists into a mystical faculty for apprehending the supreme principle: a principle which itself can neither be perceived by the senses nor conceived, strictly speaking, with the intellect.

4. While I happen to have doubts about Hadot’s post-Plotinian dating of the *Anonymous Commentary*, he seems to be correct that the Stoic conception of *prolēpsis* and/or *koinai ennoiai* lurks somewhere in the background of the conception of “pre-thinking” as faculty of transcendental apprehension: a conception that seems to have been shared by Plotinus and Porphyry, and, also—if indeed, as I suspect, it was not Porphyry—by the anonymous commentator him or herself. And yet I would suggest that Plotinus and his immediate successors did not adopt this notion directly from the Stoics, but instead did so through only the mediation of roughly contemporaneous Gnostics, including, but not limited to, the Platonizing Sethians on the immediate periphery of Plotinus’ Roman circle. As seems so often to be the case with the peculiar technical terms that permeate the *Anonymous Commentary*—indeed, even those terms which also occur in undisputedly Porphyrian works—the term *proennoia*, as well as the constellation of conceptions to which this term is related, have much closer parallels in indubitably pre-Plotinian sources, including, and especially, Gnostic texts. I would like to suggest that the Gnostics—whose literature, moreover, is suffused with Stoic ideas—had previously re-appropriated this aspect of Stoic psychology and had already reconfigured it into a well-developed schema that combined soteriology and transcendental epistemology, and that this schema thus comprised the intellectual–historical background of Plotinus’ doctrine of mystical apprehension.

5. To investigate the pre-Plotinian roots of this concept, then, let us begin with Hadot’s citations. Interestingly, although Hadot appeals to the Stoic origins of this idea, the only (arguably) pre-Plotinian sources that he cites are all exiguous Hermetic fragments in which the phrase *ho proenoumenos theos* appears to be a conventional Hermetic cognomen for the supreme deity who is beyond the ordinary capability of human intellection [passages 11 and 12]. Although these passages tell us very little about how this term was intended, they do appear to have something to do with the Stoic use of “preconception” to mean an intuition of the divine. Cicero uses the term *praenotionem deorum* (“the
preconception of the gods” in this sense [this is passage 13 on the handout], and in a passage from Plutarch’s critique of the Stoic doctrine of koinai ennoiai [this is number 14], the verb proennoein denotes the prior intuition of the Good upon which all value judgements rely.

6. However, one might also note that language tantalizingly reminiscent of pronoein with a more metaphysical implication also occurs in other, related contexts. We may augment Hadot’s list of Hermetic citations with another ostensibly Egyptian doctrine preserved by Iamblichus at De mysteriis VIII.3, which is perhaps somewhat closer to Plotinus’ understanding of pre–intellection as a property of the transcendent first principle prior to the constitution of Intellect. Here, among a profusion of different Hermetic theologies, Iamblichus describes one schema in which an apparently dyadic principle called “Eiktôn” is intercalated between the utterly transcendent, “indivible One” and the self– intelligizing Nous proper. This intermediary principle contains both “the first thinker and the first intelligible” (to prōton esti nooun kai to prōton noēton), and, he says, it “is worshipped through silence alone” [this is passage 15; I have also provided an analysis at number 16]. Interestingly, we may recall a similar association between silence and pre–intellection in the Anonymous Commentary passage that I cited earlier. To this we may also compare a passage of the Theologoumena Arithmeticae attributed to the Neopythagorean Nicomachus of Gerasa: “the primal thought of otherness is in the Dyad” (heterotētos gar prōtistē ennoia en duadi) [passage 17]. These two passages, taken together, suggest that something associated with preconception or pre–intellection was thought to abide immediately subjacent to the first principle beyond Intellect, but somewhere “above” the Intellect itself: in the precise position of the Platonic–Pythagorean Indefinite Dyad to which Plotinus himself furtively refers, for instance, at V.4[7].2.4–8 (and several other places as well). The certainty of the pre–Plotinian dating of this doctrine is, of course, partially compromised by the fact that both of these mysterious fragments are preserved by Iamblichus; nevertheless, this provides some grounds to suspect that the notion of pre–intellection occurred in the context not only of Stoic psychology but also of Platonic metaphysics in pre–Plotinian religio–philosophical circles.

7. Now the closest, arguably pre–Plotinian elaboration of a transcendental epistemology involving the notion of “pre–intellection” and / or “primary” or “first conception” may be found in the Platonizing Sethian Gnostic tractates that circulated among Plotinus’ entourage: a fact that Hadot apparently did not notice in 1968, but one that Michel Tardieu noted briefly in his 1996 reply to Hadot’s earlier work [passage 18]. Indeed, it appears that the Platonizing Sethians had already formulated (a) a conception of ontogenesis through the hypertranscendental, unknowable deity’s pre–intellectual self–apprehension
and (b) a model of mystical apprehension involving the contemplative replication, within the consciousness of the human aspirant, of the first principle’s own ineffable self-apprehension. Here, I should say, I follow the observations of many previous scholars, including Hans-Joachim Krämer and more recently, of course, John Turner, both of whom have pointed out various aspects of this theme in Gnosticism [thus passages 19 and 20].

