Plato's Myths and the Mystery Tradition*

Ever since the rise of Greek rationalism, and probably long before that, myths have had bad reviews. In the early 5th century BCE Xenophanes openly challenged Olympian orthodoxy by criticizing Homer and Hesiod for having "ascribed to the gods all things that are a shame and a disgrace among mortals, stealing and adulteries and deceivings of one another."[1] Herodotus accused "Homer or some older poet" of invention (*History* 2.23); while Socrates, although he held that myths are not entirely destitute of truth, would censor the "mythmakers" in his ideal State, including Homer and Hesiod. Their stories of the gods' "unholy quarrelling," murders, and mayhem do not faithfully portray reality and should, if possible, be "buried in silence" (*Republic* 377-8).

Yet the word myth has not always been associated with fiction. In original Greek usage, *mythos* denoted anything spoken by mouth, that is, a word, a speech, or a story. Shortly after Pindar, it came to mean the poetic account of events before the dawn of history, while a similar term, *logos*, also meaning "word," denoted the historic tale. In time, *myth* acquired its negative connotations of fantasy and childish nonsense, whereas *logos* came to mean reason and authentic historical narrative. The words were eventually married, begetting the scholarly subject called *mythology:* "authentic discourse about ancient tales."

From such study, however, we can learn that the fictitious images which clothe myths often obscure their inherent truth. But searching for the logos in the mythos, the truth in myth, is nothing new. The

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Neoplatonists regarded myths as mystical-historical allegories whose inner meanings were disclosed through philosophic discipline. In his biography of Proclus, Marinus wrote that his teacher attained "those truly blessed visions of Reality" whereby he

> learned with ease all of Greek and non-Greek theology and also that truth which had been hidden in the form of myths; he explained all these in a very enthusiastic manner to all who wished and were able to understand, and brought them into harmony.[2]

Proclus' suggestion of an esoteric theosophy unifying the various myths and religious systems echoes a passage from Plato's *Statesman*. In it the main character of the Dialogue, a "divine philosopher" called the Stranger from Elea, affirms that "all these stories, and ten thousand others which are still more wonderful, have a common origin." He attributes this source to mankind's instructors, who in the Golden Age transmitted the first revelation of cosmic and human beginnings as well as the "teachings of the Creator and Father" about the right conduct of life (269-74). Yet even with this overt hint that the old legends were repositories of spiritual truths, few explanations of them are to be found in the Dialogues. Plato's Socrates, moreover, is frequently critical of the stories as well as of his contemporaries versed in interpretation.[3]

Plato offers a number of reasons for this, notably in the *Statesman* (268-74) and *Critias* (109-10). He indicates that in the lapse of ages the traditional myths have eroded considerably: imperfect memory, foreign intrusions, changes of word meaning and language, literalizing, misinterpretation, and the generally corrosive effect of human fancy had so distorted the old stories that they no longer fulfilled their original purpose. They had lost much of their power to rekindle memory of our divine origin and our sacred instructions. For Plato, true myths *are* narratives of our spiritual history. Like all histories, sacred or secular, myths are meant to be reminders of where we came from, who we are, and — unique to myth — where we are going. Myths preserve memories and, as Plotinus later taught, memory is for those who have forgotten, who have lost their inner vision and no longer see (*Enneads* IV.3.25ff, IV.4.7).

Besides pointing out their tattered condition, Plato would have us

understand that interpreting a myth properly requires insight. This in turn implies priorities. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Socrates discusses certain problems arising from "rational" explanations of myths, that is, interpretations which reduce myths to purely historical events and physical realities. How is one to explain centaurs, chimeras, gorgons, and other "inconceivable and portentous natures"? It is a sort of "crude philosophy" which tries to work out plausible nonmetaphysical meanings, for these require labor, ingenuity, and a great deal of time.

> Now I have no leisure for such enquiries; shall I tell you why? I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says; . . . am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Typho[n], or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, to whom Nature has given a diviner and lowlier destiny? — 230a

Plato's criticisms are certainly not directed against all myths. His primary objections are to misleading caricatures and sterile interpretations as these trivialize myths, emptying them of their numinous content. Socrates in fact readmits poetry into his ideal State, including Homer's and Hesiod's, but only "hymns to the gods and praises of famous men" *(Rep.* 607a). As for the hidden meanings of myths (*hyponoia*), these should be disclosed privately and, presumably, only after suitable philosophic training when insight is awakened *(Rep.* 378).

Plato clearly intended to renew and expand upon the truths originally expressed in the old stories; but his reasons for creating new myths, which veil as much as they reveal, are seldom explained satisfactorily in modern textbooks. Possibly the most compelling motives arose out of his association with the Mystery tradition, the esoteric heart of Greek religion.*

Few today realize the solemnity with which the inner rites and doctrines of the Mysteries were held by the ancient Athenians. Neither does our own information-hungry culture fully appreciate their reasons for secrecy. Although no one disputes that certain kinds of knowledge in the wrong hands can be life-threatening, most today would doubt that purely religious or philosophic knowledge presents any serious danger.

