Orpheus is known as a mythical tragic lover, the minstrel-hero who made the stones dance, but he is also known as a major figure in ancient Greek religion and philosophy. Indeed, as we learn from this book, Orpheus, “the Theologian par excellence," represents a musical bridge between the earliest Greek mysteries and the latest Hellenistic flourishing of Neoplatonic and Hermetic wisdom as well as between Egyptian initiation, Pythagorean doctrines and Platonic philosophy. Algis Uždavynys has left us in this, his final work, a moving exploration of the subtle thread running through ancient and contemporary literature related to Orpheus. He spares no criticism of the limitations of some current scholarly views, steering the reader towards the conviction that philosophy, if it is not to remain mere escapism, is no less than a "knowledge through madness" entailing self-transformation and ultimately union with the Divine.

DR. ALGIS UŽDAVYNYS (1962-2010) was a senior research fellow at the State Institute of Culture, Philosophy and Arts, and Head of Humanities at the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts in his native Lithuania. A prolific author, Prof. Uždavynys’ work has been published in Lithuanian, Russian, English and French, including translations of Plotinus, Frithjof Schuon and Ananda Coomaraswamy into Russian and Lithuanian. His hermeneutical corpus on the eternal river of wisdom flowing from Ancient Egypt through Neoplatonism into the monotheistic religions constitutes a treasure trove of comparative studies. The Matheson Trust is committed to the publication of this corpus in English.
CONTENTS

**Preface** ................................................................. ix

I. A Model of Unitive Madness ........................................... 1

II. Socratic Madness ..................................................... 5

III. Socrates as Seer and Saviour ........................................ 9

IV. Philosophy, Prophecy, Priesthood ................................... 17

V. Scribal Prophethood .................................................. 19

VI. Eastern and Greek Prophethood .................................... 21

VII. Inside the Cultic Madness of the Prophets ................. 25

VIII. Egyptian Priesthood .............................................. 32

IX. Orpheus as Prophet ................................................ 37

X. Orpheus and the Pythagorean Tradition ....................... 41

XI. Orpheus and Apollo ............................................... 44

XII. The Orphic Revolution ........................................... 47

XIII. Knowledge into Death ............................................ 52

XIV. Telestic Restoration .............................................. 58

XV. The Lyre of Orpheus .............................................. 61

XVI. The Cosmic Unfolding of the One ............................. 64
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>XVII. Recollection and Cyclic Regression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XVIII. Orphic and Platonic Forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIX. The Method of Philosophical Catharsis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX. Deification of the Egyptian Initiate-Philosopher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXI. From Homer to Hermetic Secrecy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXII. Into the Mysteries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXIII. Beyond the Tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXIV. Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PREFACE

The present book is closely related to that famous Pre-Socratic fragment about the bow and the lyre, where their “back-stretched” or “retroflex” harmony (*palaitenos harmonia*) is said to depict the tense inner cohesion of a diverging unity. The same authority, Heraclitus of Ephesus, employs a Greek pun to show how in the bow itself, one of whose names is *bios*, both the name of life and the act of death coexist. Orpheus, as a mythical hero—indeed, one of the famed Argonauts—stands right at the centre of these junctions. So it is no wonder that this book shares in that harmonious tension: a tension rooted in the nature of the lyre and the bow, whose products may be piercing sounds or slaying arrows.

Here, we have first a tension within the author, who is intoxicated with his theme and yet committed to carry out his exposition in a discursive and academic manner. We can almost feel his plight: having in mind the “tremendous contemplation of the divine truth and beauty”, which would merit either a *bakkheia* outburst or a “supra-noctic metaphysical silence”, he is forcing himself to compose a “scientific” treatise. Having heard the music of Orpheus’ lyre, he is trying to convey as best as he can the unspeakable beauty of those notes in an all too earthly human language.

Second, as a direct consequence of the first, there is tension for the reader as he tries to follow the argument itself: strands of myth and mythic lore mix with dense epistemological and metaphysical discussion; abstruse Egyptian and Babylonian sources stand next to conventional Greek philosophical and 21st century academic references. The thing is
said, yet not fully; inadequately expressed with an almost deliberate disdain for exactitude on a plane which becomes redundant in the light of spiritual vision. This book moves uneasily between the apathetic and the cataphatic: trying to say something, saying something, hinting at something else, then finally keeping silent, finding itself lost for words, leaving the doors thrown open to a different understanding.

Then we find a third sort of tension, springing from the duality at the heart of the subject: Orpheus is a strange hero, one who has music and singing for weapons. He is a seer and tragic lover, yet a crucial figure in the history of philosophy. His place in the history of Greek religion and thought is still, even in specialised circles, something of a riddle, enigmatic and vague.

This book, densely packed with references, challenges, and subtle invitations, is a recapitulation or a critical reassessment of ancient and contemporary literature devoted to Orpheus, the "paradigmatic itinerant seer", "the Theologian", "the Saviour". It gives special attention to his relations with both the Egyptian and the Platonic tradition. At the heart of this book we have a glimpse into the substance, nature and development of the Orphic mysteries, but the reader must be warned: this is not a history of Orphism, and this is no ordinary scholarly monograph. Those who approach this book with respect for the ancient mysteries, humbly trying to understand why our ancestors across cultures unfailingly gave to Plato the epithet of "Divine" (Divus Plato, or Afaithum al-Ilahi, as the Arabs used to call him), hoping for that "epistemic and hermeneutical illumination mediated by the holy light of myths and symbols," such will find a treasure here: not a wealth of answers to be sure, but a wealth of mystagogic insights and intuitions, sparks perhaps of that 'fiery beauty of truth' contemplated by the author.

The brief earthly transit of Algis Uždavinys started in Lithuania in 1962. He completed his studies in Vilnius, graduating from the former State Art Institute of Lithuania, now Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts, where he would eventually become head of the Department of Humanities. Uždavinys was widely respected as a prolific author in Lithuania and abroad. He was renowned as a translator into Russian and Lithuanian of Ancient Egyptian and Greek texts, of Traditionalist works by Frithjof Schuon and Martin Lings, and he was active as well as an art critic and author of numerous articles and monographs (a list of his books can be found at the end of this volume). His interest in traditional doctrines would eventually take him around the world and to Jordan and Egypt, where he met living representatives of the Prophetic chain of wisdom embodied in the Qur'an and the Sunna. These would foster and orient his research projects until his untimely death in 2010. Not long before his passing and after he had completed this, his final book, he told his wife: "I have nothing else to say." As someone who devoted his life to the understanding and cultivation of the Divine, Algis Uždavinys must surely be taken as evidence of the ancient Greek saying "whom the Gods love, die young."

Like the Homeric epics, the current work is formed by twenty-four untitled chapters. Given the character of the book, less informative than mystagogic, and less systematic than symphonic, we have preferred to leave the brief chapters as they are, adding titles for ease of reference only in the table of contents.

Five major sections may be discerned in the book: chapters I-III deal with inspired madness in general, and with Socratic mania in particular; IV-VIII with the relations between philosophy, prophecy and priesthood, considering Middle Eastern, Egyptian and Greek traditions in general; chapters IX-XII narrow the scope to the figure of Orpheus as a prophet, considering his place in the Pythagorean tradition and in the development of Greek philosophy; chapters XIII-XVII touch on some of the deepest aspects of Orphic symbolism, considering the Orphic bakheia (initiatic rites) and way of life (the bios Orphikos); chapters XVIII-XXII relate all the above to the history of Greek wisdom-philosophy, from Homer down to Hermeticism with special attention to Plato’s theories and
their Egyptian associations. The book concludes with a chapter on the realities beyond the tomb (XXIII), followed by a surrender of all arguments and a moving self-disclosure (XXIV). Silence reigns pregnant with mystical resonance.

Juan Acevedo
Director
The Matheson Trust

ORPHEUS AND THE ROOTS OF PLATONISM

Melancholy and the awakening of one’s genius are inseparable, say the texts. Yet for most of us there is much sadness and little genius, little consolation of philosophy, only the melancholic stare—what to do, what to do. . . . Here our melancholy is trying to make knowledge, trying to see through. But the truth is that the melancholy is the knowledge; the poison is the antidote. This would be the senex’s most destructive insight: our senex order rests on senex madness. Our order is itself a madness.¹

* * *

To this we may add the conclusion. It seems that, whether there is or is not a one, both that one and the others alike are and are not, and appear and do not appear to be, all manner of things in all manner of ways, with respect to themselves and to one another.²

I

In Plato’s Phaedrus, Socrates argues paradoxically that “our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness” (ta megistos agathon hemin gignetai dia manias: Phaedr. 244a). The four

kinds of divine inspiration, or madness, are viewed as a divine gift provided by the Muses, Dionysus, Apollo and Aphrodite (or Eros) respectively. In the same dialogue, the “divine banquet” is depicted as a metaphysical place of contemplation and vision. For Plato, the contemplation (theoria) of the eternal Ideas transcends our rational ability to comprehend and analyse these Ideas discursively. The desperate longing for this paradigmatic contemplation is imagined as a yearning for wings and the regained ability to fly to the divine banquet. Accordingly, this pressing desire is the desire for wholeness, for noetic integrity, and for one’s true divine identity provided by dialectical searching, philosophical recollection and erotic madness. The hierarchically organized troops of gods are led by Zeus. They lack both jealousy and passion, being involved neither in plots, nor in heavenly wars:

The gods have no need for madness, let alone erotic madness; hence the gods are not philosophers. It is not surprising, then, that the gods seem to have no need for logos (let alone for rhetoric). Although there is a certain amount of noise in the heavens, there is no reference whatsoever to there being any discourse among the gods or between gods and men.3

Therefore the Platonic philosopher, as the madman who nurtures wings, is the dialectically transformed “speaker” (the fallen soul enchanted by the magie of logos) whose apparently mad desire and erotike mania are not so much directly sent from the gods as sparkling from within as a desire for the divine banquet and for wisdom. But the three other kinds of madness discussed in Plato’s Phaedrus, namely, poetic (poietike mania) telestic (telestike mania), and prophetic or mantic madness (mantine mania) indeed are sent by the gods.

The Muses are specified as the source of the poetic inspiration and of the three forms of madness; “the poetic sort seems to be the closest to Socratic-Platonic philosophizing and hence to be its most complex antagonist,” as Charles Griswold remarks.4

The telestic madness is anagogic, and leads the soul to its forgotten origins through the theurgic rites of ascent or other sacramental means of purification. The inspired telestic liturgies (telestikè, hieratikè telesiourgia, theophoria) are not necessarily to be regarded straightforwardly as “operations on the gods”, thus deliberately and incorrectly equating the animated cultic statues located in the context of particular ritual communications with the invisible metaphysical principles themselves. Otherwise, tacitly or not, the polemical premises for a certain iconoclastic bias are maintained. And so H.J. Blumenthal puts too much weight on the verb theourgein, supposing that one who does theia erga is one who operates on the gods, thereby making theurgy a nonsense.5

The mantic inspiration, or prophetic madness, which allegedly produces countless benefits, is evoked and evidenced, first of all, by the prophetesses at Delphi, thus recalling the close connection between the Apollonian shrine at Delphi and the philosophical self-knowledge required by Plato’s Socrates. According to Griswold, “Socratic prophecy seems to combine the human techne of division or dissection with the divinely given techne of madness; that is, it somewhat combines... MADNESS AND SOPHROSYNE.”6

The Apollonian prophecy is inseparable from philosophizing and, hence, from rhetoric in its expanded general sense, showing and leading souls by persuasion or imperative—like a sacrificial priest, using the dialectical art of definition, divi-

---


4. Ibid., p. 77.


6. Charles L. Griswold, ibid., p. 76.
sion and collection. Yet neither is the sacrifier to be viewed as a paradigm of theological understanding, nor the user of the art of rhetoric made subject to his own enchanting power of persuasion. However, they may become types of selfduped “believers” or acquire the ideologically tinctured, and therefore very “orthodox,” ability to talk about “truth”—or virtually any subject—and so become “difficult to be with”. As Griswold correctly observes, Plato’s Socrates

seems to fear the canonization of a biblos. That is, the written word lets us persuade ourselves too easily that we are in irrefutable possession of the truth, while in fact we are not. It facilitates our tendency to become dogmatists or zealots rather than philosophers. . . Under these conditions philosophy can have the same corrupting influence that sophistry does or worse.7

However, academic paranoia differs from prophetic madness. The so-called prophets (theomanteis, mantes theoi, or Aristotle’s sibullai kai bakides kai hoi entheoi pantos: Probl. 954a.36) fall into enthusiasmos, the state of a particular “inspired ecstasy”, and utter truths of which they themselves presumably know nothing. Hence, being entheos means that the body has a god or a daimon within, just as the Egyptian animated statue has a manifestation (ba) of a god (neter) within. Similarly, empauchos means that both the physical human body and the cultic body (the hieratic statue or the entire sanctuary, itself full of images, statues and hieroglyphs) have an animating, life-giving and self-moving principle—namely, a soul (psuche)—inside them.