8. Let us turn first to the evidence from Zostrianos. Despite the severe damage to the text, it is evident that pre-intellection occurs in three interrelated contexts: first, in the self-apprehension of the supreme deity, the Invisible Spirit; second, in the ontogenetic emergence of the second, noetic principle (that is, the Barbelo Aeon and its subaeons); and third, in the mystical epistemology which permits the human aspirant to apprehend the transcendent first principle. On page 20, lines 11–14 [passage 21 on the handout], we find an indication that the hypertranscendent first deity is not accessible to knowledge but is, nevertheless, “pre-knowable”: “He is a divine father as he is pre-known (eu-r shrp n-eime erof), and he is not known; for he is a power and a father from himself.” The remainder of the passage, lines 15–18, seems to equate the tripartite power of the first principle, the Invisible Spirit, with a “first thought,” ti-shorp n-ennoaia, a phrase which recurs later at 24.12 and 60.13 [passage 22 on the handout], and which is, one may presume, more or less equivalent with the first principle’s “pre-knowing” (shrp n-eime). Earlier, at 58.16–20 [passage 23 on the handout], we find, “the Invisible Spirit is a psychic and an intellectual power, a knower and a pre-knower (ref-r shrp n-eime).” This pre-intellectual self-apprehension is also the original act that establishes ontogenesis, as the Barbelo Aeon and its contents emerge from the Invisible Spirit through an act of reflexive pre-intellection. At 82.23 [passage 24 on the handout] the fully-distinguished Barbelo is described as the “comprehension (ti-katanoësis)” of the pre-existent god, a peculiar term which Plotinus later echoes in an early, pre-Großschrift treatise, V.4[7].2.16–17 [passage 25 on the handout] to describe a mysterious noëton apprently located somewhere ‘between’ Intellect and the One. At Zostrianos 82.6–13, the subject of self-intellection is the prefiguration of intellect still in occultation: namely, Kalyptos, the supreme subaeon of Barbelo; this principle first minimally distinguishes itself from the Invisible Spirit through reflexive pre-cognition [this is passage 26 on the handout]: “[the one] who preconceives it (pê et-r shorp n-eime erof) is an eternal space (chôrêma), since he had become a second one of his knowledge, again the knowledge of his knowledge, which is the unbegotten Kalyptos.” It is interesting that this apparently recursive “knowledge of knowledge” is specifically criticized by Plotinus at II.9[33].1.34–40 despite its evident proximity to his own scheme. Finally, in the clearest elaboration of mystical epistemology in Zostrianos, at 24.1–17 [passage 27 on the handout], we find a description of the
various faculties by which one can apprehend successive ontological strata. As I have tried to indicate in the chart [number 28 on the handout], something called a “first thought” (ti–shorp nennoia)—which we may reasonably connect with pre–intellection (r–shrp n–eime)—corresponds to the ultimate apprehension of the first principle, the Invisible Spirit: “Through the thought that now exists in Silence and through the First Thought (hn ti–shorp n–ennoia) (one learns) about the Triple Powered Invisible Spirit.” Here we have an explicit statement that the faculty by which the first principle is known is called a “first thought.”

9. In Allogenes, the term shorp n–ennoia—“first thought”—appears to have crystallized into a technical term for pre–intellection; as I have argued elsewhere, the term was virtually synonymous with the phrase mnt–shorp ouônh ebol, which can be rendered as “primary revelation” or “primordial manifestation.” This denotes both the reflexive self–manifestation of the first principle that initially establishes ontogenesis, and also, simultaneously, the mechanism by which the human aspirant apprehends that transcendent principle. In any case, the term “first thought” itself occurs unambiguously at least three times in the tractate. The first instance, at 48.13 [passage 29 on the handout], clearly occurs in the context of mystical epistemology: “Since it is impossible for the individuals to comprehend the Universal one that abides in the place that is beyond perfection, they apprehend through a first thought (ou–shorp n–ennoia).” The second instance, at 53.10–13 [passage 30], refers to a first thought in the simultaneous sense of both mystical epistemology and of primordial ontogenesis: “Since perfect comprehension is impossible... it is (known) in this manner: because of the third silence of Mentality and the second undivided activity which manifested in the First Thought (ti–shorp n–ennoia), which is the Aeon of Barbelo.” Finally, at 64.31 [passage 31 on the handout], the term appears to refer to a faculty of transcendental apprehension that is imparted by the initial precognition at the moment of ontogenesis: “He was blind apart from the eye [or ‘spring’] of revelation that is at rest, that which is activated from the triple power of the First Thought (ti–shorp n–ennoia) of the Invisible Spirit.”

