

Orphic Myth and Platonic Philosophy

Throughout the writings of Plato the spirit of Orphic myth and initiation can be glimpsed – sometimes fairly clearly, and at other times out of the corner of the eye. In the *Apology*, for example, Socrates looks forward to meeting the great and the good of the Hellenic tradition in Hades and lists a few, putting in the first place Orpheus, while in the *Laws* (at 672b) one of the speakers refers directly to the Orphic myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus when he says, "A certain story and at the same time a tradition slips under in some way, namely that this god [i.e. Dionysus] was torn apart with respect to the perception of his soul at the behest of his step-mother Hera; for this reason he establishes both the Bacchic rites and all the mad dancing, in vengeance." (The speaker has already sounded a note of caution, saying that he would be fearful of talking about this because it is so easily misunderstood by the uninitiated and uneducated.)

But the dialogue with the most wide-ranging and important references to Orphic mysteries is, without doubt, the *Phaedo* – a dialogue which centres on the immortality of the soul and its relation to the mortal body. Orphic myth outlines in highly symbolical terms the way in which the material universe emerges from an ordered unfolding of immaterial laws and also traces our own embodied state which, for the Platonic tradition, arises from the nature of the immaterial soul and its experiences before it takes on a material body. We can perhaps see that Platonic and Orphic teachings are closer in character to those of the East than modern western thought – both in terms of their understanding of the nature of the human self and the way in which we should be conducting our lives.

Let us begin with a brief outline of the central Orphic myth, after which we can see how Plato weaves the *Phaedo* around this mysterious story.

First was unageing Time, from whom came Aither and Chaos in whose darkness an Egg was generated and impregnated. From the Egg sprang Phanes in whom the whole universe lay, and so he become the first ruler of the universe. He held the sceptre of rulership, 24 measures in length: this he passes on to Nox (Night) who thus becomes the second ruler of the universe.

Phanes and Nox conceived offspring: Uranos (Heaven) and Ge (Earth) and Nox passed the sceptre to Ouranos, the third ruler. From Ouranos and Ge many offspring were born, including the Titans – one of whom, Kronos, was incited to lead a rebellion against his father's rulership. Kronos castrates Ouranos and, taking the sceptre, becomes the fourth ruler of the universe. Kronos unites with Rhea and their union produces the Olympian Gods, each of which is swallowed as soon as they are born in order to prevent a usurpation.

When Rhea gives birth to Zeus she gives Kronos a stone wrapped in swaddling in order to prevent the continual infanticide: Zeus is hidden in the cave of Night, where he learns from the ancient Goddess that he is to become the fifth ruler of the universe. As the sceptre is passed from ruler to ruler, so the universe is expanded

and becomes more and more distinct with each of its components given increasing definition and separation. Zeus asks Night how he can rule over a universe which will be one but at the same time many – she replies that he must catch the first ruler, Phanes, and swallow him.

Before this, however, Zeus must take over the rulership from Kronos which he does by conspiring with Rhea who feeds her husband with intoxicating honey so that he falls into a deep slumber; while thus off his guard, he is bound tight by Zeus who thus obtains the sceptre and rulership of the universe. Kronos is fed a potion which forces him to regurgitate all the offspring he has swallowed, and so all the Olympian Gods are born again. Zeus follows the counsel of Night and swallows Phanes and now, sings the Orphic hymn, all things are in the belly of Zeus, -

"the broad air and the lofty splendour of heaven,
the undraining sea and earth's glorious seat,
the great Oceanus and the lowest Tartara of the earth,
rivers and boundless seas and everything else,
and all the immortal blessed gods and goddesses,
all that had existed and all that was to exist afterwards
become one and grew together in the belly of Zeus."