Orpheus is an example of one who has all these four kinds of inspiration or madness according to Hermetas the Alexandrian Neoplatonist, whose commentary on Plato’s Phaedrus reflects the views of his master Syrius. 8 Since these four man-

8. Anne Sheppard, The Influence of Hermetas on Marsilio Ficino’s Doctrine

9. Ibid., p. 106

However, academic paranoia differs from prophetic madness. The so-called prophets (theomanteis, mantes theoi, or Aristotle’s sibullai kai bakides kai hoi entheoi pantos: Probl. 954a.36) fall into enthusiasmos, the state of a particular “inspired ecstasy”, and utter truths of which they themselves presumably know nothing. Hence, being entheos means that the body has a god or a daimon within, just as the Egyptian animated statue has a manifestation (ba) of a god (neter) within. Similarly, empauchos means that both the physical human body and the cultic body (the hieratic statue or the entire sanctuary, itself full of images, statues and hieroglyphs) have an animating, life-giving and self-moving principle—namely, a soul (psuche)—inside them.

Orpheus is an example of one who has all these four kinds of inspiration or madness according to Hermetas the Alexandrian Neoplatonist, whose commentary on Plato’s Phaedrus reflects the views of his master Syrius.9 Since these four man-

9. Ibid., p. 106
Initially acting as a typical idle talker, Socrates realizes himself as a moralist. Strictly speaking, the man who is persuaded by nothing in him except the proposition which appears to him the best when he reasons about it (Crit. 46b) is no metaphysician either, though Apollo commanded him (as he "supposed and assumed") to live philosophizing, examining himself and others (Ap. 28c). Socrates saw his own work in "philosophizing", that is, in summoning all citizens (but especially wealthy youths of aristocratic origins) to perfect their soul, as a sort of socio-political mission following the god’s command and acting on the god’s behalf. Therefore, his performance of thus understood "dialectical" work (ergon) can be imagined as a form of piety in service (latreia) to the god. Gregory Vlastos argues:

Were it not for that divine command that first reached Socrates through the report Chaerephon brought back from Delphi there is no reason to believe that he would have ever become a street philosopher. If what Socrates wants is partners in elenctic argument, why should he not keep to those in whose company he had sought and found his eudaimonist theory—congenial and accomplished fellow seekers after moral truth? Why should he take to the streets, forcing himself on people who have neither taste nor talent for philosophy, trying to talk them into submitting to a therapy they do not think they need.10

There is no explanation other than a supposed divine command (be it just literary topos or some inner experience) or Socrates’ own wild presumption, keeping in mind that Socrates was no mystic in any conventional religious sense, but rather a zealous social worker and rationalizing moralist serving his god for the benefit of his fellow Athenians. This


“madman’s theatre” is nevertheless regarded as a revolutionary project:

And it is of the essence of his rationalist programme in theology to assume that the entailment of virtue by wisdom binds gods no less than men. He could not have tolerated a double-standard morality, one for men, another for the gods... Fully supernatural though they are, Socrates’ gods could still strike his pious contemporaries as rationalist fabrications...11

Socrates undoubtedly regarded his own “rationalism” and his leap from epistemological ignorance to public political and moral expertise as devised by the daimonion, the supernatural guide. His own front door was adorned, as A.H. Armstrong relates, by “an unshaped stone called Apollo of the Ways and another stone called a Herm with a head at the top and a phallus halfway down, which Socrates would tend at the proper time like every other Athenian householder”.12

In this respect he was quite traditional, although his presumably esoteric side (if this curious aspect of Socrates is not invented by Plato’s dramatic imagination) is close to the madness of Orpheus, the divinely inspired mythical singer. In the context of traditional Hellenic culture, Orphism and Pythagoreanism may be viewed as a “small sectarian movement”. Alternatively, Orphism may be presented as a new spiritual programme of radically revised anthropology and of both cosmic and personal soteriology, partly derived from Egyptian and Anatolian sources. In either case, the Orphic doctrines sharply differ from those of early Hellenic (the so-called Homeric and pre-Homeric) spirituality.

11. Ibid., pp. 545 & 547
The main Orphic doctrine follows the pattern already established in the *Pyramid Texts*, asserting that the royal soul has its goal in unity with the divine through ascent and recollection. With considerable modifications, this anagogic scenario became an integral part of Platonism, whose adherents practiced rising up to the heights of philosophical contemplation through the anagogic power of *eros*, and were able to reach the noetic Sun by a combination of dialectical and telestic means. In short, Orphism maintained that the human soul is immortal and is subject to divine judgement:

The divine in us is an actual being, a *daimon* or spirit, which has fallen as a result of some primeval sin and is entrapped in a series of earthly bodies, which may be animal and plant as well as human. It can escape from the “sorrowful weary wheel”, the cycle of reincarnation, by following the Orphic way of life, which involved, besides rituals and incantations, an absolute prohibition of eating flesh. . . .  

The somewhat clumsy Socrates hardly fits the much demanding Orphic ideals, although he nevertheless functions in Plato’s *Symposium* as an Orpheus figure, being presented as a literary double of *Phanes*. The self-manifested Phanes of the Orphic cosmogonies should be described as *Protagonos* (the first-born, tantamount to the noetic light which appears from the egg of ineffable darkness), whose other name is the demiurgic Eros.  

Sara Rappe emphasizes “the centrality of Orphic symbolism in the *Symposium* as a whole”, arguing that there is good reason to attribute the allegorizing use of Orphic material to

---


Plato himself, and not only to Syrianus, Proclus, Damascius or Olympiodorus. She says:

The Orphic mystery purports to be an esoteric tradition, one that liberates people from the petrifying conventions of the mass sex gender machine. Its purpose is to recreate the subject, to wrench him away from the public fiction in which he has hitherto been schooled. . . . The Orphic myth promises a return to the undifferentiated state before sexual identity arises, promising to deliver us back inside the egg to become in the Lacanian sense, hommelletes. But of course, this is a delusional aspiration, as the myth makes clear, and it is in fact a self-destructive delusion. . . . In my reading of the Orphic cosmology in Plato’s *Symposium*, I have emphasized its function as an etiology for human consciousness, prior to its regeneration by philosophy. This is the esoteric mind that desperately requires enlightenment but because of its conditioning, all too rarely seeks it.  

---

Neoplatonic doctrine into ritual, or the language of metaphysics is grafted on to a traditional Orphic narrative. However, such theurgic convergency is initially based on Egyptian hermeneutical and cultic patterns. She argues as follows:

The "Rhapsodic Theogony" ends with a famous hymn to Zeus, in which his identity as the coincidentia oppositorum is revealed. . . . This vision of the world of Zeus gives us a kind of mirror of the Proclan universe, in which each being is an all, and all beings are in each. . . . The multiple states of being, each level mutually reflecting all of the others, proliferate as a hall of mirrors. It is this great world of mutual interpenetration endlessly expanding as a single drama, that the Orphic theogony captures. And not surprisingly, this vision is exactly the mythic equivalent of Proclus' central metaphysical views.

Proclus' assertion that all Hellenic theology ultimately derives from Orphic mystagogy (Plat. Theol. 1.5.25) may be regarded as a normative and paradigmatic claim of his philosophical hermeneutics. Thus, Orpheus constitutes the archetypal mark of his metaphysical topography. In this particular sense, the name and image of Orpheus function more like the theological arhe, like the canonized philosophical hupostasis, than as an unquestioned and factual person of ancient history. This imaginative assertion of Proclus, though belonging to the realm of semi-mythic genealogies, is shared by the countless followers of the ancient Hellenic tradition and constitutes one of its main etiological kernels. Consequently, it is this image of the esoteric Orpheus that counts, not one provided by the modern academic interpretations that present their hypothetical contructions as an ultimate truth about a given tradition in place of the self-representations, theological images and myths used by adherents of the tradition.

For the late Platonic tradition, the "fighters"—those belonging to the "sacred race" (hiera genes)—defend, according to Syrus, "the best and most beautiful of philosophies", namely, the Kronian way of life (In Metaph. 91.8ff). These intellectual defenders of tradition recognized themselves as forming a link in a golden Platonic chain, claiming that inwardly all human beings are divine and, therefore, must become conscious of this inherent divinity. The anagogic tradition of a journey within consists in an unbroken chain of divinely inspired teachers, who both taught and practised the revealed Platonic mysteries. As Polymnia Athanassiadis remarks:

In a society in which political propagandists had raised the principle of imperial legitimacy to a metaphysical level, the Neoplatonists came effortlessly to evolve and spread a dynastic theology. Indeed by the time of Damascius, the history of the caste had acquired its own mythology as well, for the creation of which all sorts of forged genealogies were mobilised.

