

## 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 can be interpreted as an outline (in highly symbolical terms) of the way in which the material universe emerges from an ordered unfolding of metaphysical 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. Most importantly, Plato draws on the Orphic tradition in his understanding of how the human soul releases itself from the ignorance which so often accompanies its immersion in the materiality of body. He uses the Orphic play on the *sema* (tomb) and *soma* (body) as well as presenting the parallel between the "remembering" of the scattered limbs of Dionysus (or Bacchus) with the "remembering" which is central to Platonic doctrines of learning – the axiom that "all learning is reminiscence."

Let's recall the Orphic story of the dismemberment and regeneration of Dionysus:

As the universe unfolds from its mysterious beginning, the myth tells of a series of Gods – Phanes, Night, Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus each of whom hold the sceptre of universal rulership for a certain phase.

Finally Zeus decides to pass the sceptre to his son, Dionysus (who is the result of the union of Zeus with Persephone,<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Another reference to this myth can be seen in the *Meno* (81b) when Socrates quotes a fragment of Pindar who says that souls in Hades must, if they are to progress, approach Persephone to make recompense for "an ancient grief."

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.

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Apart from the reference to this myth in his *Laws*, Plato also brings a clear reference to it in the *Phaedo* (69c) as Socrates says:

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.

For Plato the practice of "philosophizing rightly" is the recovery of the those profound and eternal truths from the hidden depths of the soul to the point at which they become the guiding lights of our life both here in this terrestrial form and onwards through whatever states we experience in the hereafter (that is to say, in Hades).

The truths inherent in the soul are there because we have already looked upon them before we entered the body – although the confusion that embodiment causes means we have more or less forgotten them. In the *Phaedrus* Plato offers an image of the soul as a winged chariot drawn by two horses and steered by a charioteer crossing the heavens in the company of the immortal Gods. There in their purest form are the truths which, says Plato, the soul must have seen otherwise "it could not have entered the human form."

It is the 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.

Here is a section of the *Phaedrus* (249c) in which Socrates explains that the recovery of the celestial vision requires the inspiration of Eros (a "madness") – for it is love which connects the lover with the beloved: the seemingly mortal with the beautiful immortal

Indeed it is necessary to understand 'man', denominated according to species, as a being proceeding from the information of many senses to a perception contracted into one by the reasoning power. But this is a recollection of what our soul formerly saw with divinity, when in a perfect condition of being; and

when she looked down on what we now consider as realities, and was supernally elevated to the contemplation of that which is true. On this account, the reasoning power alone of the philosopher is justly winged. For the philosophic memory perpetually adheres as much as possible to those concerns, by an application to which even a God is seen to be divine. But he who properly uses meditations of this kind, being always initiated in perfect mysteries, alone acquires true perfection 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.

That Dionysus and his experience of being torn apart stands for us in our present state in which the pure ideas are only partially seen, and then only when accompanied with the particular dressing of materiality – for the whole idea is never seen by the senses – perhaps indicates the part that Athena and Apollo play in our philosophic path. Apollo, the God of Light, draws everything towards their unity,<sup>3</sup> while Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, weavings things into beauty (one of her names is *Kaliurgos* – "worker of beauty"). A final extract, this time from the *Phaedo* (79c):

Socrates: And have we not also formerly asserted this, that the soul, when it employs the body in the speculation of anything, either through sight, or hearing, or some other sense (for to speculate through sense is to speculate through body), then, indeed, it is drawn by the body to things which never subsist according to the same, wanders and is agitated, and becomes giddy like one intoxicated, through passing into contact with things of this kind?

Simmiias: Entirely so.

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.

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<sup>2</sup> Previously Socrates had talked about four "madnesses" or inspirations: prophetic inspiration under the auspices of Apollo, initiatory from Dionysus, poetic from the Muses; but the entire dialogue centres itself on the erotic – that is to say the madness which arises under the influence of Eros who causes us to love those things (and people) which most remind us of the divine vision once experienced in our procession through the intellectual heavens.

<sup>3</sup> Some, including Plato in the *Cratylus*, suggest that the name A-pollo means "not many."