10. We may see, then, that the conception of pre–intellection and / or “first thought” as the simultaneous mechanism of both ontogenesis and mystical apperception occurs throughout the Platonizing Sethian literature closest to Plotinus. However, lest one harbor any residual suspicion that the vector of influence moved from Plotinus to the Gnostics, rather than, as I suggest, the other way around—that is, from the Gnostics to Plotinus—we may observe that variants of the same notion are extremely widespread in other Gnostic sources at a greater remove from Plotinus’ circle but appear not
to exist apart from a Gnostic context. Beginning with other Sethian texts, in the *Untitled Text* of the Bruce Codex, for instance, we find a clear statement that the aeons are established by the “first thought” of the transcendent Father, which also appears to grant the aeons knowledge of the Father in return [this is passage 32 on the handout]: “Through his members he has of himself provided a place for his members so that they would be situated within him and so that they know that he is the Father and that it is he who projected them in his first thought (*nef-shorp n–ennoia*).” While the *Untitled Text* is considered (by Turner among others) to postdate Zostrianos and Allogenes, this term also occurs in the classic Sethian literature that most likely predates the Platonizing tractates, as is suggested by the namesake of the Sethian *Trimorphic Protennoia*— the “first-thought in three forms”— who is both the primordial first thought of the Father and, simultaneously, the indwelling salvific principle within human beings that permits them to reascend to their pleromatic source [number 33 on the handout]. Moreover, this notion is not restricted to Sethian literature, but may also be found in the presumably Valentinian *Tripartite Tractate*, though with subtle terminological differences. Thus at 61.1 [passage 34 on the handout], the initial emanation of the aeons by the transcendent Father occurs by means of pre–intellection: “The one who *preconceived* them...” (*p–entaf–r–sharp mmeue...*),” or, with a slight variation of terminology, at 62.15 [passage 35], “the one who conceived it from the beginning...” (*pe–ete–af–meue aras jn n–sharp*...); at 82.22 [passage 36], the aeons emerge from “the thought that *preconceived* them” (*p–meue entaf–r–sharp n–souônou*). A similar construction is explicitly used to describe mystical apprehension of the Godhead. Thus at 127.8–24 [passage 37] we find a list of technical terms for the mystical apprehension of the pre–existent deity, one of which is described as a manifestation of the ontogenetic first thought: “He who gave them knowledge of him was one of his powers for enabling them to grasp the knowledge in supremity; it is called...”— among other terms—“the manifestation of those things that were *preconceived*” (*p–ouônh abal n–nent–ausouônou n–shorp*).”

11. Yet at this point one might also note that the notion of preconception also occurs in descriptions of primordial ontogenesis in the very earliest phase of Gnostic thought. In the Valentinian ontogenetic schema thought itself emerges, somewhat counterintuitively, *prior* to the genesis of Intellect. In Irenaeus’ account of the system of Ptolemy, the supreme deity Bythos (Deep) is accompanied by two consorts, Thought and Will [this is passage 38 on the handout]; “for it was *first conceived* to project something (*prôton gar ennoêthê*)... and then it was willed.” The apparent tmesis dividing the word *proennoein* somewhat obscures the parallel, but in an account of the ostensible “first” Gnostic, Simon Magus, the terminological connection is clear. According to Justin Martyr, Simon Magus’ companion
Helen, an ex–prostitute, was considered by Simons’ disciples to be the “first thought” (ennoian prôtên) generated by the supreme deity [passage 39]; interestingly, elsewhere Justin disapprovingly quotes certain pagans, possibly Stoics, who describe the birth of Athena from Zeus’ head as his “first thought” (prôtên ennoian) [passage 40]. And—most importantly— in the description of ontogenesis in the Apocryphon of John [passage 41 on the handout], at the moment Barbelo emerges from the self–apprehension of the Invisible Spirit as his reflection in his own aqueous light, she is described as te–hœoueite n–ennoia, the “primordial thought.” This confirms that the notion of the self–reflection of the supreme principle described as “pre–intellection” or “first thought” already existed in embryonic form in the classic Gnostic systems, and that this principle was thought to occupy an intermediary position immediately subjacent to the supreme principle but in some sense superior to the fully–determinate, second, noetic principle, the Barbelo Aeon.

12. At this point we may wonder how this first thought become associated with soteriology and visionary ascent. I cannot claim to answer this here with any certainty, but I would hypothesize that it has something to do with the notion of providence. Significantly, in the same ontogenetic passage of the Apocryphon of John [again, passage 41 on the handout], another related term is employed to describe the first emergent self–cognition: “His thought became an actuality; she appeared; she stood before him in the brilliance of his light. She is the dunamis that is prior to everything, the Pronoia of the all (te–pronoia m–pterf).” Here the term pronoia is used to describe the emergent Barbelo, and in this passage it is often simply translated as “providence,” which is certainly at least one of its meanings. But pronoia here might be better rendered as “forethought” or even “pre–thought,” and we may begin to suspect that it is related both conceptually and etymologically to the other designation of the incipient Barbelo, tehœoueite n–ennoia, “primordial thought,” that occurs later in the same passage. That pronoia is more or less synonymous with prôtê ennoia elsewhere in Sethian thought is further supported by the occurrence of this term in precisely the same context in the Gospel of the Egyptians, which is a more proximate ancestor of the Platonizing Sethian tractates; thus, in Codex IV, page 50, lines 5–9 [passage 42 on the handout] we find the hymnic phrase, “the light of the perfection, the eternal light of the eternities, the light in silence, in the Pronoia and silence of the Father.”

13. Yet the mythical figure of Pronoia in the Apocryphon of John—like the eponymous savior of the Trimorphic Protennoia and the First Thought in the Platonizing Sethian tractates—is not only the incipient reflexive apprehension of the supreme principle, but is also, as is well known, the salvific mechanism by which one returns to the transcendent realm. In the long version, Pronoia herself is
important enough to be accorded a lengthy aretalogy of her own (the so-called Pronoia monologue); thus, in Codex II, page 31, lines 11–14 [passage 43] she declares, “I am the Pronoia of the pure Light; I am the thought of the Virginal Spirit, who raises you up to the honored place,” and the same salvific role is attributed to the personified Pronoia and/or her secondary emanation, Epinoia, “mental reflection,” throughout both long and short versions of the tractate [examples of this are provided in passages 44 and 45].