The prototypal "winged souls" of the Neoplatonic "golden chain" (chruse seira) were Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato. But already by the end of the fourth century AD, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus and many others were regarded as divine. Garth Fowden has this to say:

Likewise Hierokles described Ammonios as "divinely possessed (enthousiasos) with longing for the true goal of philosophy". Reflection on theological and philosophical truths was

---

16. Ibid., p. 164.
17. Ibid., p. 160.
20. Ibid., p. 5.
Indeed widely accepted as a prerequisite of divinisation, Proclus ... asserts that immersion in the mysteries of Platonic philosophy could result in divine possession, like a "Dionysiac frenzy"; and Olympiodorus listed four Platonic dialogues (Timaeus, Republica, Phaedrus, Theaetetus) which in his opinion illustrated these Platonthoi enthousiasmoi. 21

According to this tradition (paradosis), Plato himself received the complete science of the gods from Pythagorean and Orphic writings. The science of dialectic advocated by Plato is not found in the Orphico-Pythagorean theology, but both Orphism and Pythagoreanism (whatever these ambivalent terms may mean for different audiences) are viewed as being based on the ancient Egyptian and Babylonian revelations. The divine Plato only gave it scientific form, combining "the revelatory style of Pythagoreanism with the demonstrative method of Socrates". 22

Hence, in this respect Socrates' approach is demonstrative (apodeiktikon) rather than revelatory. Now Syrius, the spiritual guide of both Hermias and Proclus, not only proclaimed the harmony (symphonia) between Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato, but also depicted Socrates as a kind of saviour—the divine avatar sent down to the world of becoming in order to bring the fallen souls back to the divine banquet (Hermias, In Phae. 1,1-5). This soteriological function of Socrates is modelled on the analogous function of Orpheus, though the initial meaning of the term soteria is related to the realm of public sponsorship, social benefits and graces provided by local patrons and divinized heroes. In the Hellenistic Greek world, any benefactor (eurgetes) may be recognized and honoured as a saviour (soter). 23

However, in a metaphysical sense, the ability to save—the soul's immortalization or alleged "homecoming"—is the function and privilege of the benevolent gods. For example, the Chaldean Hekate as the "life-giving womb" and "lightning-receiving womb" (or as a formless fire, aneideon pur, visible throughout the cosmos) is indispensable for those seeking salvation: "Soteriologically minded philosophers and theologists, who wished to assure the rising of their own souls, later advanced the idea that Hekate, by controlling the crossing of the boundary between humanity and divinity, either could aid the ascent or could force the descent of the soul." 24

The divine-like souls of true philosophers are not entirely cut off from participation in contemplation of the Ideas. In a certain metaphorical sense, they still follow the heavenly retinue depicted in Plato's Phaedrus. They are "companions of the gods" (opadous theon andras), like the idealized and mythologized Socrates of Syrianus and Proclus. In short, Socrates is understood as an instrument of divine will. His system of pedagogy presumably belongs to the soteriological "golden chain" of Homer and Orpheus, and his philosophy is no less than a divinely inspired beneficial madness.

Both Orpheus and Socrates are presented as spiritual guides, that is, as inspired mystagogues able to reveal the ultimate vision of the Ideas, a vision regarded as initiation into the highest mysteries. Before starting his interpretation of the Phaedrus myth, Proclus explains: "These things are said by Socrates in the Phaedrus when he is clearly inspired (enthousiazon) and dealing with mystic matters" (Plat. Theol. IV, 18.23-25). And the citharist Orpheus, like Chiron the Centaur, half-brother of Zeus, in a certain way embodies the mythical guide of souls most purely", as Ilsetraut Hadot says.
“preparing a direct and material correspondence between music and wisdom.”

But philosophy is the highest art and highest music, as Plato’s Socrates himself acknowledges (Phaed. 61a). Consequently, the exemplary poets and singers are _enteinos_, inspired ones, although feebly translated as “inspired”, the Greek word _enteinos_ loses its literal force, according to Vlastos. And Socrates is god-possessed (katechomenos); even more: “I am a seer (_manias_),” he says (Phaed. 242c), since the Greek term _manias_ may be rendered as “diviner” or “prophet”. In a sense it is “god himself (_ho theos autos_) who speaks to us through them” (Iom. 234.d.3-4), since the possessed speakers “know nothing of the things they speak”.

The Greek _enteinos_ literally means “within is a god” or “in god”. This indwelling _theos_ (not unlike the Egyptian _ha_ in its simulated sacred receptacle) speaks from the person (or from the animated cultic statue) in a strange voice, sometimes resembling the so-called “language of the birds” or the primordial noise of the creative sound. The most common Greek terms for this or similar states are _mania_ (madness, frenzy, inspiration) and _ekstasis_ (to stand [or be] outside oneself). Every seer, filled by the ritually ignited and conventionally performed frenzy, stands in a special relationship to the deity, because the words he utters presuppose either the teletic madness of Dionysus, or the prophetic madness of Apollo.

But what about knowledge which is not human in its origin? Strictly speaking, this knowledge presupposes that the speaker himself knows nothing. According to Vlastos:

In Socrates’ view the effect of the god’s entry into the poet is to drive out the poet’s mind: when the god is in him the poet is “out of his mind”, _ekphros_, or “intelligence is no longer present in him”; so he may find himself saying many things which are admirable ( _polla kai kale_ ) and true without knowing what he is saying . . . it is because he is like the diviner that the inspired poet is “out of his mind”. . . . For Socrates, diviners, seers, oracle-givers and poets are all in the same boat. All of them in his view are know-nothings, or rather, worse: unaware of their sorry epistemic state, they set themselves up as repositories of wisdom emanating from a divine, all-wise source. What they say may be true; but even when it is true, they are in no position to discern what there is in it that is true.

They convey truth to the extent that they repeat the divine voice which may serve as a truth-speaking _kathugemon_, the one who leads and who shows the way, and may deceive as Agamemnon allegedly was deceived by Zeus, although Proclus is eager to explain this deception _kata ten aorhpeton theoria_. That is, according to the esoteric (or secret, unspoken, mysterious) mode of seeing. This is so, because the revealed myths and hieratic customs may be “educational” (_paideutikos_), or appropriate for the young, and “more divinely inspired” (_enteistikoterai_), that is, “more philosophical” (_philosophikoterai_) and appropriate for the initiates (Proclus, _In Remp_. I.79.5-18). As Robert Lamberton points out:

When Proclus discusses the differences between Homer and Plato, he presents Homer as “inspired” and “ecstatic”, an author who offers a direct revelation and is in contact with absolute truth. Plato is seen as coming later to the same information and treating it differently, “establishing it solidly by the irrefutable methods of systematic thought” [ _In Remp_. I.171-172].

---

The Greek word for god (theos) is itself related to the act of the seer. The divine revelation may be received in the form of myth (mythos). Such a myth is to be used properly, because its surface is only a "veil" or "screen" (parapetasma), behind which another, metaphysical truth lies awaiting its inspired hermeneus. Even Homer's blindness is regarded as a divinely established symbol that points to the dark and transcendentinal character of Homer's vision. In this respect, Proclus argues that Socrates (the literary personage of Plato's Republic), in fact, is deceived regarding "the way in which myths represent the truth".  29

So what does it mean to be a seer—both the teller of myths and the inspired interpreter of the revealed myth? As Walter Burkert explains the Greek terms:

... an interpreted sign is thephaton, the seer is theoprotos, and what he does is a theiazein or entheazem... Insofar as the seer speaks in an abnormal state, he requires in return someone who formulates his utterances, the prophetes. The word for seer itself, mantes, is connected with the Indo-European root for mental power, and is also related to mania, madness.  30

Be that as it may, the Platonic philosophy is viewed by Proclus as divine philosophy, because it "shone forth" (eklampai) for the first time "through the good grace of the gods".  31 Therefore, its amazing noetic tradition repeats the dazzling appearance of Phanes, the Orphic Atum, whose primaeval "shining forth" from the ineffable darkness constitutes the noetic pleroma, the mound of Heliopolis. Accordingly, the ineffable Night is the Egg from which the solar bird sprang forth on the first morning—in illo tempore.

29 Ibid., p. 196.

Proclus presents Socrates' "celebration" of the realm beyond the heavens (huperouranios topos) as a "symbolic description" (symbolike apangelia). He says that "the mode which aims to speak of the divine by means of symbols is Orphic and generally appropriate to those who write about divine myths" (Plat. Theol. I.4.10.6ff). Consequently, the myth narrated in Plato's Phaedrus is taken "to be not only inspired but also teleistic, which for him means theurgic". 32

Hence, Proclus interprets the images and events of the Phaedrus myth in terms of theurgy, arguing that the realm beyond the heavens where the Ideas are to be contemplated corresponds to the three Orphic Nights. Anne Sheppard considers that Syrianus, the spiritual guide of Proclus, "did not distinguish between the inspired, theurgic mode of discourse on the one hand and the symbolic, Orphic mode on the other". 33 Even for Proclus (in spite of his advanced technical terminology), the prophetic madness, philosophical frenzy, theurgic rites and their allegorical or symbolic interpretation constitute a single metaphysical set of references related to the way in which the soul ascends to the noetic realm, whence it may be reunited with the highest reality.

In relation to this exposition of the Orphic and Platonic aids to recollection, "which form a continual initiation into the perfect mystic vision" (Phaedr. 249c), one may wonder what it means to be possessed by a god, or to be a prophet in the wider context of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures.

Arguing that the Greek verb gnigosko (from which derives gnosis, knowledge) in early times is often combined with verbs of seeing (though "vision", in this case, may be understood as

33 Ibid., p. 422.
an exceptional supra-normal faculty), J. Gonda attempts to
place the oracular soothsayers and poets on the same footing
as prophets and philosophers. In Greece, the specific sanc-
tuary or holy place where the gods are thought to be present
and may offer counsel is called chresterian or manteion, and
rendered as oraculum by the Romans. In these places, like in
the Syrian and Mesopotamian temples, the god speaks di-
rectly from a priest or a prophet who enters the state of pos-
session (enthusiasmos).

Hence, a prophet, as an inspired seer, somewhat emptied of
himself and “filled with the god” (being a possessed enthousi-
astes), is a representative of the speaking deity. Even if this
attribution is sometimes just a literary convention turned into
a compelling promise of an act of salvation, the magic power
was thought to be inherent in the mighty word of any suc-
cessful demagogue. Whether or not we would like to describe
this mythically determined oracular performer and possessed
speaker as inspired public teacher or as a prophet (the Greek
prophetes who relates cult legends at festivals), the
prophecy itself may be defined as a perpetual conformation of
particular cosmological, epistemological and socio-political
principles sustained through a ritually performed exegesis.
Even the ancient Hebrew “prophet” (nabi), in its initial con-
text, may appear simply “as a courier for an important letter
passed between two politically interested parties, perhaps co-
conspirators of some sort”.36

34. J. Gonda, The Vision of the Vedic Poets (New Delhi: Munshiram
36. Joel Sweeney, “Inquiring for the State in the Ancient Near East:
Determining Political Location,” in Magic and Divination in the Ancient World,

What, then, is prophecy? The use of this very concept is con-
troversial, mainly due to a Judaico-Christian theological bias
and the related “romantic perception of the biblical prophets
as tormented individuals of great literary talent”.37

The almost unquestioned dogma of prophetic revelation as
an epistemological category embodied in the book is a scribal
construct of Mesopotamian origin. The post-exilic religious
bureaucrats of Second Temple Judaism decided that the only
way in which the divine Patron can speak to His vassals (the
Israelites as His contractual slaves and warriors) was through
the written text. Karel van der Toorn discusses the rhetoric
of prophetic revelation in connection with the legitimizing
construction of the prophetic experience, with the increasing
emphasis on writing as the primary and privileged vehicle of
prophecy. He writes:

When prophecy became primarily a literary genre, the proph-
ets were posthumously transformed into authors... When
the Hebrew scribes adopted the revelation paradigm in con-
nection with the prophetic literature, they took the vision
(hazon) to be the classic mode of prophetic revelation. That
is why the rubrics of the prophetic books often use the ter-
minology of the visionary experience as the technical vocab-
ulary for prophecy, even for prophets whose oracles do not
refer to any vision... The novelty of the scribal construct of
prophecy as a revelation lies in the reference to written texts.
The scribes developed the notion of the prophet as a scribe,
and of his message as a secret revealed by heavenly figures,
to legitimize the fact that the prophets had become books.38

37. Karel van der Toorn, Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible
38. Ibid., pp. 231 & 232.
In this case, God (the mighty Patron of the chosen zealots) is presented as speaking only through the written text, itself now attached to the prestigious taklimtu category of Babylonian writings. The Akkadian word taklimtu (literally meaning “demonstration”) stands for “revelation” and “preserves a reminiscence of the time in which revelation was primarily thought of as a visual experience”. The premise of the Babylonian cuneiform literature is that, unless revealed, wisdom (nemeg) remains hidden, thus constituting a conception of esoteric knowledge and interest in the “broad understanding” (uznu rapashitu) and “profound wisdom” (hasisu palku) of the Deep, attributed to the apkallu sages, which assisted the emergence of the revelation paradigm; a paradigm that asserted the authority of the written tradition perpetuated by the learned expert (ummanu mudu) who guarded the secret lore of the great gods (ummanu mudu nasir pirishiti iš rabiti).

