

Platonic Philosophy as Mystical Initiation

“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 descended¹³ 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 *Phaedo*, 69c)

With these words Plato explicitly aligns the ancient traditions of the mystery initiations with the philosophical path of wisdom: we might note that they are found in the *Phaedo*, a dialogue which takes the reader through a series of experiences which are set dramatically within the confines of a prison cell, and which starts at sunrise and ends at sunset. The structure and content of the dialogue may well be carefully based on the progress and understanding extended to those who presented themselves to the cult centres which offered the experience of initiation in the ancient world. Interestingly the other Platonic dialogue which seems to mirror the initiatory experience is the *Symposium* – a dialogue which runs from sunset to sunrise – and so along with some passages from ancient writers about the mystery cults, we need to look at passages from one of these dialogues, and because of time constraints, we’ll confine ourselves to the *Symposium*.

1) Initiation and the Mysteries

What were the initiations of the ancient world, and what was their purpose? Synesius quotes a lost work of Aristotle and says, “. . . as Aristotle claims that those who are being initiated are not to *learn* anything but to *experience* something and to be put into a certain condition.” (Frag. 15) This response to the initiatory experience seems to be confirmed by several notable authors of the ancient world:

“In this world [the soul] has no knowledge, except when it reaches the moment of death. It then undergoes an experience like that of those who participate in the great initiations.” (Plutarch, fr. 178)

“Still, set thy foot in Attica to see those nights of Demeter’s great mysteries. Thence you shall get a heart that is care-free among the living and less heavy when you go to join the majority [that is, to Hades.] (Crinagoras, 11.42)

“In speaking of the Eleusinian mysteries, Pindar adds, ‘Happy is he who, having contemplated that, goes beneath the earth, for he knows the end of life and knows the beginning given by Zeus!’” (Clement or Alexandria - Pindar, *Threnoi* fragment 137).

We can see that the important factor for those who celebrated the mysteries was the direct experience of the ritual, rather than a gathering of a mental concept: the effect of this experience was transformative, breaking the limitations of ordinary understanding. But

what kind of experience could produce the effect that the ancient writers reported? Although the details of the experience of initiation were kept secret by serious vows of silence, we can gather something of the profound effect from the words of Lucius – Apuleius’ semi-autobiographical hero in the *Metamorphosis*, when he touches upon the experience of being initiated:

1

“Perhaps, inquisitive reader, you will very anxiously ask me what was then said and done? I would tell you, if it could be lawfully told; you should know it, if it was lawful for you to hear it. But both the ears and the tongue are guilty of rash curiosity. Nevertheless, I will not keep you in suspense with religious desire, nor torment you with long-continued anxiety. Hear, therefore, but believe what is true. *I approached to the confines of death, and having trod on the threshold of Proserpine, I returned from it, being carried through all the elements. At midnight I saw the sun shining with a splendid light; and I manifestly drew near to the Gods beneath, and the Gods above, and proximately adored them.*”

Hermeas, in his *Commentary on the Phaedrus*, says that there were three ascending stages of initiation in the Eleusinian Mystery celebrations which were called *telete*, *muesis* and *epopteia*. He writes, “*Telete*, therefore, is analogous to that which is preparatory to purifications. But *muesis*, which is so called from ‘closing the eyes’, is more divine. For to close the eyes in *initiation* is no longer to receive by sense those divine mysteries, but with the pure soul itself. And *epopteia* is to be established in, and become a spectator of the mysteries.” Both the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium* follow this threefold progress: first Socrates calls his companions to the pursuit of truth and purifies them of misconceptions – in other words they are consciously oriented as *telete*; then Socrates explores the issue in hand through the use of reason – the exteriorized opinions which were the starting point of the dialogue being dismissed in favour of an interior, “eyes closed”, understanding, so that the *muesis* stage is attained; thirdly there bursts forth a vision, and the companions become the “blessed spectators” of the mystery: *epopteia* is theirs and, perhaps, ours.

Theo of Smyrna also outlines these three stages but adds two further ones: “And the fourth, which is the end and design of *epopteia*, is the binding of the head and fixing the crowns; so that the initiated may, by this means, be enabled to communicate to others the sacred rites in which he has been instructed; whether after this he becomes a torch bearer, or an interpreter of the mysteries, or sustains some other part of the sacerdotal office. But the fifth, which is produced from all these, is friendship with divinity, and the enjoyment of that felicity which arises from intimate converse with the gods.”