14. Hints of a similar association between pronoia and both salvation and visionary ascent may also be found in the earliest stratum of Valentinian thought. One might consider a fragment of Valentinus himself, preserved by Clement of Alexandria [this is passage 46 on the handout]: “Until the heart encounters pronoia, it is impure, being the domicile of many demons; but when the Father who alone is good inspects (the heart), he sanctifies it and causes it to shine forth with light, and therefore one having such a heart is blessed, because he will see God.” Interestingly, this quotation from Valentinus is later echoed at Zostrianos 46.6–31 [passage 47 on the handout], where the soul, having fallen into generation, is similarly imprisoned by evil spirits, but is subsequently saved, here not quite by pronoia, but instead by “perfect living thoughts” (hen-noêma nen-telios euonh) that are equated with luminous “impressions” (tupoi) within the soul; these assist in the ascent out of the cosmos. In both passages, one may perceive a conflation of the soteriological or providential role of the innate remnant within the human soul of the primordial first moment of divine intellection (on the one hand) with (on the other hand) the visionary possibilities inherent in introspective contemplation.

15. There are a number of more ambiguous hints that Pronoia played some unusual role in Gnostic thought; one might consider Origen’s description of the Ophite diagram, in which one figure’s caption apparently read “the pronoia of Sophia” [passage 48]; or Plotinus’ own diatribe against the Gnostics, where he enigmatically takes them to task for claiming themselves to be the unique beneficiaries of Pronoia [this is passage 49]. Here the sense of pronoia is obscure.

16. Now it is well known that the concept of Pronoia, understood as providence or forethought, occupied a significant role in Stoicism, and it is, of course, possible that the Stoics themselves envisioned some connection between pronoia and the prolépsis and/or koinê ennoia that permits apprehension of the divine; and yet other than a few intimations here and there, I have been unable to find a clear indication of this association in Stoic sources. Whether or not this association was made by the Stoics, however, it appears that pronoia was deliberately employed in a dual sense by the Gnostics, who exploited the ambiguity between both its traditional meaning, that of the divine Providence
necessary for salvation—which they understood specifically in the sense of an ascent out of the cosmos—and also its newer, more esoteric significance, that of the salvific or mystical—epistemological faculty of transcendental “pre-intellection” that was also understood as the primordial self-apprehension of the transcendent deity itself. Undoubtedly aware of the Gnostic origin of this association, Plotinus makes no connection between pronoia and mystical pronoësis in his long treatise On Providence that Porphyry separated into III.2 and III.3 (chronologically numbers 47 and 48). But such a connection was made explicit by later Neoplatonists, who, unlike Plotinus, did not feel that their Platonic or Hellenic identity was threatened by Gnosticism and therefore had far less compunction about tacitly redeploying certain recognizably Gnostic ideas that earlier had so embarrassed Plotinus and his Roman circle. Alluding to the Stoic conception of koinai ennoiai, Iamblichus insists that an “innate knowledge” (emphutos gnōsis) about the gods derives from the gods themselves and is also associated with the soul’s desire for the Good [this is passage 50]. More remarkably, in a discussion of providence, Proclus later makes the Gnostic jeu de mots explicit: “Among the gods, then, providence is primary; for where, then, is the activity prior to intellect, if not in the hyper–essential things? Providence (pronoia)—as the name indicates—is an activity prior to intellect (pro nou).” [This is passage 51]. Proclus was writing in the 5th century, but it seems reasonably clear—despite the numerous chronological uncertainties—that the equation of the salvific faculty of transcendental apprehension that was granted providentially to humans as an element of the transcendent deity’s own, primordial pre-intellection, was already current in demonstrably pre–Plotinian strata of Gnostic thought, perhaps even as early as the second third of the 2nd century when the Apocryphon of John was presumably compiled. I would therefore suggest that despite Plotinus’ self-proclaimed opposition to the Gnostics, it was from a profound familiarity with these Gnostic ideas that he derived his notion of mystical pre-intellection: a notion whose true source he reveals with but a single use of pronoousa at V.3[49], a treatise written late in his career once the Gnostic ‘threat’ had largely abated.
“First Thought,” “Prethinking,” “Forethought” (Prôtê Ennoia, Pronoein, Pronoia, etc.) as Faculty of Transcendental Apprehension in Plotinus and Gnosticism

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[1] Plotinus V.3[49].10.41–44

There will not be thinking of it, but touching, and, as it were, only an unutterable and unthinkable contact—‘pre–thinking’—Intellect not yet having come into being, and what is touching is not thinking.

[2] Plotinus VI.7[38].35.19–38

Intellect, too, therefore, has one power for intellection, by which it looks at the things in itself, and another for what transcends it, by means of some ‘thrusting upon’ and ‘receiving,’ by which also, earlier, it only saw, and later, by seeing, also acquired intellect and is one. And that [former] contemplation is of the sober intellect, but the [latter is] itself the loving intellect, when it has become insane, “drunk from the nectar”; then loving, having been expanded into enjoyment in satiety; and it is better for it to be drunk with this kind of inebriation than more respectfully sober. But does that intellect see in part, sometimes some things and sometimes others? No; the teaching discourse makes them “come to be,” but it always has intellection while it also has not intellection, but looking at that in another way. For seeing him, he ‘had’ [sc. “conceived”] offspring and was conscious both of their being born and their being within him; and when he sees them he is said to think, but [he sees] that one by means of the power by which he was going to think.