Scribal wisdom itself (along with the broad comprehension of “secret things”) is god-given. The privileged texts “from the mouth of Ea” (sha pi Ea) may be witnessed as “the writings of Ea” (širu sha Ea). It was held that Ea dictated his revelations to Adapa, the legendary apkallu sage, one of the “seven brilliant apkallu, puradu-fish of the sea”. Oannes-Adapa transmitted this wisdom of Ea (nemeg Ia) through the subsequent written tradition. Adapa’s patron Ea is called beat nemeg, the Lord of Wisdom. The exceptional value of his wisdom is recognized by the sixteenth century BC text on behalf of the early Kassite ruler: “May Ea, the god of the depths, grant him perfect wisdom” (Ea bel naghim nemegam lishkitlishu).

Similarly, Marduk provides deep understanding (uznu) and intelligence (hasisu), and Nabu, the heavenly Scribe who knows everything, brings forth wise teachings (ibnu nemeg). Van der Toorn describes the situation when the written tradition of the Mesopotamian scribes supplanted the oral tradition and, as a consequence, faced the problem of legitimacy and authority. He writes:

The scribes found their new source of authority in the concept of divine revelation. Through the construct of an antediluvian revelation from Ea to the apkallus, transmitted in an unbroken chain of sages, scribes, and scholars, the written tradition could claim a legitimacy issuing from the gods. In support of the theory that the revelation paradigm was an answer to a legitimacy problem, one can point to the emergence of the rhetoric of secrecy. At about the same time that the Mesopotamian scribes and scholars began to speak of the tradition as having been revealed, they started to emphasize its secret nature.

VI

And so, what about the prophets themselves? Are they “prophets” in the sense of seers—the beholders of divine epiphanies at festivals with their splendid processions, portable divine images and barques? Let us remember that the Greek word theoria initially meant contemplation of the gods at their festivals, before it started to mean the beholding of the well-ordered Pythagorean cosmos or the Platonic Ideas. Are the prophets “messengers” in the sense of heralds, announcers, ceremonial declaimers in the manner of reciters who perform the traditional poems and myths at the annual festivals? Or

39. Ibid., p. 212.
42. Ronald F.G. Sweet, ibid., p. 52.
are they the professional actors on the stage of the Dionysiac theatre?

Modern Western convention tends to emphasize the "inner experience", "spontaneous inspiration", and the "moral educational" pedigree of the imagined "prophetic" human-divine communication, though this kind of theologically asserted communication may be simply a matter of cultural definition and classification. The proposed taxonomy engages a division of social and metaphysical roles that may be performed.

There is no single equivalent of the Greek words "prophet" (prophētes) and "prophecy" (propheteia) in the ancient Near Eastern languages. In addition, the word "prophecy" is liable to a certain semantic confusion, since it is commonly equated with foretelling the future. Nevertheless, prophecy may be defined as a process of communication—not unlike a well-organized royal "postal service", prominent in the Achaemenid Persian empire, when the conception of angelic messengers started to emerge. According to Martti Nissinen, this consisted of the divine sender of the message, the message (classified as "revelation") itself, the transmitter of the message (the prophet as postal officer and courier), and the recipient of the message, usually the king. Nissinen comments:

The Mesopotamian sources include two distinguishable types of texts, both of which have been characterized as "prophecy": 1) the verbal messages, allegedly sent by a deity and transmitted by a human intermediary to the addressee, and 2) the "Akkadian Prophecies", also called "apocalypses", which predict historical events, mostly ex eventu.

In a sense, the prophet is the mouthpiece of a deity when the message to be transmitted is not initially a "written document" (or a material cuneiform tablet brought from the divine

44 Martti Nissinen, References to Prophecy in Neo-Assyrian Sources (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1998), p. 6
Gnostic Sophia) constitutes the Assyrian esoteric doctrine of salvation. In the universalized imperial context, prophecy, mysticism and royal ideology are inseparable. Gilgamesh is the prototype of the perfect Assyrian king, and Ishtar is the divine mother who gives birth to him. No wonder, then, that one of the Assyrian prophetesses (ragintu) "identifies herself with Gilgamesh roaming the desert in search of eternal life."49 As Simo Parpola relates:

For a spiritually pure person, union with God was believed to be possible not only in death but in life as well. This belief provides the doctrinal basis of Assyrian prophecy: when filled with divine spirit, the prophet not only becomes a seat for the Goddess but actually one with her, and thus can foresee future things. . . . The purpose of the act—which certainly was the culmination of a long process of spiritual preparation—was to turn the devotee into a living image of Ishtar: an androgynous person totally beyond the passions of flesh.50

Let us explore the following analogy: both the god-chosen Assyrian king and the devotee of Ishtar play the role of Ashur’s son or of Mullissu’s son. Likewise, the Neoplatonic mystic may seek to be integrated into the universal hypostasis of Heqate Soteira or Athena Soteira. Ishtar as "virgin of light" marks the presence of God (Ashur, the only, universal God, viewed as "the totality of gods", gabbili Ashur).51 At the same time, Ishtar is the word of God and the way of salvation. As a rule, the Assyrian prophets belong to the cultic community of Ishtar’s devotees (assimnu, nash pilaqqi) and share their esoteric mystical lore concerning the ascent and salvation of the soul.52

Similarly, theurgic divination in Neoplatonism may be regarded as a means of ascent and unification—"standing outside" of one's normal state of consciousness, that is, in ecstasis and frenzy. This entails an all-consuming presence of the divine as the inspired theurgist is seized by the invading god. This divine invasion may be equated to the active irruption of the dazzling noetic light within the purified recipient, or rather, in his mirror-like phantasia. Emma Clarke explains the matter as follows:

Iamblichus argues that the imagination is manipulated by the gods and receives divine phantasmata during inspiration. He consistently describes god-sent visions as phantasmata or phantasiai. . . . Porphry writes that people themselves "imagine" (phantazontai) or "are divinely inspired according to their imaginative faculty" (kata to phantastikon theiaizoun), whereas Iamblichus insists that the imagination is affected from the outside—divine power "illuminates with a divine light the aetherial and luciform vehicle surrounding the soul, from which divine visions occupy the imaginative faculty in us, driven by the will of the gods. . . . " An inspired individual is not thinking or using his imagination—his imagination is being made use of by the gods. Left to its own devices, untouched by the gods, the imagination produces mere (human) phantasms which have no place in the process of inspiration. . . . The imagination is therefore valued only as a passive receptacle of divine visions.53

VII

The prophetic messages attributed to the accredited Babylonian prophets, including those who served in various temples and those perceived as madmen, Abraham Malamat relates

50. Ibid., p. XXXIV
51. Ibid., pp. XXI & LXXXI.
52. Ibid., p. XLVII.
to the category of “intuitive prophecy.” Since the so-called “scientific” Akkadian divination practised by the barum is described as both typical and rational, the “intuitive divination” attested at Mari seems to be both atypical and irrational. But this observation is not entirely correct. In certain cases, prophecy may be described in terms of ceremonial rhetoric—the human calls and divine answers which demand the taking of important political decisions. To categorize this conventional dialectical play as “intuitive” means to be under the spell of an exalted Western romanticism. This influential theory of aesthetics invents and cherishes the “spontaneous inner experiences” of exceptional individuals, deliberately forgetting the ritualized literary background of such “spontaneous” social concerns.

The Neo-Assyrian and Mari texts, however, present the local prophets (apilum, mukhum, nabum, raggimu) as those who receive divine messages involuntarily: the messages are not regarded as invented or created by the mukhum. Lester Grabbe states: “When prophets speak openly in a temple, this looks like spontaneous spirit possession: the spirit comes upon them, and they become a mouthpiece for the deity.”

Or do they believe this is so and need this belief literally as it stands, along with the “ecstatic testimony” and the subsequent “theatrical performance”? The stereotypical language of this seemingly spontaneous play amounts to a strategically managed language which functions as the hermeneutic of the myth, as the reconfirmation of the temple tradition, of its socio-economic premises, expectations, hopes and dreams. As a rule, the contemporary cosmic geography and its pecu-

liarities are involved. Therefore, “it is often difficult to distinguish between actual prophetic oracles and literary prophecies created by scribes.” No wonder the prophets themselves are sometimes viewed as scribes whose speeches or reports are not performed in public as the standards of the sacred “revelatory theatre” and of epic consciousness would require. Instead, they are composed as oracular collections and royal inscriptions.

In the Mesopotamian city of Mari (eighth century BCE) the mediators between the heavenly divine assembly (puhru) and the earthly royal court bear the titles of apilum/apilum (“answerers”), mukhum/mukhum (“ecstatics”), assinum (“cult singers”), and nabum (“ones called”). The messages they bring from the gods (Dagan, Addu of Halab, Shamash, Marduk, Nergal) and the goddesses (Anunitum, Diritum, Hishametum, Ninhursagga, Ishtar) are taken seriously by the political authorities, although these prophetic messages are subordinated to other means of divine communication.

Accordingly, the identity of the prophet cannot be taken as a guarantee for the validity and truth of the prophecy pronounced, or “shouted” (ragamu), presumably in a state of real or solemnly feigned frenzy. But a possession cult par excellence and the related professionalization of prophecy pertain to the domain and supervision of Ishtar. Van der Toorn writes:

Ishtar was deemed capable to produce, by way of ecstasy, a metamorphosis in her worshipers. Men might be turned into women, and women were made to behave as men. . . . There is

55. Ibid., p. 60.

57. *Ibid.* , p. 25
evidence that at least some of the Neo-Assyrian prophetesses were in reality men, or rather self-castrated transvestites. Their outward appearance was interpreted as a display of Ishtar’s transforming powers. Possessed by the divine, they were the obvious persons to become mouthpieces of the gods.\textsuperscript{60}

Their prophetic utterances were not metaphysical slogans or theological shahadas, as the modern esoteric dreamer would tend to imagine, but the utterances of a deity, revealed while standing in the temple before the animated hieratic statue. In the name of a particular god an oracle is delivered by the temple servant, or rather the deity (Dagan, for instance) opens the mouth of and speaks from within his image. Van der Toorn comments on this rite as follows:

The Old Babylonian gods grant prophetic revelations only in the sanctuary. Dreams may occur at other places, but prophecy, properly speaking, is confined to the temple... When a god speaks directly through the mouth of a prophet, the latter utters the prophecy first in the temple. The prophet (\textit{apilum} or \textit{apilum}) "rises" (\textit{tibi}) or "stands" (\textit{izzie}) to deliver the divine message in the temple. The ecstatic (\textit{muhum}), too, receives the revelation in a sanctuary; this is the place where he or she gets into a frenzy (\textit{immahi, immahu}), utters loud cries (\textit{shittessu}), and gives the oracle. When a prophet delivers an oracle outside the sanctuary, at the residence of the royal deputy for instance, he repeats an oracle revealed to him in the sanctuary. For that reason the prophet presents himself as a messenger of the god (\textit{DN tshpurannu}): he transmits the message (\textit{terum}), which he receives at an earlier stage.\textsuperscript{61}


\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 80.