Finally Zeus decides to pass the sceptre of rulership to his son, Dionysus (who is the result of the union of Zeus with Persephone, his own daughter by Demeter). Zeus calls the Gods together and, sitting Dionysus on his throne, announces that the sixth ruler will be the young God. While he sits upon the throne Apollo whispers to him a warning to take care not to stray from the throne. But Hera is jealous that a son of Zeus not born from herself is to inherit the rule of the universe and conspires with the Titans (the offspring of Uranos) to destroy the God-child.

The first thing the Titans must do is to lure Dionysus away from the throne: they offer him toys as a distraction but nothing works until they hold before him a mirror: lost in the beauty of his own reflection, he is easily led away down into the dark cavern of the Titans. Here they give him a thyrsus – a fennel stalk – as a mocking parody of the sceptre, and then, tearing him into seven pieces, boil and roast him in order to feed upon his body. The aroma of the cooking alerts the Zeus and his Olympians, who make war on the Titans who are eventually defeated after Zeus has thrown his thunderbolts at them. Apollo collects the pieces of Dionysus for burial on the slopes of Olympus, while Athene rescues his still beating heart from which she regenerates the God restoring him to life and wholeness. From the ashes of the blasted Titans the human race is made.

* * * * *

Turning to the *Phaedo*, Socrates introduces mythology and its powers early in the dialogue, on being asked about the apparent contradiction between the prohibition on suicide and the willingness of a true philosopher to embrace death. He says, "What I have heard I will not enviously conceal from you. And perhaps it is becoming in the most eminent degree, that he who is about to depart thither [i.e. to

Hades, the realm of the afterlife] should consider and mythologize about this departure: I mean, what kind of a thing we should think it to be. For what else can such a one be more properly employed about, till the setting of the sun?" He thus aligns himself with Orphic writers whose works were usually framed as myths.

Reading 1

^{Phaedo}
64a Socrates: Those who are conversant with philosophy in a proper manner, seem to have concealed from others that the whole of their study is nothing else than how to die and be dead. If this then is true, it would certainly be absurd, that those who have made this alone their study through the whole of life, should when it arrives be afflicted at a circumstance upon which they have before bestowed all their attention and labour.

b Simmias: By Zeus, Socrates, you cause me to laugh, though I am very far from desiring to do so at present: for I think that the multitude, if they heard this, would consider it as well said respecting philosophers; and that men of the present day would perfectly agree with you, that philosophers should in reality desire death, and that they are by no means ignorant that men of this description deserve to suffer death.

c Socrates: And indeed, Simmias, they would speak the truth, except in asserting that they are not ignorant of it: for both the manner in which true philosophers desire to die, and how they are worthy of death, is concealed from them. But let us bid farewell to such as these, and discourse among ourselves: and to begin, Do you think that death is anything?

Simmias: Entirely so.

Socrates: Is it anything else than a liberation of soul from body? and is not this to die, for the body to be liberated from the soul, and to subsist apart by itself? and likewise for the soul to be liberated from the body, and to be essentially separate? Is death anything else but this?

** The presence of the body, while useful to the soul as an instrument which allows it to shape the material world and, further, to act as a prompt to the recovery of its half-forgotten memory of eternal forms (insofar as materiality reflects those immaterial forms) it also detracts from contemplation, and makes demands upon our time and energies. After discussing this, Socrates continues. **

65b Socrates: But what with respect to the acquisition of wisdom? Is the body an impediment or not, if any one associates it in the investigation of wisdom? What I mean is this: Have sight and hearing in men any truth? or is the case such as the poets perpetually sing, that

We nothing accurate or see or hear?

Though if these corporeal senses are neither accurate nor clear, by no means can the rest be so: for all the others are in a certain respect more depraved than these. Or does it not appear so to you?

c Simmias: Entirely so.

Socrates: When then does the soul touch upon the truth? for, when it endeavours to consider any thing in conjunction with the body, it is evidently then deceived by the body.

Simmias: You speak the truth.

Socrates: Must not, therefore, something of reality become manifest to the soul, in the energy of reasoning, if this is ever the case?