Did it, when it was looking towards the Good, think that One as many, and he himself being one, think him as many, dividing him in himself by not being able to think the whole at once? But it was not yet Intellect while it was looking at that, but looked unintellectually. Or we should say that it was not ever looking, but lived towards it and depended upon it and turned towards it...
...όρισε μὲν ἐπ’ αὐτῷ οὐχ ὡς νοῦς, ἀλλ’ ὡς ὁ ψυχή οὐκοῦν ἄγως, ἐξήλθε δὲ ἔσοροις ὑπερ ἀντὶ ἐπιλήθηνεν· ὡστε ἀλλού μὲν ἐπεθύμησεν ἀκοπλήσιος ἔσοροις ἐπ’ αὐτῆς φάντασμα τι, ἐξήλθε δὲ ἄλλο λαβοῦσα ἐν αὐτῇ αὐτῷ πολὺ ποιήσασα. Καὶ γὰρ αὐτὸ ἔξω ὕπαινον τοῦ ὁμοθέτου· η ν’ παρεδεξαστὸ ἐν αὐτῇ γενέσθαι. Οὔτος δὲ πολὺς ἐς ἕνως ἐγένετο, καὶ οὕτως γνῶς εἰδέναι αὐτῷ, καὶ τότε ἐγένετο ἱδοῦσα ὑμῖς. Τοῦτό δέ ἑκα θεός, ὅτε ἔχει, καὶ ὡς νοῦς ἔκει πρὸ δὲ τούτου ἐφίλας οἷον καὶ ἀτυπωτός ὑμῖς. Οὔτος οὖν ὁ νοῦς ἐπέβαλε μὲν ἐκεῖνο, λαβὼν δὲ ἐγένετο θεός, ἂν δὲ τι ἐνδιάλεκτος καὶ κενόμενος καὶ νοῦς καὶ ὦσία καὶ νόησις, ὁτὲ ἐνόησε: πρὸ γὰρ τούτου οὐ νόησις ἢ τὸν θεόν οὐκ ἔχων οὓδε νοῦς ὑπάρ νόησας.

...it moved to it not as Intellect, but as vision not yet seeing, and came out having that which the vision multiplied. For again it has the impression of the thing seen, or else it would not have allowed it to come to be in itself. This became many out of one, and thus coming to know it saw it, and then became seeing sight. It is already Intellect when it has this, and has it as Intellect; but before this it is only desire and unimprinted sight. And so this Intellect apprehended that one, but grasping it became Intellect, eternally in need and having become Intellect, substance, and thought, when it thought; for before this it was not thinking, not having the intelligible nor Intellect, not having yet thought.


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It is therefore necessary to become intellect and to entrust one’s own soul to intellect and to place it beneath it, in order that having awakened, one might receive what one sees, and by this (one should) contemplate the One, not adding to it anything sensory nor receiving from (sense perception) into (intellect), but with pure intellect—and with the primary part of intellect—(one should) contemplate the Purest.


...it moved to it not as Intellect, but as vision not yet seeing, and came out having that which the vision multiplied. For again it has the impression of the thing seen, or else it would not have allowed it to come to be in itself. This became many out of one, and thus coming to know it saw it, and then became seeing sight. It is already Intellect when it has this, and has it as Intellect; but before this it is only desire and unimprinted sight. And so this Intellect apprehended that one, but grasping it became Intellect, eternally in need and having become Intellect, substance, and thought, when it thought; for before this it was not thinking, not having the intelligible nor Intellect, not having yet thought.

“Nonbeing”: one (kind) we generate while separated from being, another we preconceive while holding fast to being. If indeed we are separated from being, we do not preconceive the nonbeing above being, but we generate the false experience “nonbeing,” which is found around the one standing out of himself.
And thus it will be possible neither to fall off into a void nor to dare to attach anything to it, but to remain in non-apprehensive apprehension and in nonconceptual thought; from this exercise, it will at some point happen to you, while also standing away from those things substantiated through him, to stand upon an unutterable preconception of him, which creates an image of him through silence, without recognizing that it is silent nor is conscious that it is creating an image of him nor knowing absolutely anything at all, but being only an image of the unutterable, unutterably being the unutterable, but not as if cognizant, if you can follow me imaginatively insofar as I am able to explain.


Kaï οὐτός οὖτε ἐκπίπτει εἰς κένωμα ἐνέςται οὐτε τολμᾷ τι ἐκεῖνῳ προσάπτειν, μένει δ’ ἐν ἀκαταλήπτω καταλήμει καὶ μηδὲν ἐνυνοοῦση νοήσει ἄφ’ ἣς ἁλέτης συμβησάται σοι ποτε καὶ ἀποστάντι τάν δι’ αὐτόν ὑποστάντων τῆς νοήσεως στήναι ἐπὶ τήν αὐτοῦ ἀρρήτου προέννοιαν τῆν ἑνεκοινζομένην αὐτόν διὰ σιγῆς οὐδὲ ὅτι σιγά γιγνώσκουσαν οὐδὲ ὃτι ἑνεικοινίζεται αὐτῶν παρακολουθοῦσαν οὐδὲ τι καθάπαξ εἰδοῦν, ἀλλ’ οὕσαν μόνον εἰκόνα ἀρρήτου τὸ ἀρρήτως οὕσαν, ἀλλ’ οὐχ ὡς γιγνώσκουσαν, εἴ μοι ὡς χωρώ λέγειν δύναιο κἂν εφανταστικῶς παρακολούθησαι.