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*We owe much to H. P. Blavatsky for showing how powerfully the Mysteries influenced Plato and the shape of his compositions.

The adepts of the Mysteries held otherwise, especially concerning the teachings about consciousness and man's inner nature. Secrecy was practiced not for the selfish purpose of hoarding power, but mainly to protect the unprepared from possible psychological and physical harm — and from injuring others.

In Plato's time, however, many of the known Mystery schools had degenerated considerably. Plato himself was not altogether happy with those Eleusinian initiations which did not impose the lengthy philosophic discipline required for attaining insight into primary realities (*Rep.* 378a); and he particularly disparaged the popular Bacchic or Dionysian frenzies which, in his words, conferred "an immortality of drunkenness [as] the highest meed of virtue" (*Rep.* 363d). Nevertheless, sufficient inner light had been retained at Eleusis to attract some of the finest minds of the time. As late as three hundred years after Plato, the Roman Stoic Cicero, wrote:

> Much that is excellent and divine does Athens seem to me to have produced and added to our life, but nothing better than those Mysteries by which we are formed and moulded from a rude and savage state of humanity; and, indeed, in the Mysteries we perceive the real principles of life, and learn not only to live happily, but to die with a fairer hope.
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> — *De Legibus* II.14

Plato was unquestionably an initiate. His writings amply reflect the aims and scope of the Mysteries, and may well have been an attempt to restore their original philosophic purity. In the *Phaedo* Socrates says the true initiates are the true philosophers, "to be numbered amongst whom I have bent all the effort of a lifetime" (69d, Hackforth).

We can only surmise to what extent Plato was indebted to Orphic, Eleusinian, Pythagorean, and other sources, not to mention his own inner vision. As with all spiritually-illumined teachers, one of the most difficult problems facing Plato was how to transmit that vision — the great light of the Good — which the Mysteries confer: how to awaken a skeptical and mocking world; and, equally important, how to restrain those who believing too well would unwisely rush in unprepared. For not only were there unutterable mysteries which human speech cannot express (the *arrhēta*), there were also the proscribed teachings

about which it was unlawful to speak openly (*aporrhēta).*[4] The penalty for profanation of the Mysteries, i.e., of divulging or abusing secret teachings, was death. Originally this meant a kind of soul-death: being cut off from the natural inflow of the "sacred life-giving lore" which could no longer be entrusted to the candidate.[5] In Plato's time, however, the penalty was interpreted literally — another sign of degeneration — and profanation had become a capital crime.[6]

It was permissible, however, to allude to certain teachings under the veil of symbolism, and it is well known that myths were the public language of the Mysteries, whose inner meanings were revealed in initiation. Thus Plato, well aware of his philosophic and public obligations, wrote with care not to infringe ancient rules. When broaching sacred teachings, he refers to them only by hint or allusion — or by myth.

Trying to suggest the inexpressible and avoid profaning the Mysteries were not Plato's only motives for using myths. As noted previously, their primary function is to awaken memory, which for Plato meant awakening soul-knowledge, an *anamnesis* or recollection of truths beyond the reach of intellect (cf. *Meno* 81). Myths speak to us in ways scientific language cannot and, in the Dialogues, they are inseparably linked with the purpose of philosophy, which is the education of the soul.[7] The Dialogues both indicate the curriculum and form a part of it.

Plato's Dialogues, like one sustained myth, may be read on several levels and contain important subthemes implicit in the settings, characters, and events. His teachings are rarely given didactically, all spelled out from A to Z — certainly never dogmatically as a sort of catechism. Rather they are expressed as possibilities or "likely stories" (*Timaeus* 29c), appearing gracefully in the natural flow of the conversation, without pretense or force, at times almost incidentally, suggestively. This helps us to remain fluid in our thinking, giving us time and space to reflect, to turn the ideas and evaluate them from different aspects and in changing perspectives. This method forms a part of Plato's dialectic, enabling us to "see things together" (*synoptikos*) as a unitary whole — or to put it metaphysically, to see the One in the many, and the many in the One.[8]

Plato also indicates that definitive statements are impossible. Concepts are to be accepted provisionally for the purpose of examination,

never as the last word on truth. Our mission is to draw out our own understanding, not to pump ourselves full of another person's thoughts. Socrates and Plato are not merchants of knowledge like the Sophists, but philosophic midwives, aiding us to give birth to our own spiritual-intellectual children.