This means that the “house of god” is the most suitable place for these continuing encounters with the divine and the forthcoming revelations. And revelation itself is to a certain extent the standard cultic procedure in the “audience hall” of the Lord. It is performed in the divine palace (since the temple is a deity’s household and palace) whose ceremonial patterns follow the established framework of the private and official life of the royalty (although, metaphysically speaking, the opposite is true).

Therefore, in accordance with the rules of cultic etiquette, the prophet is positioned in front of the hieratic statue as the servant or herald stands before the king. He stands—or rather lies in prostration—and listens. The Mesopotamian hieratic statue—that of the enthroned deity in full regalia, seated in the holy of holies—is not a religious picture, but an icon imbued with a god’s essential powers and endowed with divine radiance. The divine form (\textit{bunnannu}) or image (\textit{salam, salmu}) is not manufactured by human artists, whose hands are symbolically cut off with a tamarisk sword, but ritually conceived by the gods themselves and born in a special workshop, the \textit{bit mummi}.\textsuperscript{62} Yet a clear distinction is maintained between the god and his statue,\textsuperscript{63} which serves as a means to make the deity visible on earth.

In this respect, the entire temple complex functions, metaphorically speaking, like a “nuclear power station” that provides all material and spiritual sustenance for the surrounding land and its inhabitants, viewed respectively as a deity’s private flock and vassals. The animated image is presumed able to perceive what happens in the earthly realm, to reign over the kingdom, communicate through the court messengers...


Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism

place where the divine presence is manifested. For Iamblichus, the Syrian Neoplatonist, divination (mantic) and theurgic ascension (anagoge) coincide. He argues: “Only divine mantic prediction (he theia mantic), therefore, conjoined with the gods, truly imparts to us a share in divine life, partaking as it does in the foreknowledge and the intellucions of the gods, and renders us, in truth, divine” (De myst. 289.3-5).

Hence, the “emptied” prophet is the theurgic receptacle filled with the divine light and life emanating from the seeing and speaking deity. This real or imagined theophany implies the prophet’s annihilation (in the sense of the Sufi jina) and God’s exaltation. As Van der Toorn observes:

There is no room for misunderstanding as to who is speaking. That is why we never find, in any of the reports describing a prophecy delivered in the temple, a phrase identifying the divine speaker. . . . The only time the prophet finds it necessary to say that god so-and-so has sent him (DN ḫaprwni) is when the prophecy is transmitted to someone outside the sanctuary.

Eventually, the Neo-Assyrian prophets themselves became like interiorized and portable sanctuaries, and not bound to the presence of the material divine image in order to establish contact with the gods. Although images and statues were their cultic receptacles and symbolic bodies, these gods at the same time permanently resided in heaven, and consequently, they could also be praised inwardly, within the human body. Hence, a message from the god or a revelation may occur outside the sanctuary. In late antiquity, a similar attitude became prominent among the Neoplatonists, namely,

(apostles) and consume victuals. The mouth washing ritual activates the statue’s noetic and perceptive functions, as Angelika Berlejung remarks: “The ritual thus enabled it to become the parn epiphany of its god and to be a fully interacting and communicating partner for the king, the priests and the faithful.”

When the prophet speaks in the name of a god in the temple, he makes himself an extension of the god whose holy face he contemplates. When he has this privilege, neither is the statue’s face veiled, nor the statue itself hidden behind a screen. In a parallel fashion, the divine Pythagoras used to speak from behind a curtain, thus imitating the oracular statue. It is, therefore, not surprising that Pythagoras “imitated the Orphic mode of writing” and his disciples looked upon all his utterances as the oracles of God.

This encounter with the divine statue (veiled or otherwise) is the ultimate paradigm for mystical longing, contemplation and union by means of liturgical communications, including sound, smell and vision. To Plato’s “madness” corresponds the Orphic “frenzy” (oistros), as Peter Kingsley observes, and, we might add, to the Orphic frenzy corresponds the Mesopotamian prophetic madness (entering into a trance, immahu), experienced in the form of ecstasy before the salna.

The cultic scenario of prophetic frenzy apparently explains why traditional skills of divination should be related to this soul-transforming, illuminating and elevating standing in the

66. Ibid., p. 35 (Iamblichus, Vit. Pyth. 28).
70. Karel van der Toorn, Mesopotamian Prophecy between Immanence and Transcendence: A Comparison of Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian Prophecy, p. 82.
that “the prophetic spirit cannot be confined to one place only, but is present in the whole cosmos being co-extensive with God.”

However, sometimes it seems that only the “professional madmen” can receive such messages and afterwards come to the aid of the king to whom all prophecies within the empire presumably are addressed, or at least indirectly concern. These prophecies promise the intervention of the gods and their mighty support from heaven. As Van der Toorn remarks:

Whereas the Old Babylonian gods secure the success of the king by their presence on earth, as auxiliaries of his army, the Neo-Assyrian deities influence the outcome of political and military conflict by an intervention from heaven. In the Old Babylonian prophecies, the battle in which the gods become involved remains within the human horizon; in the Neo-Assyrian texts, however, the battle takes on cosmic dimensions.

VIII

Let us turn briefly to the Egyptian priestly titles and their functions. In Late Period Egypt, it seems that the rules of purity were imposed upon the population at large, and not only the serving priests and ascetics. Therefore, the Romanized Hermetic description of Egypt as the templum totius mundi—the temple of the whole world—is to a certain extent justified.

Cultic purification is a necessary condition for entering the house of the god (hut-neter), located in the centre of the divine household (per-neter), and becoming the god’s prophet—the royal deputy and “deified” performer of sacramental union. In the temple liturgy, the name of the deity is uttered loudly and then followed by the self-presentation of the entering priest.

The purified priests play the role of both the king and the gods themselves, thus the temple liturgy is turned into a type of theurgy. But neither the priests nor the animated cult images are the gods as they are in their transcendent metaphysical realm. Rather, they serve as vehicles for the divine irradiation, communication and contextual presence: “In the temple liturgy the self-presentation consists mainly of affirmations of the type ‘I am the god such and such,’ usually a divine intermediary such as Thot, Shu, Horus, but also Isis and Nephys, occasionally preceded by the affirmation that the entering priest is indeed pure.”

The Egyptian priests are designated as hemu-neter, “servants of the god”, like the servants of household staff. As Ronald Williams remarks, the title hemu-neter was applied to a grade of temple priest, and was rendered by the Greek term prophets, “the interpreter of the divine will”. More exactly, the higher priests of the Egyptian temple were divided into the categories of hemu-neter (prophet) and uab (priest, the pure one). Consequently, the term prophets denoted a certain particular liturgical function and also served as a designation of the higher priestly class (hieréis), itself divided into five subcategories.

According to John Gec, during the daily temple liturgy the officiant pronounces two statements of identity. While taking the incense burner, he says: “I am a priest and I am pure,” and during the ritual of “undoing the white cloth”, he says: “I am

72. Karel van der Toorn, ibid., p. 84.
a prophet; it is the king who has commanded me to see the god.”

The title hem-neter is conventionally expressed in Greek as prophetes, and uab as hiero. The statements ink uab (I am a priest) and ink hem-neter (I am a prophet) indicate the two main levels of the temple hierarchy. All priests belonged to the uab category because they were the “purified ones”, but some of them were selected or appointed as the prophets—the spokesmen of the gods. As Christiane Zivic-Coche observes:

The clergy of Amun had a “first prophet” who was at the summit of the hierarchy, as well as a second, third, and fourth prophet, each the sole holder of his rank, and then a mass of undifferentiated prophets. In principle, only the first prophet had access to the holy of holies, while the others, accompanied by lector-priests or ritualists, whose specialty was reading the papyrus rolls, stopped at the hall of offerings.

All priests were simply officially appointed substitutes for the pharaoh, or rather, vehicles and instruments that reactivated his delegated powers, like the so-called ushabty figures which enabled the deceased Egyptian to participate in the obligatory liturgical work in the afterlife, instead of otherwise missing it. In this respect, the pharaoh is regarded as virtually the sole and omnipresent Priest of the state. He is the chief Mystagogue of his administrative apparatus and the singular Mystic, contemplating (in principle or in fact) the radiant face of his divine Patron-Father. And why? Because the pharaoh symbolizes and represents humanity as a whole: “The king is the sole terrestrial being qualified to communi-

cate with the gods because... the sacred communication cannot take place between a god and a merely human being, but only between god and god.”

The pharaoh, as the titular son of Ra, is able to delegate his power of cultic communication to the temple staff. In such circumstances all constitutive elements of the teletic performance must be symbolic, since “everything in this sacred game becomes a kind of hieroglyph,” according to Jan Assmann:

It is in the role of the king that the priest is able to assume the role of a god. He plays the god because a cultic spell is divine utterance. The cultic scene, therefore, implies three levels of symbolization: 1) a priest confronting a statue; 2) the king confronting a god; 3) a god (whose role is played by the king represented by the priest) conversing with another god. ... This tripartite system of religious symbolization is reminiscent of Greek mystery religions which are reported to imply the same three kinds of symbolic expression: 1) dromemon (what is to be done: action); 2) deiknumenon (what is to be shown: representation); 3) logomenon (what is to be said: language).

To be initiated into royal service and be offered the status of cultic substitute for the son of Ra means to acquire

79. Ibid., p. 94. The tripartite system, in the Egyptian case, has three modes of symbolic expression 1) an action of the priest offering something; 2) pictorial representation of the pharaoh before the god on temple walls and in ritual papyri; 3) language (liturgical formulae and interpretations). According to Jan Assmann: “The temple rituals of the Late period reflect a full-fledged tradition of ritual exegesis, a culture of interpretation... applied not to texts—as in the more-or-less contemporaneous Alexandrian and Jewish institutions of interpretation—but to pictures. However, this culture of interpretation is anything but a symptom of Hellenistic influence; on the contrary, it is deeply rooted in the Egyptian cult” (Ibid., p. 99).
the position and rank of prophet in the sense of the Graeco-
Egyptian prophetes. Only by being initiated as the servant of
god (hem-neter) can one enter into the temple as the “living
servant of Ra” (hem ankh en ra) in order to see all forms of
the god and all secret things.

The purpose of this initiation (bes) consists in seeing the
deity, that is, in gazing at the image (sekhem, tut) of the god.
The watcher (like the Platonic theos) is to be united with
the god’s ba (manifestation, godlike radiance) in the tremendous
contemplation of the divine truth and beauty.

Likewise in Neoplatonism, the dialectical and telestic becom-
ing the divine (homoiosin) leads to unification (he ar-
rhetos henosis) with the god through the contemplation of
his animated statue, for the telestic art makes the statues in the
here below (ta te de agatmata) to be like the gods by means of
symbols and mysterious theurgic tokens (dai tinos sambolon
kai aporrheton sunthematon: Proclus, In Crat. 51, p.19, 12ff).89

For Proclus, the true divine madness is to be equated with
(or located in) the “one of the soul”, the henadic summit of
one’s psychic and noetic topology by means of which the
theurgist is united with the One.81 Through the divine ma-
naios—be it “prophetic madness according to Truth”, “erotic
madness according to Beauty”, or “poetical madness accord-
ing to divine Symmetry”—the philosopher’s soul is linked to
the gods, and “this form of life is that of the ultimate mystica
experience of the ultimate unification.”82

The threshold of the holy of holies in the Egyptian temple
may be equated with that of the huperouranios topos in Plato’s
Phaedrus, though strictly speaking, the dark inner sanctuary
represents the symbolic mound of noetic “creation” in the
darkness of Nun. The “prophetic” path leading to liturgic
and theurgic unification (later romanticized as a democrat-
ic and personal unio mystica) is closed for ordinary mortals,
but open for the living pharaoh and his initiates—both the
vindicated and blessed dead (maa kheru) and purified living
priests, the formal cultic prototypes of the Platonic philoso-
phers and mystics. Lanny Bell states: “The wooden doors of
the sanctuary shrine, which enclosed the divine image, were
called the ‘doors of heaven’. At their opening, ritual partici-
pants were projected into the realm of the divine.”83 Here, in
the temple’s “interior” (khenu), all the energy of the divine
bau that animates the hieratic statues, reliefs and the entire
temple is concentrated.