[The ms. reads προσέννοιαν (as a noun, this is a hapax); Hadot conjectures προεννοιαν, which is followed by Linguiti; Bechtle, however, preserves προεννοιαν. But could this instead have been προτέννοιαν, unattested in Greek but preserved in the Coptic πρωτεννοια in NHC XIII,1?]


...et universalium et partilium omnium quae sunt prima causa, omnium principiorum praepincipium, omnium intellegientiarum praintellegentia....

Hic est deus, hic pater, praintellegentia praexistens et praexistentia beatitudinem suam et immobili motione semet ipsum custodiens....

... it is the first cause of all things that are, of both wholes and parts, the pre–principle of every principle, the pre–knowledge of all knowledge...

This is God, this Father, preexisting preintelligence and preexistence, preserving himself and his own happiness in an immobile movement....


Cette idée de “prénotion”, de προεννοια, n’est pas si singulière qu’on pourrait le croire. On la retrouve d’abord dans les Sententiae de Porphyre qui nous disent que nous avons une prénotion (προνοοούμεν ou προεννοοούμεν) du Non–Êtant au dessus de l’Êtant, c’est–à–dire de l’Un. Plotin y fait allusion lorsqu’il imagine, au–delà de la dualité de la pensée, la simplicité absolue d’un toucher sans intellecction qui anticipe la pensée (προνοοοῦσα).... Le premier Dieu est “préconçu” (aussi bien par les autres que par lui–même) parce qu’il ne peut être atteint que par un mode de connaissance antérieure à la connaissance et qui correspond précisément au fait qu’il est “préexistant”.... [n. 6:] La pensée antérieure à la pensée correspond à la fois au mode d’intellecction par lequel nous saisissions Dieu et au mode d’intellecction propre à Dieu.
[10] Diogenes Laërtius VII.54.5–9 [= SVF II.105 = Chrysippus fr. 105.7 = Posidonius fr. 460.6]

ὁ δὲ Χρύσιππος διαφορέμενος πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ Περὶ λόγου κριτηρία φησὶν εἶναι αἰσθητικαὶ καὶ πρόληψιν· ἔστι δὲ ἡ πρόληψις ἐννοια φυσικῇ τῶν καθολοῦ.

Chrisippus, contradicting himself, says in the first book On Reason that the criteria are sense-perception and preconception (prolépsis); preconception is the natural conception of universals.

[Cf. Zostrianos (NHC VIII,1) 20.16–16: τῷορὲν νηννοῖα νῆτε ναὶ] τήρω|γ|; cf. also 22.5]


ἐστιν γὰρ τις, ὃ τέκνου, ἀπόρρητος λόγοι

There is, O child, an unutterable doctrine and a holy wisdom about the sole lord of all things and the preconceived god, the declaration of whom is beyond human (capability).

[12] Iamblichus, De Mysteriis X.7 [293.1–3] [= Corp. Herm. fr. 17.1 Scott]; see also fr. 36 Scott [= Pseudo–Anthimius §15]; cf. fr. 30 Scott [= Cyril, Contra Iulianum I, P.G. LXXVI, 533a–b]

Αὐτὸ δὲ τάγαθον τὸ μὲν θεῖον ἡγούμεναι τὸν

The Good itself [the Egyptians] consider to be, in the divine sense, the preconceived god, but in the human sense, the union with him....


...anticipationem...sive praenotionem deorum...ut

Epicurus ipse prόληψιν appelavit

...the anticipation...or ‘preconception’ of the gods, which Epicurus himself called prolépsis...

[14] Plutarch, Against the Stoics on Common Conceptions (Peri tòn koinòn ennoiòn) 1072a5–b1 [on prόληψις cf. also Diogenes Laërtius VII.54 (Chrysippus) and X.33 (Epicurus)]

ei γὰρ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ χωρίς οὐκ ἔστιν

For if apart from the good it is not possible to conceive of indifference to that which is not good, still more prudence about those things that are good does not provide a notion of itself to those who did not preconceive the good; but just as a conception of technique with regard to health and sickness does not occur to those who have not previously (conceived of) them, so also it is not possible to get a thought of knowledge of good and bad things without having preconceived both good things and bad things.
[15] Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* VIII.3 [262.10–263.5]

According to another ordering, [Hermes] ranks first the god [K]mêph, the leader of the celestial gods, whom he says to be an intellect thinking himself and turning his thoughts towards himself; but he promotes above this one the Indivisible One, and what he calls the “first delivery by a midwife,” which he also names Eiktôn, in which in fact there is the first thinker and the first intelligible, which is indeed worshipped through silence alone.

[16] Analysis of theological schema in Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* VIII.3 [262.10–263.5]

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Indivisible One</td>
<td>Supreme transcendent deity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Eiktôn = “First Delivery by a midwife”</td>
<td>First thinker and first intelligible, worshipped in silence (= dyad?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>[K]mêph</td>
<td>Intellect thinking itself (= Nous)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


For the Monad is some quantity also contemplated in its own right, and is the most unique delimiter and true definer; for if a thing would at some point be together with another, it would not be alone, but would be ranked under the Dyad; for the primal thought of otherness is in the Dyad.