...

d Socrates: But what shall we say, Simmias, about such things as the following? Do we say that the *just itself* is something or nothing?

Simmias: By Zeus, we say it is something.

Socrates: And do we not also say, that the *beautiful* and the *good* are each of them something?

Simmias: How is it possible we should not?

Socrates: But did you ever at any time behold any one of these with your eyes?

Simmias: By no means.

Socrates: But did you ever touch upon these with any other corporeal sense? (but I speak concerning all of them; as for instance, about magnitude, health, strength, and, in one word, about the essence of all the rest, and which each truly possesses.) Is then the most true nature of these perceived through the ministry of the body? or rather shall we not say, that whoever among us prepares himself to think dianoëticly in the most eminent and accurate manner about each particular object of his speculation, such a one will accede the nearest possible to the knowledge of each?

e

....

79d Socrates: But when it speculates anything, itself subsisting by itself, then it departs to that which is pure, eternal, and immortal, and which possesses a sameness of subsistence: and, as being allied to such a nature, it perpetually becomes united with it, when it subsists alone by itself, and as often as it is lawful for it to obtain such a conjunction: and then, too, it rests from its wanderings, and perpetually subsists similarly according to the same, about such natures, as passing into contact with them; and this condition of the soul is called wisdom.

We are going to have to look carefully at these assertions, especially in the light of other Platonic dialogues in which it is stated that it is the role of the soul to animate and bring order and beauty to the inanimate. The story of Dionysus (the God of wine, amongst other things) is a myth concerning the consequences of becoming lost in the image in the mirror, of becoming intoxicated by the multiplicity inherent

in body; but also the recovery of the self through the agency of Athena (Goddess of wisdom) and Apollo (God of harmony and light).

The Orphic myths were an integral part of the mystery cult of Dionysus, and Plato explicitly connects his philosophy with the teachings and experiences of the cult with these words of Socrates in the *Phaedo* (69c):

And those who instituted the mysteries for us appear to have been by no means contemptible persons, but to have really signified formerly, in an obscure manner, *that whoever descended into Hades uninitiated, and without being a partaker of the mysteries, should be plunged into mire; but that whoever arrived there, purified and initiated, should dwell with the Gods.* For, as it is said by those who write about the mysteries,

The thyrsus-bearers numerous are seen,
But few the Bacchuses have always been.

These few are, in my opinion, no other than those who philosophize rightly; and that I may be ranked in the number of these, I shall leave nothing unattempted, but exert myself in all possible ways.

The phrase "thyrsus-bearer" clearly connects us back to the Dionysus of the myth who is about to be torn apart: the sceptre of rulership is a continuous rod which conveys the intrinsic power which flows from above downwards in an unbroken connection. The thyrsus or fennel stalk, says an ancient commentator, is noted for its chambered and separated nature: these were carried by the Titans whose name is derived from the Greek word 'ti' meaning *particularity* – a state which is arrived at by division. We will note that the mark of the first revolt of a Titan, Kronos, is the castration of Uranos – a division introduced in the most dramatic way.

In Platonic metaphysics the universe is understood as emerging from a single source and moving outwards from a dimensionless centre in ever-broadening circles – as each circle emerges, so it unpacks, so to speak, the hidden qualities and characteristics which the previous circle contained but also obscured by its compressed nature. What is utterly undivided in the innermost circle become at each stage a little more divided in order to reveal its otherwise unmanifested beauty. This would seem to be reflected in the Orphic myth of the six rulers: but at some point the repeated divisions introduced must be reversed and the process of gathering things back together begins in order that the intrinsic power of the original source is not dissipated into nothingness.