In the early Dialogues Socrates engages us by asking about happiness: What really is it? And who is the truly happy man (or woman)? Here myths are notably absent; the literary form is mainly cross examination. Socrates' questioning is aimed at bringing us to a state of doubt, a healthy skepticism about the depth of our understanding in matters of importance. Like the first stage of initiatic discipline, called *katharsis* ("cleansing"), these preparatory Dialogues are to help us purify our thought life of false ideas and selfish attitudes, to stimulate our love of truth, and to reveal the path of virtue which leads to wisdom.

We encounter one of Plato's first myths, and a lesson about the use of myth, in the *Protagoras* (320-2). It is a beautiful story about Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus, who together fashion man as a physical and thinking being. But the tale is recounted by the Sophist Protagoras, not Socrates, at the very beginning of the discussion, a location never occupied by the Socratic myths. These come either at the middle or end of a dialogue, and only after we have been sufficiently prepared by dialectic and self-questioning — just as Plato's cosmological myths come in the later, more technical Dialogues.

But the myth fails to serve Protagoras' purpose, which is to prove that virtue can be taught. His appeal is to traditional authority: the myth should be accepted literally, its "truth" axiomatically. Socrates naturally remains unpersuaded, for the axiom has not been examined, let alone proved. In the search for truth, presumptions must always be questioned and never taken for granted (cf. 348). The myth, however, is not without value — Plato would hardly repeat the sin of the older poets — for it seeds important ideas more fully developed in the later Dialogues, notably in the *Statesman*'s myth about cyclic beginnings and renovations (269-74).

In contrast with stories about beginnings, Socrates' myths are primarily concerned with endings and last things — both in the sense of man's fate after death and of the flowering of philosophical knowledge.

One interpreter, Paul Friedländer, plausibly suggested that Plato's early and middle Dialogues constitute a Myth of Socrates: a Greek version of the Myth of the Martyred Savior.[9] The Socratic myths within this larger myth may thus be viewed as Socrates' premonitions of and/or preparations for his final initiatory ordeals, i.e., his Athenian trial, execution, and ultimate "resurrection" as a just man into immortal life with the gods. On another level, yet fully within the context of initiation, the Socratic myths describe the ascent of the soul to true knowledge, its communion with divine realities, and its return to enlighten mankind. The order of the Dialogues is important, as the myths in them, each representing a kind of initiation, progressively reveal new teaching and clarify the old.

In the *Gorgias* Socrates resumes his theme of happiness, maintaining it is the just man, not the unjust, who is happier. After much pro and con, the discussion inevitably progresses toward considering the possibility of the soul's immortality, in which case death, as Socrates maintains, does not prevent a man from meeting the consequences of his deeds — rewards included.[10] Recognizing that neither scientific proof nor disproof is possible, Socrates appeals to our intuition with a myth: a story he knows many will dispose of as fable, but which he himself regards as a true tale, for he means to "speak the truth" (523a).

And so in mythic language we descend to the underworld Court of Judgment to learn the fate of souls. There we discern two roads, one leading upward to the Isles of the Blessed, "where he who has lived his life in justice and holiness shall dwell in perfect happiness out of the reach of evil"; the other leading to Tartarus, the "house of vengeance and punishment" and purgation. Little is said, however, about other regions of the cosmos, for the *Gorgias* myth is primarily an underworld experience.

The *Phaedo* myth (107-14) also begins with a judgment scene but expands upon the fate of the righteous who ascend from the underground "hollows" of the spherical Earth — our world is one such cavern — to the surface of the "true Earth."

> If any man . . . could take the wings of a bird and come to the top, then, like a fish who puts his head out of the water and sees this world, he would

> see a world beyond; and if the nature of man could sustain the sight, he would acknowledge that this world was the place of the true heaven and the true light and the true earth.* — 109c-e

Here is a prelude to the famous Parable of the Cave in Book 7 of the *Republic* in which Socrates describes the soul's "steep and rugged" ascent from ignorance to true knowledge. All along he has insisted that training in virtue must precede these Greater Mysteries. The philosopher must purge himself of self-interest and wrong thinking if he would successfully unchain himself from shadowy illusions and surmount the barrier separating him from the sunlight of divine realities. Even then the task is not finished, for in the later books of the *Republic* we learn of a higher discipline and, by inference, a greater truth. For instance, in Book 10 the Myth of Er widens our horizon by disclosing the sphere of cosmos, whose planets and stars revolve in stately procession about the Spindle of Necessity. We learn also of the revolutions of human souls returning to earth after their postmortem purgations and rewards, a part of their total life journey. However, it is beyond the universe of change and becoming that the philosopher is to find the Plain of Truth.