Qu’en est–il maintenant de la préintelligence, ή προεύνοια, copte *tisorp nennoia*? Dans les textes gnostiques, elle designe toujours le mode suremînent par lequel les véritablement existants, appelés aussi “membres”, “éons”, “touts”, peuvent accéder à la connaissance d’eux–mêmes dans l’Être premier qui est νοῆςς νοῆσεως...


Der aktuelle Denkprozeß kommt aber erst dann in Gang, wenn der Ursprung durch Emanation ein Anderes aus sich heraussetzt, das ihm— in vermittelnder Spielung— objectivierend vor sich selbst bringt, das ihm aber zugleich erkennend gegenübertritt und dem er sich darum gegenständlich manifestieren kann. In der so statuiren γνώσεως θεοῦ ist demnach Gott Subjekt und Objekt in einem: Indem er sich auslegt, vermittelt er sich selbst und andere, erkennt sich selbst und wird erkannt.

The reality associated with the Invisible Spirit is apprehended neither by sight nor audible revelation, but only by a “silent power” or faculty of thought, a form of audition beyond hearing, which is identical with the “pure silent power” that exists in Barbelo, namely the silent Forethought (προτέννοια) of the Invisible Spirit which emanates as the Aeon of Barbelo.

[21] Zostrianos (NH VIII, 1) 20.11–18

He is a divine father as he is pre–known, and he is not known; for he is a power and a father from himself. This is why he is [fatherless], the invisible Triple–Powered, the First Thought of them all, the Invisible Spirit...

[22] Zostrianos 60.10–21 [fragmentary]

...[hear] him [...] and [...] in a [thought] and [in] a First Thought [...] since [...] with power [...] she is perfect [...] you must be preached to concerning everything, and [...] those to whom you will listen, by means of a thought of those beyond perfection, and those which you will know in the souls of the perfect ones.

[23] Zostrianos 58.16–20

And the Invisible Spirit is a psychic and an intellectual power, a knower and a pre–knower.

[24] Zostrianos 82.23–83.1

She is the comprehension (katanoësis) of the god who pre–exists.

[25] Plotinus V.4[7], 2.16–17

[the Intelligible] is its own self–comprehension (katanoësis), and exists as if by consciousness (sunaisthësei) in everlasting stasis, and in (a kind of) thinking different from the thinking according to Intellect.

[26] Zostrianos 82.6–13

...[the one] who preconceives it is an eternal space, since he had become a second one of his knowledge(s), again the knowledge of his knowledge, which is the unbegotten Kalyptos. [Cf. Plot. II.9[33], 1.34–40]
On the one hand, one sees in a perfect soul those of Autogenes; on the other hand, in intellect, those of the Triple Male, in a pure spirit, those of the Protophanes. One hears about Kalyptos through the powers of the Spirit which emerged in a vastly superior manifestation of the Invisible Spirit. Through the thought that now exists in Silence and through the First Thought [one learns] about the Triple Powered Invisible Spirit; it is a hearing and a power of silence which is purified in a vivifying spirit: perfect, first–perfect, and all–perfect.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line no.</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Faculty by which object is apprehended</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–3</td>
<td>those of the Autogenes</td>
<td>perfect soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–4</td>
<td>those of the Triple–Male</td>
<td>intellect</td>
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<tr>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>those of the Protophanes</td>
<td>pure spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>Kalyptos</td>
<td>the powers of the Spirit which emerged in a vastly superior manifestation of the Invisible Spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–13</td>
<td>Triple–Powered Invisible Spirit</td>
<td>the thought that now exists in Silence and through the First Thought</td>
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[29] Allogenes (NHC XI,3) 48.13

Since it is impossible for the individuals to comprehend the Universal one that abides in the place that is beyond perfection, they apprehend through a first thought.


The entirety beyond perfection precedes knowledge, (in such a way that it is not known by means of knowledge). Since perfect comprehension is impossible to be known, is (known) in this manner: because of the third silence of Mentality and the second undivided activity which manifested in the First Thought which is the Aeon of Barbelo.
[31] **Allogenes 64.31–32**

He was blind apart from the eye [or ‘spring’] of revelation that is at rest, that which is activated from the triple power of the First Thought of the Invisible Spirit.

[32] **Untitled Text (Codex Bruce) 265.11–18 Schmidt–MacDermot**

Through his members he has of himself provided a place for his members so that they would be situated within him and so that they know that he is the Father and that it is he who projected them in his first thought.

[33] **Trimorphic Protennoia (NHC XIII,1)**

I am Pro[tennoia, the thought] that exists in the light.....

I am the thought of the Father....

[34] **Tripartite Tractate (NHC 1,5) 61.1–8**

The one (the Father) who preconceived them [i.e., the Aeons]— not only that they should exist for him, but also that they should exist for themselves as well, that they should then exist in his thought as the substance of thought, that they might also be (substance of thought) for themselves as well— he sowed a thought as a spermatic seed.

[35] **Tripartite Tractate 62.15–20**

The one who conceived it from the beginning possessed it from the beginning; he saw it; he concealed (?) it from those who first came forth from him.

[36] **Tripartite Tractate 82.22–24**

And they come from within the thought that preconceived them.
He who gave them knowledge of him was one of his powers for enabling them to grasp the knowledge in supremacy; (it) is called “the knowledge of all that are conceived” and “the treasure” and (it) is “the addition for the increase of knowledge” (and) the “manifestation of those things which were preconceived” and “the path towards harmony and toward the one who pre–exists,” which is the increase of those who have abandoned the greatness which was theirs in the organization of the will, so that the end might be like the beginning.