In the Orphic myth, Dionysus is the son of Persephone who is already a figure of descent and ascent – it was her story which was central to the mystery celebration of Eleusis, which portrayed her as being drawn down into the dark of Hades and being guided back to her mother Demeter through the guidance of Hermes, the God of learning. Dionysus also descends and ascends – but added to that of Persephone is the image of dismemberment and a "remembering". These two initiatory myths

are clearly telling us something of the experiences of the human soul. The Platonic dialogue which has most to say about the nature of the soul and its adventures in the two worlds of eternal intellect (or spirit) and temporal materiality is the *Phaedrus*. Here Socrates attempts to explain the nature of the soul in an extended analogy in which it is likened to a winged chariot guided by a charioteer and drawn by two horses: in its pristine state this is part of a divine procession through the heavens which is led by the Gods:

Reading 2

246b To tell what the soul really is would be a matter for utterly superhuman and long discourse, but it is within human power to describe it briefly in a figure; let us therefore speak in that way. We will liken the soul to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the horses and charioteers of the gods are all good and of good descent, but those of other races are mixed; and first the charioteer of the human soul drives a pair, and secondly one of the horses is noble and of noble breed, but the other quite the opposite in breed and character. Therefore in our case the driving is necessarily difficult and troublesome.

c Now we must try to tell why a living being is called mortal or immortal. Soul, considered collectively, has the care of all that which is soulless, and it traverses the whole heaven, appearing sometimes in one form and sometimes in another; now when it is perfect and fully winged, it mounts upward and governs the whole world; but the soul which has lost its wings is borne downwards until it enters something solid, when it settles down, taking upon itself an earthly body, which seems to be self-moving, because of the power of the soul within it; and the whole, compounded of soul and body, is called a living being, and is further designated as mortal. . . .we
d will now consider the reason why the soul loses its wings. It is something like this. The natural function of the wing is to soar upwards and carry that which is heavy up to the place where dwells the race of the gods. More than any other thing that
e pertains to the body it partakes of the nature of the divine. But the divine is beauty, wisdom, goodness, and all such qualities; by these then the wings of the soul are nourished and grow, but by the opposite qualities, such as vileness and evil, they are wasted away and destroyed. Now the great leader in heaven, Zeus, driving a winged chariot, goes first, arranging all things and caring for all things. . .

247a There are many blessed sights and many ways hither and thither within the heaven, along which the blessed gods go to and fro attending each to his own duties; and whoever wishes, and is able, follows, for jealousy is excluded from the celestial band. But when they go to a feast and a banquet, they proceed steeply upward to the top of the vault of heaven, where the chariots of the gods, whose well matched horses obey the reins, advance easily, but the others with difficulty; for the horse of unruly nature weighs the chariot down, making it heavy and pulling toward the earth the charioteer whose horse is not well trained. There the utmost toil and struggle await the soul. For those that are called immortal, when they reach the top, pass outside and take their place on the outer surface of the heaven, and when they have taken

their stand, the revolution carries them round and they behold the things above the heaven.

c But the region above the heaven was never worthily sung by any earthly poet, nor will it ever be. It is, however, as I shall tell; for I must dare to speak the truth, especially as truth is my theme. For the colourless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence, with which all true knowledge is concerned, holds this region and is visible only to intellect, the pilot of the soul. Now the divine intelligence, since it is nurtured on intellect and pure knowledge, and the intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving that which befits it, rejoices in seeing reality for a space of time and by gazing upon truth is nourished and made happy until the revolution brings it again to the same place. In the revolution it beholds absolute justice, d temperance, and knowledge, not such knowledge as has a beginning and varies as it is associated with one or another of the things we call realities, but that which abides in the real eternal absolute; and in the same way it beholds and feeds upon the other eternal verities, after which, passing down again within the heaven, it goes home, and there the charioteer puts up the horses at the manger and feeds them with e ambrosia and then gives them nectar to drink.