Some nineteenth century scholars may be wrong in imag-
ing the prophet (first of all, the Jewish political moralist
and inspired demagogue) as “an exceptional individual and a
religious genius”,84 that is, an extraordinary personality who
has miraculous inner experiences. In most cases, however, an-
cient “prophethood” is more like a job appointment—either
by the king, or by the patron deity—for the official temple
ritual performance and the royal court service. Be that as it
may, the prophet (although de jure only a humble servant)
had an opportunity (or rather, a job requirement) to visit the
divine house and see its amazing beauties, or even encounter
and glimpse the face of the god himself.

IX

Just as the ancient Near Eastern conception of “prophecy”
and “prophethood” (often presented as an instrumental so-
cio-political construct with distinctive literary genres and so-
teriological implications) may mean different things in dif-

---

different contexts, so Orpheus may be "all things to all men", according to the deliberately disorienting assertion made by M.L. West, for whom there is only Orphic literature, not Orphism or the Orphics.\textsuperscript{55} Standing as a great academic shaman of an astonishing modern Western insanity as regards the Orphic \textit{bakhëesia}, West can speak only about "the fashion for claiming Orpheus as an authority", since "the history of Orphism is the history of that fashion."\textsuperscript{56}

Although a figure of myth and the preferred name for metaphysical \textit{auctoritas} in telestic and esoteric matters, Orpheus nonetheless appears as a prophet and mystagogue, presumably the "first" to reveal the meaning of the mysteries and rituals of initiation (\textit{telestai}). Since Orphism is an ascetic and telestic way of life, W.K.C. Guthrie surmises that Orpheus did not have a new and entirely distinct species of religion to offer, but rather an esoteric modification and reinterpretation of traditional mythologies, a reformation of Dionysiac energy in the direction of Apollonian sanity: "Those who found it congenial might take him for their prophet, live the Orphic life and call themselves Orphics."\textsuperscript{57}

Famous for his charms and incantations (\textit{pharmaka}, \textit{epodia}), Orpheus appears in countless legendary stories as the son of the solar Apollo and the muse Calliope or as a devoted worshipper of Apollo. Accordingly, Orpheus makes Helios the same as Apollo and Dionysus, though as a giver of oracles and a prophet he always was "companion of Apollo" (\textit{Apollo\n\nlonos hetairion}).\textsuperscript{58} Subsequently, Dionysus sent the Macedonians against him and he was torn to pieces like the Egyptian Osiris.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid}., p. 3.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 42.

In this respect, however, it needs to be remembered that the "much-labored contrast" between Dionysian and Apollonian dimensions in ancient Mediterranean culture "belongs to German speculation", as A.H. Armstrong rightly observes, rather than to the actual realm of Hellenic piety.\textsuperscript{59}

The philosophical "ecstasy" may be sober and passionless, and the utmost "madness" like a supra-noetic metaphysical silence. In a certain sense, the prophetic and poetic frenzy somewhat resembles the epistemic and hermeneutic illumination mediated by the holy light of myths and symbols. These myths—Orphic, Hesiodic and Homeric—may cause a state of Bacchic ecstasy because of their therapeutic quality.\textsuperscript{60} Therefore, Proclus prays to the Muses that they should bring him to ecstasy through the noetic myths of the sages (\textit{noe\n\noiros me tophon bakhëesiate munthoi: Hymns 3.11}). And he turns to Athena, the sober patroness of Platonic philosophy, saying: "Give my soul holy light from your sacred myths and wisdom and lore" (\textit{Hymns 7.33f}).\textsuperscript{61}

As the paradigmatic lyre player and liturgical singer, Orpheus was also a \textit{theologos} and \textit{theurgos} of sorts. According to some versions of his death, Orpheus was a victim of a thunderbolt from Zeus, since, in a similar way as Prometheus, he taught men things unknown to them before, expounding the mysteries of the soul's descent and ascent.

The lyre and the decapitated head of the murdered Orpheus were thrown into a river and floated across to the island of Lesbos. The temple of Bacchus (the Orphic Dionysus) was built at the spot where the singing and prophesying head of Orpheus was buried. The miraculous lyre had been dedicated at the temple of Apollo, and the singing head became famous as a giver of oracles and prophecies.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} R M. van den Berg, \textit{Proclus' Hymns}, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 100.
\textsuperscript{62} W. K. C. Guthrie, \textit{Orpheus and Greek Religion}, p 35.
And so, is Orpheus a "prophet" in the trivial sense of a person (or a symbol) who foretells the future, or in the sense of the theological administrator and authority in covenants and treaties of the Israelite politico-military enterprises? In both cases, prophecy is an integral part of the divination whose fundamental cosmological premises and logic are based on the ancient ideology of Near Eastern royalty. Consequently, prophecy is a form of divination along with dreams and visions, as Nissinen indicates: “In the ancient Near East ... the primary function of all divination was ... the conviction of the identity, capacity and legitimacy of the ruler and the justification and limitation of his ... power, based on the communication between the ruler and the god(s).”

Nissinen argues that any definition of prophecy (not just in the widespread cases of literary manifestos and fictions) is a scholarly construct. And a written prophecy is always a scribed construct. The very notion of the human being able to function as a substitute for the animated and speaking divine statue or as an autonomous mouthpiece of the deity is the outcome of particular socio-historical forms and versions of the covenantal patronship. Nissinen writes:

According to Liddel and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon, propheteia is equivalent to the “gift of interpreting the will of gods” and propheteuo to being an “interpreter of the gods”, whereas prophetes is “one who speaks for a God and interprets his will to man”, or, generally, an “interpreter”. ... If the word “prophecy”, then, can be agreed to denote primarily the activity of transmitting and interpreting the divine will, it can be used as a general concept of related activities in the ancient

X

According to the Hellenic tradition, Pythagoras published his writings in the name of Orpheus. Moreover, like the Orphic initiate, Pythagoras has descended to Hades and returned, coming back through the Delphic sanctuary. Therefore Kingsley surmises that Orpheus, as the inspired mystagogue, “would seem originally to have had the power to fetch the dead back to life”, or rather, to lead the dead (meaning the transformed initiates) “into the day of the noetic life of Atum-Ra”, or even to “the primeval time before there was any duality”. This is a state where Atum, instead of having two eyes (like the paradigmatic Pythagorean dyad), is one-eyed. But the prevailing religious and moral attitudes of the Greeks presumably suppressed Orpheus’ initial success and turned it into failure.

Likewise, the (elletu) Ishtar, the prototype of the Orphic Persephone, elevates the soul and reintegrates it into the “Pythagorean” deced of the Assyrian sacred tree. This reintegration is analogous to the baka of the Sufis. Being the image of God (like the macrocosmic fullness of the noetic cosmos, the collective of demiurgic archetypes) and the image of the perfect man (elletu gitmatu, the microcosmic fullness of the king initiate-philosopher as a son of God), it is the noetic constellation of divine attributes. The descent and ascent of Ishtar

94. Ibid., p. 23.
95. Ibid., pp. 19 & 20.
had outlined the way for salvation, depicted in terms of the body-like royal tree and the seven-stepped zigurat tower.  
And the “numerical” sacred tree of Ishtar itself can be viewed as a graphic representation of both the divine council (ilani rabut) and “cosmic man” as “the human incarnation of the almighty God, Ashur”.  

According to the ritualized requirement of archetypal auctoritas, the early Pythagoreans used to attribute to the prophont Orpheus their own works on the soul’s soteria (salvation), focused on the figure and fate of Persephone, analogous to the Babylonian and Assyrian Ishtar. And Plato allegedly paraphrased Orpheus and the Orphic literature throughout, according to Olympiodorus’ remark: pantachou gar ho Platon parodei to Orpheos, “Plato paraphrases Orpheus everywhere” (In Phaed. 10.3.13). In this respect, Plato simply reshapes and rationalizes the mythical and religious ideas of esoteric Orphism and its Bacchic mysteries of Dionysus. Therefore, Proclus is not so much exaggerating when he claims that Plato received his knowledge of divine matters from Pythagorean and Orphic writings: ek te ton Puthagoreion kai ton Orphikon grammaton (Plat. Theol. 1.5; In Tim. III.160.17-161.6).  

Like Orpheus, Plato’s Socrates is a servant of Apollo, maintaining that the best music is philosophy. Hence, philosophical talk is analogous to the prophetic song of Orpheus or the theological hymn of “Apollo’s philosophical swan who sings that this life is a prelude to a disincarnate afterlife”.  
The Orphic myth (or the philosophical Platonic myth) can serve us if we obey it, following the upper road, and if we regard it as a model for present behaviour in accordance with the revealed knowledge of the afterlife. This knowledge is about the soul’s judgement and the very depths of Duat, the Osirian netherworld, where Ra and Osiris unite at the deepest point in the nocturnal journey of the Egyptian solar barque. Thoth is seated in front of the barque, attending to the Eye of Horus and healing it. And the solar barque itself is transformed into a holy serpent “whose fiery breath pierces a pathway through the otherwise impenetrable gloom”.  
As Kathryn Morgan relates: “The myth teaches us that we must try to retain as much memory of the world beyond as possible.”  

Accordingly, Pythagoras worships Apollo-Helios (the Sun as an icon of the divine Intellect) because of knowledge acquired in the dark Osirian underworld. Pythagoras emerged from Persephone’s realm as an immortalized hierophant of Orpheus, the revealer of the Pythagorean “holy sacraments”. In sum, he is like Dionysus restored and Osiris united with Ra in the netherworld, because the true philosopher (and the Egyptian royal initiate) is the “deceased” who “sees the god and knows his secret”. He is “dead” to the illusory world of impermanence, corruption and ignorance. Hence, the Orphico-Platonic philosopher contemplates the eternal Ideas and is himself mingled with the gods. As Erik Hornung observes:

Having become a god, the deceased resides where the gods reside and may encounter them face to face. While still on earth the gods are approached only indirectly, through images and symbols. One such symbol is the sun, but only in

---

98. Simo Parpola, Assyrian Prophecies, p. XCV.
100 Peter Kingsley, ibid., p. 131.
103. Kathryn A. Morgan, ibid., p. 209.
the depths of the underworld can humans actually meet the sun in person.105

XI

In certain traditional accounts, Orpheus is depicted as the grandson of the king Charops, to whom Dionysus—when invading Europe from Asia—has given the kingdom and has taught the mystic rites of initiation related to the later mysteries of Eleusis. Orpheus himself almost merged with the lyre-playing god Apollo, and consequently he was able to charm all nature and tame the wildest of beasts with his playing and singing—his "sacred incantations" (hieron epaúdon) and prayers (euchai). Birds and animals came to hear Orpheus' music, and even trees were calmed.