2) The Symposium

The pattern of preliminary purification and affirmation of goal, followed by the movement inwards, and final vision is also to be found in the *Symposium* – along with a series of allusions to mystery rituals – and it is in this dialogue where Plato seems especially keen to emphasize the transformative effects of the philosophical-initiation experience. Two passages will act as illustrations of this. The first is part of the speech of Diotima, as reported by Socrates: Socrates has purified the understanding of Agathon regarding the nature of Eros, or Love, during the only example of Socratic questioning of any length in the dialogue; he has proved that Eros is not the highest or most powerful of divine things, but acts as an intermediary between mortals and Immortal Beauty towards which the Erotic impulse forever tends. He has also relayed to the gathered thinkers the teaching of Diotima

regarding the ascent to higher and higher forms of beauty, outlining a series of points which allow a deeper and more interior understanding of the nature of love. Thus the *telete* and the *muesis* stages have been negotiated, and now we pass on to the *epopteia* stage with these words:

2	“Whoever then is advanced thus far in the mysteries of Love by a right and regular progress of contemplation, approaching now to perfect intuition, suddenly he will discover, bursting into view, a beauty astonishingly admirable; that very beauty, to the gaining a sight of which the aim of all his preceding studies and labours had been directed: a beauty, whose peculiar characters are these: In the first place, it never had a beginning, nor will ever have an end, but always is, and always flourishes in perfection, unsusceptible of growth or of decay. In the next place, it is not beautiful only when looked at one way, or seen in one light; at the same time that, viewed another way, or seen in some other light, it is far from being beautiful: it is not beautiful only at certain times, or with reference only to certain circumstances of things; being at other times, or when things are otherwise circumstanced, quite the contrary: nor is it beautiful only in some places, or as it appears to some persons; whilst in other places, and to other persons, its appearance is the reverse of beautiful. Nor can this beauty, which is indeed no other than the beautiful itself, ever be the object of imagination; as if it had some face or hands of its own, or any other parts belonging to body: nor is it some particular reason nor some particular science. It resides not in any other being, not in any animal, for instance; nor in the earth, nor in the heavens, nor in any other part of the universe: but, simple and separate from other things, it subsists alone with itself, and possesses an essence eternally uniform. All other forms which are beauteous partipate of this; but in such a manner they partipate, that by their generation or destruction this suffers no diminution, receives no addition, nor undergoes any kind of alteration. . . .
210e-	
212a	

Here is to be found, here if anywhere, the happy life, the ultimate object of desire to man: it is to live in beholding this consummate beauty; the sight of which if ever you attain, it will appear not to be in gold, nor in magnificent attire, nor in beautiful youths or damsels: with such, however, at present, many of you are so entirely taken up, and with the sight of them so absolutely charmed, that you would rejoice to spend your whole lives, were it possible, in the presence of those enchanting objects, without any thoughts of eating or drinking, but feasting your eyes only with their beauty, and living always in the bare sight of it. If this be so, what effect, think you, would the sight of beauty itself have upon a man, were he to see it pure and genuine, not corrupted and stained all over with the mixture of flesh, and colours, and much more of like perishing and fading trash; but were able to view that divine essence, the beautiful itself, in its own simplicity of form?

Think you that the life of such a man would be contemptible or mean; of the man who always directed his eye toward the right object, who looked always at real beauty, and was conversant with it continually? Perceive you not that in beholding the beautiful with that eye, with which alone it is possible to behold it, thus, and thus only, could a man ever attain to generate, not the images or semblances of virtue, as not having his intimate commerce

with an image or a semblance; but virtue true, real, and substantial, from the converse and embraces of that which is real and true. Thus begetting true virtue, and bringing her up till she is grown mature, he would become a favourite of the Gods; and at length would be, if any man ever be, himself one of the immortals.”

* * * * *

With these words, Socrates completes the three stages usually said to make up the progress through mystical initiation, and his formal speech is ended. But what of the “crowning” which Theo of Smyrna speaks, and the subsequent divine communion? At the end of Socrates speech there is a loud knocking at the outer door, and the host, Agathon gives orders that the newcomers are admitted to the gathering. The narration continues:

3

212a-
213b-

“Not long after this the voice of Alcibiades, who was very much intoxicated, was heard in the court, asking where Agathon was, and commanding to be led to him. The flute-player, therefore, and some other of his companions, brought him to Agathon, and stood with him at the doors, he being crowned with a garland of ivy and violets, having many ribbons on his head, and exclaiming, All hail, my friends! Either receive as your associate in drinking a man very much intoxicated, or let us depart, crowning Agathon alone, for whose sake we came. For I could not, says he, be with you yesterday; but now I come with ribbons on my head, that, from my own, I may crown the head of the wisest and the most beautiful person, if I may be allowed so to speak. Do you, therefore, laugh at me as one intoxicated? However, though you may laugh, I well know that I speak the truth. But tell me immediately, whether I may come in to him or not; and whether you continue drinking or not?”

All the company, therefore, was in an uproar, and ordered him to enter and seat himself: which he accordingly did, and called for Agathon. Agathon, therefore, came, led by his companions; and Alcibiades at the same time taking off his ribbons, that he might crown him, did not see Socrates, though he sat before him, but sat near Agathon, and between him and Socrates: for Socrates had made way for him that he might sit. Alcibiades, therefore, being seated, saluted and crowned Agathon.”

