

Plato the Orphic?

1 – Orpheus and Plato

The figure of Orpheus in the age leading up to the emergence of Plato from the swirl of religious and intellectual thought in the early fourth century is difficult to pin down. Plato's writings add to this uncertainty – he criticises Orphic practitioners in his *Republic* (364e) for offering the gullible an easy salvation via esoteric rites, while in his *Laws* (782c) he praises the Orphic way of life, and in his *Apology* Socrates looks forward the possibility of meeting Orpheus in the Afterlife. Modern scholars are suitably divided on the relation of Plato to whatever Orphicism actually was: in the days when Plato was lauded as a proto-modern rationalist his relationship was largely based on the critical *Republic* passage. But a gradual re-examination of Plato and his tradition, taking more note of the emphasis on mythic and initiatory elements of the dialogues and, especially, the seriousness of the repeated references to the immortal soul's path through numerous incarnations towards some kind of divinization, has brought about a revision of the place of Orphic teaching in the basic structure of Plato's philosophy.

Leaving aside the numerous scholarly arguments over specific elements of Platonism and of Orphism, we can important likenesses between Plato and Orphic teachings:

Firstly they are both committed to the view that the human life we see as we pass from a single birth in the material world to its end is a part of a much longer journey towards some kind of divinization. For them both, the life and death the earthly body are by no means the boundary markers of the soul's self-motive activity.

Secondly our experiences in the material world require a stepping out of the ordinary, a purification and a re-orientation to the divine buried in our own nature if we are to make progress.

Thirdly, that a significant part of that re-alignment is “the work of memory”: the gnomic instructions on many of the Orphic gold burial tablets explicitly say that the initiate must avoid drinking from one spring (perhaps lethe?), and instead, pass on to *the lake of memory*. While Plato's view of philosophic learning is, in reality, the bringing of half-forgotten memories into the fore-consciousness: “all learning is reminiscence” (*Meno*, 81d)

Fourthly, the myth of Dionysus as the “torn apart god” who is re-integrated by the power of Athene and Apollo, lies at the heart of the Orphic mysteries and of Platonic philosophy.

We can, briefly, take these four issues one at a time as we look at the Dialogues of Plato:

1) – reincarnation – Several major dialogues show the soul passing through a series of terrestrial lives, including the *Republic* where a passage in book 10 (614b-621c) Socrates relates the tale of Er the Pamphalian, who coming out of what we might call a ‘near death experience’ describes, among other things, a scene in which a group soul about to be born in an earthly body chose the live they are about to live. He says, “But that the most of those who came from earth, as they had endured hardships themselves,

and had seen others in hardships, did not rashly make their choice. And hence, and through the fortune of the lot, to most souls there was an exchange of good and evil things.”

Again, in the *Phaedo*, (107c/108a) after Socrates has run through a series of proofs concerning the immortality of the soul, he says, “But it is just, my friends, to think that if the soul is immortal, it requires our care and attention, not only for the present time, in which we say it lives, but likewise with a view to the whole of time: and it will now appear, that he who neglects it must subject himself to a most dreadful danger. . . the soul, proceeding to Hades . . . but there, abiding for a necessary time, is brought back hither again, in many and long periods of time.”

2) – transcending the mundane, purification, divinisation – In the *Theaetetus* (176a), Socrates says the evils “revolve about a mortal nature, and this place of our abode. On this account we ought to endeavour to fly from hence thither, with the utmost celerity. But this flight consists in becoming as much as possible similar to divinity. And this similitude is acquired by becoming just and holy, in conjunction with prudence.”

And in the *Timaeus* Plato writes, “In him, therefore, who vehemently labours to satisfy the cravings of desire and ambition, all the conceptions of his soul must be necessarily mortal; and himself as much as possible must become entirely mortal, since he leaves nothing unaccomplished which tends to increase his perishable part. But it is necessary that he who is sedulously employed in the acquisition of knowledge, who is anxious to acquire the wisdom of truth, and who employs his most vigorous exertions in this one pursuit; - it is perfectly necessary that such a one, if he touches on the truth, should be endowed with wisdom about immortal and divine concerns; and that he should participate of immortality, as far as human nature permits, without leaving any part of it behind.” (90b-c)

3) – The work of memory – What is commonly referred to as Plato’s theory of forms, together with the teaching that the soul is immortal has been called the “twin pillars of Platonism”. The link between the two is central to the Platonic spiritual path – that what we are doing in thinking and acting on that path is drawing up the seed-forms of ideas embedded in the soul so that they flower in their beauty and power in our inner and outer lives.

A typical example comes from the *Phaedo*, where Socrates goes through an examination concerning how we are able to recognize, for example, how near material things approach to true equality even though we have never actually perceived perfect equality with our senses. The idea of *the equal* is already implanted in the soul and our perceptions of its approximations in material things serves only to remind us of that idea which is ours by virtue of our essence being rooted in eternal intellect. He summarizes with these words:

“If, therefore, receiving this before we were born, we were born possessing it; we both knew prior to our birth, and as soon as we were born, not only *the equal*, *the greater*, and *the lesser*, but everything of this kind: for our discourse at present is not more concerning *the equal* than *the beautiful*, *the good*, *the just*, and *the holy*, and in one word, about everything which we mark with the signature of *that which is*, both in our

interrogations when we interrogate, and in our answers when we reply: so that it is necessary we should have received the science of all these before we were born.” (75c)

4) Torn apart and reintegrated - Possibly the most explicit reference to the secret behind the Dionysus myth is to be found in the *Phaedo* (69c-d):

“But that which is in reality true virtue is a purification from everything of this kind; and temperance and justice, fortitude, and prudence itself, are each of them a certain purification. 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.”