One should remember that dancing and flute or lyre music were traditional parts of the sacrificial cult of Apollo, and these Apollonian musical rituals held a privileged place in ancient Hellenic religion. According to Johannes Quasten:

Orpheus was considered by the ancient world to be the representative of cultic music. . . . Music had the same character of epiclisis. It was supposed to "call down" the good gods . . . because song and music increased the efficacy of the epiclisis the words of epiclisis were nearly always sung to instrumental accompaniment. Thus the Dionysian fellowship used the so-called hymnet kletikoi of women in order to obtain the appearance of their god.106

The practice of Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy is itself tantamount to the singing of rationally composed ana-

gogic hymns, thus imitating Apollo, the Leader of the Muses. The Muses sometimes are equated with the anagogon phos, the elevating light that kindles the soul with anagogon pur, the upward-leading fire. For Proclus, the prayer-like hymns are "theurgical instruments,"107 and "human philosophy is an imitation of Apollo's hymns."108

Orpheus, as the paradigmatic itinerant seer, is credited for the ability to pacify through his music, to heal, to foretell the future and interpret the past, as well as shape the traditions of the gods— theology in the form of myths, spells and epic songs. Arguing that both Thales' and Orpheus' music worked magic, Neta Ronen attributes special healing powers to the song of Orpheus as it is described by Apollonius Rhodius. Presumably, the theogony which he performed itself had the power to restore cosmic and social harmony.109

Plato's dialogues themselves may be viewed as a product of "musical madness", constructed following the rules of dialectical reasoning and logic. Hence, philosophy, as an artful strategy of recollection and restoration of vision, "is related to the performance arts of dancing and love poetry".110

Both philosophical dialectical and esoterically interpreted myth produce the logos which is an image of the higher noetic and henadic reality. This reality itself is beyond the adequate capture either by mythos or by logos, each of which are by degrees representations—plausible (eikos) perhaps, but ultimately open to the risk of deception or misinterpretation. Likewise, and with a similar imaginative splendour, the ineffable essence of wisdom (if not of being) may be revealed by the cosmic choreography and theurgic music of the calendrical festivals and seasons. This kind of telestic dance-theatre

105. Ibid., p. 110.
107. R.M. van den Berg, Proclus' Hymns, p. 33.
108. Ibid., p. 23.
110. Kathryn A. Morgan, Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato, p. 235.
is established for the sake of the circular descent and ascent, manifestation and the return to the source. According to Gregory Shaw:

Musical theurgy was a form of anamnesis that awakened the soul to its celestial identity with the gods. . . . Musical theurgy came from the gods and gave the soul direct contact with them. . . . According to Iamblichus, Pythagoras was the first composer of this analogic music. . . . The sacred names and incantations used in theurgic invocations also originated from the gods, and Iamblichus says the Egyptian prophet Bitys revealed “the name of the god that pervades the entire cosmos” (De myster. 268.2-3). . . . For Iamblichus the god whose “name” pervaded the cosmos was Helios. . . . Man’s prayers must therefore be presented to Helios through the many zodiacal schemata that the god assumes. Iamblichus says: “The Egyptians employ these sorts of prayers to Helios not only in their visions but also in their more ordinary prayers that have this same kind of meaning, and they are offered to God according to this symbolic mystagogy” (De myster. 254 8-10). 111

In the later Pythagorean milieu, the seven strings of Orpheus’ lyre are connected with the seven circles of heaven, suggesting that “the souls need the cithara in order to ascend.” 112 The theory of the seven vowels and the seven-string cosmic lyre, related to the different planets, colours, sounds and the seasonal rotation of the year, is perhaps of Babylonian origin. It is also related to Egypt as the ultimate source of the main (or at least initial) esoteric principles of esoteric Orphic lore.

The use of lyre or cithara music during the rites of ascension is attested along with the mantric intoning of the seven vowels that allegedly enabled the soul to escape the darkness of the irrational lower existence and return to the divine realm from which it initially descended. The theurgic way of the Orphic bakheia (initiation, recollection, reintegration, elevation to the solar nectic realm) is provided for the Orphic and Bacchic initiates (orphikos, bakheos), those who looked to Orpheus as their prophet and practised bios Orphikos or bios Puthagorikos.

The Egyptian provenance of this purificatory way of life (bios)—and here it is only the archetypal ideal, not the actual transmission that matters—is affirmed by Herodotus when he speaks about the Egyptian custom of wearing linen tunics: “They agree in this with the observances which are called Orphic and Bacchic, but are in fact Egyptian and Pythagorean” (Hist. 2.81). 113

Burkert also recognized that although Orpheus wove together and melded different Near Eastern traditions (Assyrian, Hurrite-Hittite), the Egyptian metaphysical and cultic tradition is used most of all. 114 It is evident that not only Egyptian cosmogonies, but also the royal paths of salvation—popularized through the temple initiations, hermeneutical instructions and educational programmes related to the Egyptian Book of the Dead—are reshaped and reused, though for the Greek audience the Egyptian illustrations “seem to be even more suggestive than the Egyptian formulas”. 115

XII

The so-called Orphic and Pythagorean spiritual revolution consists in a reversion of the traditional Greek view, namely, that psuche is a simulacrum (eidos) of the mortal body. The Orphic and pro-Egyptian Dionysiac-Osirian esoterism now regards the living body as an illusion and transitory (al-
beit complex and complicated) image of the immortal soul, whose purification may be described as separation from the body (soma, corpse) by recollection (anamnesis), asceticism (turning away from the flux of becoming, la genomena, and from its unreliable images), and philosophical contemplation (theoria) of intelligible principles.

In short, the prospect of personal immortality in the Egyptian fashion and promotion of "scientific knowledge" (episteme) as the chief soteriological power are inseparable from their initial Orphico-Pythagorean context. Though "the idea of proof is introduced as a rhetorical device,"118 not related with theoria as a spectacle of the divine epiphany, science and logic can claim to constitute the salvation of its practitioners only when based on the premise of the mathematical nature of the demiurgic world-construction.

The "scientific" soteriology of Plato, itself based on the Pythagorean and Sophistic episteme, is a domain of a small elite group whose critical reflections and ironic speculations in relation to the central body of political orthodoxy and the Sophistic style of education are regarded as an almost gnostic-like means of "dialectical salvation". Yehuda Elkana explains:

For instance, the road to the Pythagorean heaven leads through the well-defined corpus of the geometrical proof. This is the Pythagorean soteriology. . . . The carriers of the transcendental vision are small groups of intellectuals, often marginal to society, who contemplate the alternative views of the world. . . . The moment when the logos—which is not bestowed upon every person in the same degree . . .—is becoming the main source of knowledge, then the source of knowledge becomes elitist and authoritarian by nature. Consequently, it is not surprising that the fields that were built upon the Parmenidean method, that is, by strict deductions—


117 Ibid., pp. 43, 47 & 55.

Since the Homeric values of body-life and shadow or simulacrum-like soul are radically inverted by their esoteric opponents, what survives now is the soul understood as a manifestation (ba in the Egyptian Ramesside theology)119 of the divine spirit—be it called daimon or theos. The soul as the winged ba (the breath and living image of Amun) alone is from the gods. Therefore, "what survives is an image of life (eidolon aionos), which sleeps during normal bodily consciousness but wakes up while the body sleeps and foresees future events in prophetic dreams."118

The soul as a sort of fallen daimon, or as a Dionysian divine spark, is buried in a tomb-like material body, thus entering the cosmic cycle of elemental transformation. Hence, the soul is the pre-existing and immortal knowing subject. It passes through a number of incarnations in a cyclical pattern, and these bodily incarnations may be regarded as a sort of punishment, ordeal, or simply viewed as a result of forgetfulness, ignorance and play.

Therefore, the ultimate aim of the soul is freedom from the wheel of terrestrial punishment following the soteriological formula bios-thanatos-bios (life-death-life), which shows the way of entering the eternal and poetic "day" of Ra or Helios. This freedom implies the restoration of one's initial divine
identity. The deliverance (thesis) is performed by Dionysus Bakchos through specific cathartic rituals; and Persephone must decide whether those purified souls that have paid the penalty for their wrongful deeds may be sent to the "seats of the blessed" (hedras eis euhagion). The soul's ultimate goal is its final liberation from the painful cycle of reincarnation, thus arriving "at the victor's crown with swift feet" and ending as god instead of mortal.

As Bartel Poortman observes, it is the Orphico-Pythagorean tradition that Socrates has in mind when he introduces the theory of recollection (anamnesis), experienced by certain divinely inspired seers and poets, and based on the clear separation of the immortal soul and mortal body:

This ontological dualism goes hand in hand with epistemological dualism. There are two different states of knowing: having the Forms for its objects, psyche's state is episteme; having the aistheta for its objects, the senses' state of knowing is doxa. The fact of having the Forms as objects of knowledge implies that psyche is immortal. This is in line with the principle known from the Presocratic "theory of knowledge" similia similibus cognoscuntur: the Forms are imperishable, therefore the subject knowing them must be imperishable.

This subject contemplates the Forms like the temple prophētes contemplates the animated hieratic statues of the Egyptian gods. His own eye (irēt) is awakened to light and related to the active aspect (iru, "that which acts") of the visible manifestation of the deity through the shining light. So the ability of the cult statue (the tut of Amun, for example) to act (irēt) is a response to the ritual action, equated with the Eye of Horus and performed by the priest. The cobra-like uraeus of the animated statue is identified with the solar Eye of the divine self-consciousness and with maat (truth, right proportion and justice). Even the efficiens "refers to himself as a ba and as the goddess Sekhmet" at the point when he is ready to embrace the statue.

The Platonic subject imagines the vision of these Forms by himself when he is unrestricted by a mortal body, that is, either after physical death, or whilst living in the body and "separation" is accomplished by the Osirian initiation or by a kind of philosophical contemplation (theoria). This telestic or dialectical "separation" is regarded as essentially an intellectual (noetic) passage. It is like one's entering the solar barque of Ra, based on the ontological and epistemological premise that embodied cognition mirrors disembodied cognition, or rather divine intellection. Consequently, only when separated from our mortal bodies and elevated to the stars (the heradic archetypes) do we regain our true divine identity, our real being and "gnostic immortality", being in an ideal cognitional (or rather contemplative) state of knowledge (episteme).

Since the ideal Platonic knower is the disembodied soul, analogous to the Egyptian ba turned into the noetic akh, Plato's Socrates elaborates an eschatological Orphic myth of the blessed afterlife after separation of body and soul and "the identification of the person with the latter", for "it is the state of the latter that is judged by the gods." Therefore, Lloyd Gerson argues: "For Plato, embodied persons are the only

---


121 Ibid., p. 254.


sorts of images that can reflexively recognize their own relatively inferior states as images and strive to transform themselves into their own ideal.\textsuperscript{125} Hence, philosophers "long to die" and strive to transform themselves into the akhu—the noetic spirits of light that participate in the Sun god's resurrection and share "the triumph of Ra".\textsuperscript{126} They stipulate this metaphorical and literal "separation" by means of a certain epistemological initiation, since the philosopher's soul "attains truth" by "reasoning" (to logizesthai: Phaed. 65b.9).