248a Such is the life of the gods; but of the other souls, that which best follows after God and is most like him, raises the head of the charioteer up into the outer region and is carried round in the revolution, troubled by the horses and hardly beholding the realities; and another sometimes rises and sometimes sinks, and, because its horses are unruly, it sees some things and fails to see others. The other souls follow after, all yearning for the upper region but unable to reach it, and are carried round beneath, trampling upon and colliding with one another, each striving to pass its neighbour. So there is the greatest confusion and sweat of rivalry, wherein many are b lamed, and many wings are broken through the incompetence of the drivers; and after much toil they all go away without gaining a view of reality, and when they have gone away they feed upon opinion. But the reason of the great eagerness to see where the plain of truth is, lies in the fact that the fitting nutriment for the best part of the soul is in the meadow there, and the wing on which the soul is raised up is nourished by this. . . .

249c For a human being must understand a general conception formed by collecting into a unity by means of reason the many perceptions of the senses; and this is a recollection of those things which our soul once beheld, when it journeyed with God and, lifting its vision above the things which we now say exist, rose up into real being. And therefore it is just that the mind of the philosopher only has wings, for he is always, so far as he is able, in communion through memory with those things the communion with which causes God to be divine. Now a man who employs such d memories rightly *is always being initiated into perfect mysteries* and he alone becomes truly perfect; but since he separates himself from human interests and turns his attention toward the divine, he is rebuked by the multitude, who consider him mad and do

not know that he is inspired. All my discourse so far has been about the fourth kind of madness, which causes him to be regarded as mad, who, when he sees the beauty on earth, remembering the true beauty, feels his wings growing and longs to stretch them for an upward flight, but cannot do so, and, like a bird, gazes upward and neglects the things below.

* * * * *

It is this recovery of the intellectual and celestial vision which is the aim of the philosophical path of the Platonic tradition and which is the initiation of the self into the mysteries which lie within its own nature but which are obscured by the separation which it experiences in the embodied state.

There are several gold tablets which have been found in the graves of Orphic initiates in many places around the Mediterranean world from differing centuries which seem to bear ritual texts for the afterlife. We can see from these how much they conform to the Platonic teachings of restoration through remembrance; a typical example tells the initiate not to drink from the wrong waters – which we must assume are the waters of forgetfulness – but rather from the Lake of Memory:

This is the work of Memory, when you are about to die
 down to the well-built house of Hades, there is a spring at the right side,
 And standing by it a white cypress.
 Descending to it, the souls of the dead refresh themselves.
 Do not even go near this spring!
 Ahead you will find from the Lake of Memory,
 Cold water pouring forth; there are guards before it.
 They will ask you, with astute wisdom,
 What you are seeking in the darkness of murky Hades.
 Say, "I am a child of Earth and starry Sky,
 I am parched with thirst and am dying;
 But quickly grant me
 Cold water from the Lake of Memory to drink."
 And they will announce you to the Chthonian King,
 And they will grant you to drink from the Lake of Memory.
 And you, too, having drunk, will go along the sacred road on which other
 Glorious initiates and bacchoi travel.

The "password" formula is repeated on several of the tablets with variations, one of which reads "I am a child of Earth and starry Sky, but my race is heavenly." So here we see how close the Orphic cult's teaching comes to the Platonic view of the human soul being essentially of the heavens with its mixed experiences drawn from the two worlds of immaterial and material realities.

The idea that we recover our divine self by delving down into the depths of our being, is perhaps most beautifully expressed by Proclus:

For the soul when looking at things posterior to herself,¹ beholds the shadows and images of beings, but when she converts herself to herself she unfolds her own essence, and the reasons which she contains. And at first indeed, she only as it were beholds herself; but, when she penetrates more profoundly into the knowledge of herself, she finds in herself both intellect, and the orders of beings.

When however, she proceeds into her interior recesses, and into the adytum² as it were of the soul, she perceives with her eye closed, the genus of the Gods, and the unities of beings. For all things are in us psychically, and through this we are naturally capable of knowing all things, by exciting the powers and the images of wholes which we contain.

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

¹ In other words, things which are lower than the soul in the unfolding scheme of reality.

² The adytum is the sacred centre of a temple.