Such knowledge is difficult to attain, equally difficult to describe, and in the *Phaedrus* Socrates reaches his peak of inspiration. Here his ideal philosopher at last conquers the beast within, the "monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the [hundred-headed] serpent Typhon." The unruly steed of his lower nature has been tamed and mastered by *Nous*, his divine Self. Now one of the immortals, he reaches the "end of his course." In a chariot transported by the winged steeds of his purified soul, and powered by love, he "stands upon the outside of heaven . . . and behold[s] the things beyond." Of this supercosmic world beyond the heavens, Socrates asks, "what earthly poet ever did or ever will sing worthily" (247d)?

Although the transcendental vision of truth described here and elsewhere in the Dialogues is central to Plato's philosophy, it is not the

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*The presence of superior globes and planes of reality is a common theme in mystical traditions. Compare, for example, the "mythical" geography of Hindu dvīpas, Zoroastrian keshvars, Mandaean Mshunia Kushta, Qabbalistic sefirot, and modern theosophical planetary chains.

philosopher's ultimate objective. Socrates reminds us in the *Republic* (519e) that our world is not to be neglected. The Lawgiver intended that all citizens in the State should be happy, and divine wisdom is to infuse light, reason, and justice throughout the whole of cosmos, not in just a select few ascetics.[11] True, the philosopher must "die" to be reborn spiritually — to so loosen himself from worldly attachment that he may ascend to the Plain of Truth. But, like the soul's postmortem sojourn between earth lives, the philosopher's initiatory journey in the Greater Mysteries is but a temporary absence from duties here on earth. Necessity (*ananke*) compels him to return. And so does something else.

The love of wisdom is essential to the philosopher's quest. That is a cardinal truth in Plato's message — and a theme beautifully allegorized in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* (201c-13a). Yet there is a more fundamental power organizing and energizing the philosopher's life. This is the power of divine love, that exalted compassion which moves humanity's great ones to share not only their unique vision of the sun of Good, but to give themselves wholly and often unnoticed to the universal welfare — truly, "a diviner and lowlier destiny." But we are not to believe that altruism begins only after wisdom has been achieved. In Plato's view, nothing could be further from the truth — a truth exemplified in the person of Socrates. Here is a warmly human benefactor who claims no wisdom of his own, but only "a small body of knowledge [about] the nature of love."[12] Philosophy for Socrates is the "tendance of the soul"; it is a path of loving care for others — a path which starts now, at the beginning of the course, not at the end.

It is surely with deliberate intent that Plato opens the *Republic* with a brief conversation between Socrates and his elderly friend Cephalus on the subject of death. Cephalus' reason for living is purely selfish: he wants to assure himself that, if there is an afterlife, he will be spared the sufferings of the underworld. He even quotes from one of Pindar's odes to support his argument. In counterpoint to Cephalus' story, Plato ends the *Republic* with the Vision of Er. In rounding out his examination of justice, Socrates describes the spiritual warrior who is slain in battle and returns to life, physically resurrected in order to transmit the message of all saviors: that we are immortal beings and, as thinking, choosing humans, our destiny lies in our own hands. But the myth — and indeed

the Dialogues taken as a whole — contains a far more sublime message. In retelling the story of the true philosopher, Plato has given us a powerful reminder of the noblest ideal ever conceived: the true philanthropist who renounces the life of the gods to help uplift mankind.

References:

Quotations from the Dialogues, except where noted, are translated by Benjamin Jowett. References are to marginal numbers (Stephanus pagination).

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2. Ch. XXII, in *The Philosophy of Proclus*, Laurence J. Rosan, tr., Cosmos, New York, 1949, p. 25.
3. Cf. *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*, and *Phaedrus* 229.
4. Cf. *Phaedrus* 246a, *Timaeus* 28e, *Sophist* 242d-3b, *Statesman* 277c, *7th Letter* 341-5; also "The Gnosis of Plato," *Sunrise*, Aug/Sep 1986, pp. 171-9 above.
5. H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 1:xxxv, 1888 edition; G. de Purucker, *Fundamentals of the Esoteric Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Theosophical University Press, Pasadena, 1979, pp. 254-5, 557.
6. Cf. George Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1961, pp. 224-9.
7. Cf. J. A. Stewart, *The Myths of Plato*, Centaur Press, London, 1960, p. 222.
8. Cf. *Republic* 537c, 511b, 532-3, *Phaedrus* 266c, *Philebus* 16c, and *Parmenides* (passim).
9. Paul Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*, Harper & Row, 1958, pp. 87, 172-5; see also Plato's *2nd Letter* 314c which speaks of Socrates as "youthful and idealized."
10. Cf. *Phaedo* 107c, *Republic* 613a, and *Laws* 728b.
11. Cf. *Timaeus* 29c-31a and *Laws* 903c.
12. *Theages* 128b (in Friedländer, *Plato 2: The Dialogues*, p. 151); also *Lysis* 204b, *Symposium* 177d.