Those around Ptolemy say that [Buthos] has two consorts, which they also call ‘dispositions,’ namely Thought and Will; for it was first conceived to project something, as they say, and next it was willed.

And almost all the Samaritans, and a few also among the other nations, agree to and revere [Simon Magus] as the first god; and some Helen—who wandered about with him during that time, who had previously prostituted (herself) in a brothel — she they claim (to be) the first thought generated by him.

Also— behaving in a similarly malicious manner—they [sc. the Pagans] declare Athena to be the daughter of Zeus, not through sexual reproduction but rather, since they knew that God had the notion to create the world through the Logos, they spoke of Athena as the first thought, which we consider to be the silliest thing, to put forth the female form as an image of thought.
It is he who intelligizes himself in the light that surrounds him, which is the spring of living water, which is full of purity, and the spring of the spirit which poured forth living water from within it. He was providing all the aeons and their worlds, and in every likeness he sees his own image (eikôn) in the pure light—water that surrounds him; and his thought became an actuality; she appeared; she stood before him in the brilliance of his light. She is the power (dunamis) that is before everything, the Pronoia of the All, who shines in the light of the invisible image (eikôn), the perfect power (dunamis). Barbelon, the aeon that is perfected, the glory giving glory to him, since she appeared by means of him. And she gave glory to him, she who is the Primordial Thought, his image (eikôn).

[42] Gospel of the Egyptians (NHC IV,2) 50.5–9 [cf. also 75.11 and NHC III,2 63.22]

...ποιοίν ἐν Ντης αἰώνων, ποιοίν ὀν Ντης ηνεξίης αἰὼν ἐν ἐν Ντης υπόστασις ἐν τῆς Φυσικής ἐν τῶν Πρωσίονοις ἐν Ντης της της πατης...

...the light of the perfection, the eternal light of the eternities, the light in silence, in the Pronoia and silence of the Father...

[43] Apocryphon of John (NHC II,1) 31.11–14

Ἀνόκ τε Τηπρωσίονοι Μπησούνοιν | Επιβνή Ἀνόκ τε ἐν Ντης ἐν Ντης ἐνεξίης | Ἐν Ντης της της Πρωσίονοις ἐν Ντης της της πατης... I am the Pronoia of the pure Light; I am the thought of the Virginal Spirit, who raises you up to the honored place.


Ἀνόκ τε ἐν Ντης της της Πρωσίονοις ἐν Ντης της της Ἐκελάς ἐν Ντης της της Πρωσίονοις ἐν Ντης της της Πρωσίονοις ἐν Ντης της της πατης... (cf. also II,1, 30.24 etc: Ἀνόκ τε ἐν Ντης ἐνεξίης | Ἐν Ντης της της Πρωσίονοις) I appeared in the likeness of an eagle upon the Tree of Knowledge, which is the mental reflection (Epinoia) from the Pronoia of pure Light, so that I might teach them and awaken them out of the depth of sleep.

(I am the remembrance of the Pronoia)

[45] Apocryphon of John (NHC III,1) 27.2–4 [CGL synopsis 56.9–10]

Τηνοια ἐν της της Πρωσίονοις ὑποστάσει | Ἐν Ντης ἐν Ντης ἐνεξίης | Ἐν Ντης της της Πρωσίονοις ἐν Ντης της της πατης... The Thought of the pre-existing light, being within him, awakened his thought.
And it seems to me that the heart experiences something like an inn; for that is riddled with holes and dug up and often filled with excrement, as people stay there licentiously, having no forethought for the place since it has been established by another. In this way too, until the heart encounters forethought, it is impure, being the domicile of many demons. But when the Father who alone is good inspects (the heart), he sanctifies it and causes it to shine forth with light, and thus one having such a heart is blessed, because he will see God.

Although it possesses an eternal and immortal power, it is caught by the claws of the body; it is obliterated, and is always bound within strong bonds, cut away by every evil spirit [i.e., by demons], until it [reconstitutes itself] again and begins again to abide within [itself]. This is why (powers) are appointed for their salvation, and these powers are those that abide here (in this world). And within the self-generated ones corresponding to each of the [aeons] stand glories so that one here (in the world) might be saved alongside them. But the glories are perfect living thoughts (teleios noëma euonh) appearing in powers. They are imperishable because [they are] impressions (tupos) of salvation which each saved one receives. One receives an impression; one takes power from each of them, and for each there is a glory as a helper; in this manner one will pass out of the cosmos and every aeon.

[48] Origen, Contra Celsum VI.38.16–19

On the second circle [in the Ophite diagram], intertwined with and encompassing two other circles, was inscribed another rhomboideal figure, (entitled) “the Pronoia of Wisdom (Sophia).”
Also, how is it pious [sc. to claim, as the Gnostics do] that Providence (pronoia) does not penetrate [this world down] here, or into everyone? For they say it ‘provides’ for them alone.

For an innate knowledge about the gods abides together with our very substance, and is superior to all discernment and decision–making, reason and demonstration. It is united from the beginning with its own cause, and coexists with the essential desire of the soul towards the Good.

Among the gods, then, providence is primary. For where, then, is the activity prior to intellect, if not in the hyper–essential things? Providence (pronoia)—as the name indicates—is an activity prior to intellect (pro nou). By their being, then, and by their being goodesses, the gods fill all things with a goodness prior to intellect.

* * * * * * * * * * * *