2 – Orphic myth – Cosmology, the Royal Series

Orphic myth tells of the beginning of things in the following terms:

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 formed 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: Ouranos (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.

Phanes "light or a showing forth"

↓

Nox "Night"

↓

Ouranos "Heaven"

↓

Kronos "Pure Intellect"

↓

Zeus "through/Life"

↓

Dionysus

3 – Dismemberment and the remembering of Dionysus

While he sits upon the throne Apollo whispers to him a warning to take care not to stray from the throne for in this seat is stability and safety. 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 Ouranos) 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 (apples from the Hesperides, a pine-cone, a bull-roarer, a ball, knucklebones, wool, and puppets) 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 Nathax¹) – a fennel stalk – as a mocking parody of the sceptre of Phanes, 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 (on the advice of Prometheus) has thrown his thunderbolts at them. Apollo collects the pieces of Dionysus for burial on the slopes of Olympus, while Athena finds and preserves Dionysus' heart, undivided and is still beating. She takes it to Zeus in a casket: from the heart a new Dionysus is given life through the skill of Athena.

The smoke from the blasted Titans deposits a soot from which Zeus creates a new race of men. Persephone as the queen of Hades plays a part in the release of souls from the confines of death back into life – her own story being one of an amphibious existence, and release through the agency of Zeus and Hermes.

4 – Orphic Salvation

Just to round off our brief look at the Orphic myths, it is worth noting that there was a widespread cult of Orpheus more or less contemporary with Plato. How widespread and how organized is a matter of heated scholarly debate.

At regular intervals archaeologists have found evidence of cultic practices connected to the Orphic tradition and centred upon the figures of Dionysus and Persephone. These includes some 39 gold tablets found in the graves of those who are supposed to be Orphic initiates, 3 bone plates found in Olbia (a site of a Greek colony on the northern shores of the Black Sea), and a partially burnt scroll which seems to have fallen from a funeral pyre in Derveni (in Macedonia) and dating back to the fifth century BCE.

Many of the gold tables have little other than a name (presumably the name of the deceased person) but some have a simple formula with cultic significance and some are quite complex. Here are four:²

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 son of Earth and starry Sky, I (masculine) 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 Chthonic 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. (Tablet 1, Calabria)

You will find to the left of the house of Hades a spring and standing by it a white cypress. Do not even approach this spring! You will find another, from the Lake of

¹ The Nathax or fennel stalk is often depicted on Greek vases showing scenes from the Bacchic celebrations – it is a long hollow stalk (appropriately, the hollow is divided into separate chambers) with a head which looks very like a diadem. It was used by Prometheus to enclose the heavenly fire while he brought it down to humankind.

² All 39 gold tablet inscriptions are given in Franz Graf and Sarah Iles-Johnson's *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife*, Routledge, 2007. The numbering is theirs.

Memory, cold water pouring forth; there are guards before it. Say, "I am a child of Earth and starry Sky, but my race is heavenly. You yourselves know this. I (feminine) am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grant me cold water flowing from the Lake of Memory." And they themselves will grant you to drink from the sacred spring. And thereafter you will rule among the other heroes. This is the work of Memory. When you are about to die to die . . . write this . . . enwrapped . . . darkness. (Tablet 2, Petelia)

But as soon as the soul has left the light of the sun, Go to the right [...] being very careful of all things. "Greetings, you who have suffered the painful thing; you have never endured this before. You have become a god instead of a mortal. A kid you fell into milk. Rejoice, rejoice." Journey on the right-hand road to holy meadows and groves of Persephone. (Tablet 3, Thurii)

I come pure from the pure, Queen of the Chthonian Ones,³ Eucles, Euboleus and the other immortal gods. For I also claim to be of your happy race. But Moira overcame me and the other immortal gods and the star-flinger with lightning.⁴ I have flown out of the heavy, difficult circle, I have approached the longed-for crown with swift feet, I have sunk beneath the breast of the Lady, the Chthonian Queen, I have approached the longed-for crown with swift feet. "Happy and blessed, you will be a god instead of a mortal." A kid I fell into milk. (Tablet 5, Thurii)

And of the bone plates, here are two:⁵

Life: death; life. – Truth. A - ? - Dio(nysus), Orphic. (Olbia bone tablet 1)

Peace: war. Truth: falsehood. – Dio(nysus) N-A. (Olbia bone tablet 2)

The Derveni has more recently been read using advanced x-ray technology: it is a complex philosophical treatise on symbolic interpretations of the Orphic myths.

³ This is clearly an address to Persephone. In the *Meno* we have a quote from Pindar in which the soul approaches Persephone in Hades to ask for forgiveness from her for having been involved in the dismemberment of her son – we must presume because if the human race is created from the ashes of the Titans we are in some way attached to the titanic division of Dionysus.

⁴ Star-flinger – almost certainly a reference to Zeus who threw the thunderbolt at the Titans.

⁵ The bone plates are given in M L West's *The Orphic Poems*, Prometheus Trust, 2016.