* * * * *

Now Agathon had won the festival of Dionysus’ contest for the best play – this is the reason why the symposium-party is being held – and Alcibiades who has arrived as the very image of the God of the festival, who is not only patron of comedy and tragedy but also wine and initiation – is simply following custom here in his crowning of Agathon. But things take a turn at this point, because it is only now that Alcibiades notices Socrates, he says:

4

213b-
213e

“Who is this third drinking companion of ours?’ and at the same time turning himself round saw Socrates; but seeing him, he started, and exclaimed, ‘O Hercules! what is this? Are you again sitting here to ensnare me? as it is usual with you to appear suddenly where I least expected to find you. And now for what purpose are you here? And why do you sit in this place, and not with Aristophanes, or with some other who is ridiculous, and

wishes to be so? But you have contrived to sit with the most beautiful of the guests. . . . But now, Agathon, give me some of the ribbons, that I may crown the wonderful head of this man, that he may not blame me that I have crowned you, but not him who vanquishes all men in discourse, not only lately as you have done [in the contest], but at all times.”

And so saying, he crowns Socrates, and offers to make another speech – although rather than praise Eros (who had been the subject of the previous sixth speeches) he says he will instead praise Socrates:

5

“But, gentlemen, I will thus endeavour to praise Socrates through images. He indeed will, perhaps suspect that I shall turn my discourse to things ridiculous; but the image will be for the sake of truth, and not for the sake of the ridiculous.

I say, then, that Socrates is most similar to those Silenus¹ that are seated in the workshops of statuaries, which the artists have fabricated with pipes or flutes in their hands; and which, when they are bisected, appear to contain within statues of the Gods. And I again say, that he resembles the satyr Marsyas. That your outward form, therefore, is similar to these, O Socrates, even you yourself will not deny; but that you also resemble them in other things, hear in the next place. You are contumelious: or are you not? For, if you do not acknowledge it, I will bring witnesses. Are you not also a piper much more wonderful than Marsyas?² For he charmed men through instruments, by a power proceeding from the mouth; and he also accomplishes this even now, when any one uses that modulation. For I call the modulation of Olympus³ that of Marsyas, because he instructed Olympus in it. That harmony, therefore, whether it is produced by a good piper, or by a bad female player on the pipe, alone detains the hearers, and manifests, because it is divine, those that stand in need of the Gods and the mysteries; but you in this respect only differ from that harmony, that you effect this very same thing by mere words without instruments. We, therefore, when we hear some other person relating the discourse of another, though he that relates it should be a very good rhetorician, yet we pay, as I may say, no attention to it; but when any one hears you, or another person, relating your discourses, though he that repeats them should be a bad speaker, and whether it be a woman, or a man, or a lad, that is the auditor, we are astonished and possessed.

I therefore, my friends, unless I should appear to be very much intoxicated, will tell you upon oath in what manner I have been affected by the discourses of this man, and how I am even now affected. For when I hear him, my heart leaps much more than that of those who celebrate the mysteries of the Corybantes; and my tears flow from his discourses. I also see many others affected in the same manner. But when I hear Pericles, and other good rhetoricians, I think, indeed, that they speak well, but I suffer nothing of this kind;

¹ These small figures were similar to Russian dolls, hiding a statue within an outer one.

² A celebrated piper of Celæne in Phrygia. He was so skilful in playing on the flute, that he is generally considered as the inventor of it. It is fabled of him, that he challenged Apollo to a trial of his skill as a musician; and, being vanquished, the God flayed him alive.

³ Olympus was both a poet and a musician: he was the disciple of Marsyas, and flourished before the Trojan war.

nor is my soul agitated with tumult, nor is it indignant, as if it were in a servile condition. But by this Marsyas I am often so affected, that it appears to me I ought not to live while I lead such a life as I do. . .

And again, he knows all things, and yet knows nothing; so that this figure of him is very Silenical; for he is externally invested with it, like a carved Silenus. But when he is opened inwardly, would you think, O my fellow guests, how replete he is with temperance? Know also, that neither if anyone is beautiful, does he pay any attention to his beauty, but despises it far beyond what you would suppose; nor does he esteem any one for being rich, or for possessing any other honour from the things which are considered as blessed by the multitude. But he thinks that all these possessions are of no worth, and that we are nothing. He also passes the whole of his life among men in irony and jest; but when he is serious and is opened, I know not whether any one of you has seen the images which are within. I however once saw them, and they appeared to me to be so divine, golden, all-beautiful and wonderful . . . For I omitted to mention this before, that his discourses are most similar to the Silenuses when opened. For the discourses of Socrates, to him who is willing to hear them, will at first appear to be perfectly ridiculous; since the nouns and verbs which he employs externally enfold a certain gift of a reviling Satyr. For he speaks of asses and their burthens, of copper-smiths, shoe-makers and tanners, and he always appears to say the same things through the same; so that every unskilful and ignorant man will ridicule his words. But he who beholds his discourses when opened, and penetrates into their depth, will, in the first place, find that they alone of all other discourses contain intellect within them; and, in the next place, that they are most divine, are replete with numerous images of virtue, and have a very ample extent, or rather extend themselves to every thing which it is fit he should consider who intends to become a truly worthy man.”