\textbf{XIII}

The impure cannot conjoin with the pure, since the latter is without impurity. Accordingly, either wisdom (phronesis) and knowledge (episteme) are nowhere to be gained, or else it is for the dead, for the Egyptian maa kheru who sees the god (Osiris-Ra) and knows his secret by undergoing a symbolic death: "He becomes an initiate, as in the later mystery cults that derive many of their notions from ancient Egyptian concepts of death and the hereafter."\textsuperscript{127}

In addition, all his members (like the parts of the restored Eye of Horus) are equated with deities and thereby constructed as an ideal icon, as an ideal statue-like image of Osiris, thus becoming entirely a god. According to Hornung, although the term akhu is written with the hieroglyph of a crested ibis (ibis comata, the sign of Thoth, whose telestic wisdom includes the ability to use the transformative heka power, heka

being the ba of Ra), the akhu is usually depicted not as a bird, but as a mummy, the ideal sah-body, tantamount to one's archetypal eidos made visible. Hornung states:

A person can become an akhu only after death, and descriptions of the afterlife differentiate clearly between akhs, the blessed dead and those dead persons who have been judged and condemned. Related to the Egyptian verb meaning "to illuminate", the term akhu is usually translated as "transfigured one", for it is through a process of ritual transfigurations that the deceased becomes an akhu.\textsuperscript{128}

In this way the knower becomes what he knows, and is transformed into the noetic light whose idealized bodily image (the statue-sanctuary) adequately reflects a particular divine Form. The body of the transformed initiate, even before his physical passing away, is tantamount to the Osiran sah-body (mummy), to the sunetnma-like tomb, and able to serve as a receptacle for the divine ba. Understood in this sense, the tomb is analogous to the womb-like primaeval mound of Heliopolis, and the philosopher inside this alchemical tomb (like Phanes inside the cosmic egg) is the vehicle of transformation, of one's own turning into the god-like akhu. Eventually, it means becoming not what one is not, but rather restoring one's real noetic identity by moving from image to reality, from the sensible things that are "unlike" (anomoion) to their paradigmatic spiritual "likeness". Therefore, Gerson writes:

---

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., p. 4.


\textsuperscript{127} Erik Hornung, Idea into Image: Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought, p. 112.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., p. 184.
recognition is identical to the construction of an ideal self in so far as that is possible for the embodied person.\textsuperscript{129}

According to Plato, only the rational part of the soul (logistikon) sees the Ideas, and as a result, only this part of the soul is immortal. In the Phaedrus myth, it is represented by the charioteer able to contemplate and be nourished by the Parmenidean noetic world which alone “really and truly is”.

Plato’s theory of the soul’s immortality, of its reincarnation through the cosmic cycle of becoming and its ultimate salvation by the means of recollection and dialectical ascent, is an inseparable part of his erotic philosophia. The “lover of wisdom” tries to imitate (mimeisathai) the Forms, thus making himself a likeness of them, “realizing one’s nature by actually identifying with the immaterial”.\textsuperscript{130} By becoming like the noetic eidos, he becomes one out of the many. For Plato, this process consequently:

... generally takes 10,000 years before psyche has regrown its wings and may return to its heavenly home. The philosopher, however, is in an exceptional position: in his case it takes 3,000 years. After every thousand years there is to be a new reincarnation, partly determined by lot, partly by choice. The period between a life and a new incarnation is the time to be punished or rewarded. The first incarnation will be in a human body; subsequent incarnations may be in animal bodies. The philosopher’s cycle is completed sooner because his life is dominated by a constant devotion to the Forms;... only the philosopher’s psyche regrows its wings.\textsuperscript{131}

This Platonic “science” of transmigration (metoikesis) and metempsychosis is typically out of favour with modern schol-
The mystic opportunity to reach the interior divine presence—directly and immediately—is tantamount to the miraculous leap beyond the macrocosmic circle of ouranos. This is an exceptional release before the ending of the cosmic cycle and in spite of the rules of necessity. According to Peter Manchester:

The question shifted from that of one’s status among the dead, in an afterlife that was real in the same way as successive cycles of Eternal Return, to that of whether one had awakened, in this life, to a transcending spiritual and interior life that knows its own eternity already and in death is released from the cycle of birth and death and from worldly existence altogether.134

The Orphic cult (telete), with all its prominent purifications and initiations, was far more private and esoteric than the Hellenic public festivals and mysteries, politically and spiritually centred around the Delphic sanctuary. The new model of post-Homeric political culture sharply distinguished public life from private life, viewing public life as superior, more rational and more important.135 Since the cosmos, and likewise ordered human society, were both rationalized in various ways, the inner religious life (suddenly discovered as a path of release) became associated with the private sphere and marginal esoteric movements. Orpheus and Pythagoras in varying degrees responded to the demand for logical thought. Both these mystagogues became much more symb-


136. Ibid., p. 9.
137. K. Corrigan, Body and Soul in Ancient Religious Experience, p. 374
Those initiates (mustai) who called themselves bakchoi looked to Orpheus as their prophet, depicting him as sent by the deity as a revealer of truth about the soul, life after death, and salvation. Hence, Orpheus was viewed as the founder of the soteriological rites (teleiai) of Dionysus Bakchois (who sends his teletic mania and uninges the supplicants into madness) and Dionysus Lusios (who frees them from madness and transmigration). These hûsioi teletai of Bakchios are centred on purification as an art of “separation”. 138

West assumes that the Bacchic and Pythagorean Orphica probably represent two parallel developments from a common field of origin. At the same time he presupposes a conceptual link between Pherecydes of Syros (the famous seer who promulgated the theory of metempsychosis and, allegedly, brought together the poems of Orpheus) and Pythagoras. 139

The Orphic doctrines are fragmentarily attested by the golden leaves and plates that bear testimony of the Orphic preparation for death, analogous to the paideia provided by the Egyptian officiants of the House of Life (per ankh), those who composed, recited and ritually performed the Book of the Dead (pert em hru). In Egypt, death is regarded as a way to real life in the realm of akh.

Like the nocturnal Ra, the deceased “philosopher-king” is transformed into a scarab and a child encircled by the ouroboric serpent “who burns millions”. The Egyptian-Hermetic illumination-regeneration “appears as the mystery which saves”, and its central motif consists in the noetic vision, “fol-

dowing an ancient model of cosmic journey which is, actually, an interior journey”. 140

According to the Egyptians, both humans and gods originate in the all-embracing deity, the One Alone, though the gods issue from Atum’s sweat and humans from his tears. As Assmann observes, these primacal “humans” are probably referred to in a way that means “clients”, that is, those who at the beginning appear as the community of the noetic flock, the primordial “saints” (the Sufi awliya). In this sense, they are “contemplators”, “knowers”, “philosophers” here below as Atum-Ra is above, after heaven is raised up on high (at the end of a golden age) and the gods are separated from fallen humanity. 141

As the embodied beings whose telos is to restore the perfect state of solar contemplation, humans are “braural creatures” 142 for whose sake the world was created as the theurgic theatre of the divine Eye. The creation is accomplished (or rather constantly “performed”) by the thinking heart (intellect), and then by the speaking tongue (logos) and by writing or drawing (ta hierogrammate, the writing of divine speech: sesh en medu neter). According to Assmann:

Writing only carries out what is already implicit in the structure of reality. This structure is “hieroglyphic”. It is a kind of Platonism. Plato interprets the visible world as the infinite material impression of a finite set of immaterial ideas. The Egyptians interpreted the visible world as a kind of infinitely ongoing series production which very faithfully follows an

139 M. L. West, The Orphic Poems, pp. 18-20.
142 Ibid., p. 169.
original finite set of types or models. And this same set is also represented by the hieroglyphic system.\textsuperscript{143}

To be restored as the hieroglyph of the Eye means to enter the solar barque of Ra and join his all-embracing noetic contemplation by means of the life-giving rays. The Orphic text on the golden tablet from the grave of Thessalian Petroporos conveys the similar claim: “Now you have died and now you have come into being, O thrice happy one, on this same day. Tell Persephone that Bakaion has himself set you free.”\textsuperscript{144}

The blessed deceased emerges into the realm of divine being when his mortal body passes away. He is invited to the holy symposium of the gods in order to enjoy “eternal drunkenness”, according to a mocking remark made by Plato (Rep. 363cd).\textsuperscript{145} This “drunkenness” in the company of the re-divinised “Orphic saints” is, in fact, tantamount to the noetic bliss of the Osiran olblos (the “blessed ones”), those who received “a gift of Memory” (Mnemosyne doron). The blessed ones appear in the form of akh in the court of Ra, where Setne’s ba is going in hope “to see the future” and “get information from the gods”.\textsuperscript{146}

The Egyptian goddess Hathor initiates the ascent to heaven and is depicted as “rising in turquoise from the eastern horizon” (CT 486).\textsuperscript{147} Hathor (the “House of Horus”) is the goddess of ecstatic drunkenness, dance and music. But her essential hypostasis is the fiery Eye of Ra. She is the Iret-Eye that “acts as the agent of the god’s activity”.\textsuperscript{148} The deceased

or the initiate—the “one who knows things” (rekh (a)chet), the sage (remet-rekh)—is equated not only with Osiris, but also with Hathor, thus immortalised as the “solar gaze” and the fiery beauty (nefer) of truth (maat).

XV

In Greece, Orpheus, Linus, Musaeus and other “revealers of mysteries” proclaim the programme of salvation, presenting Persephone-Kore and Dionysus, for instance, as savours of mankind. This “Greece” of Orpheus is not the scholarly construct that depicts the eulogised tiny city-state of Athens—incomparable with either the highly bureaucratised state of Late Period Egypt\textsuperscript{149} or with the Neo-Assyrian cosmopolis and its Persian imitations. Rather, Orpheus belonged to the world of wandering demenourgoi—the performers of purifications (katharmoi) and initiations (teleiai), the seers, singers and healers able to discover the “ancient guilt” (palaios memno). As Burkert relates:

Orphic anthropogony . . . has the story of the most ancient and most general kind of memnon inherent in man as such, the “ancient grief of Persephone” in the words of Pindar . . . The myth, especially when combined with the doctrine of transmigration and the ensuing ascetic life-style, could have been the basis for a religion of salvation.\textsuperscript{150}

The seers and magicians claimed to be able to restore the imagined ideal state of harmonia, governed by the “universal
law”, the Vedic rta, as “the unifying principle which animates the parts into a single cosmic machine”\textsuperscript{153} like the animated “chariot of truth” (harma dikes; Sanskrit ratham riasya) drawn by a pair of horses—the divine twins.

Similarly, Parmenides speaks about the axe of the chariot on which he rides. He mentions the “rounded wheels” (kuklai), or the “whirling wheels” that can bring him to the great open threshold where the Heliaides hourai, daughters of the Sun, hasten to the light revealed through the Eye’s rounded pupil. Hence, the symbol of helios (of the Egyptian aten, viewed as egg of the primaeval fire) is the rounded sound-like image of kosmos noetos, the object of contemplation and theurgic glorification for the Thothian apes of the Sun, the Eastern bau: “Their importance lies in the fact that they represent the divine community of worshippers of the sun god, whose ranks the sun priest joins with his hymn. By praying to the sun he becomes one of them.”\textsuperscript{153}

Orpheus, as the archetypal singer, prophet, priest and healer, reconciles the one and the many with his “prophetic lyre” and through the song of harmony (tes harmonias te ode). The later Byzantine tradition describes the divine Logos as producing a kind of miraculous music which, by means of “the iunx of resonance” (iunx meaning both the iunx-bird and the magic iunx-wheel),\textsuperscript{153} has the ability to charm (katakelon) and attract (methelkomenos) the human soul.\textsuperscript{154} These iunxes (plural of iunx), sometimes referred to as “tongues of the gods”, are the four-spoked wheels of brass, iron or gold, hanging from the ceilings of temples and capable of producing a seductive sound like that of the Sirens. As a result, they functioned as instruments of the divine voice, an important aspect in theurgy (viewed by Sarah Johnston as “a form of Platonic mysticism”): “The sounds produced by iunx wheels by the theurgists were understood to affect and influence not only individuals and objects on earth, but the heavenly bodies as well.”\textsuperscript{155}

Likewise, Orpheus’ music and voice may stir human beings, animals, trees, stones, and even the gods—Persephone herself is charmed, and therefore allows him to bring up his dead wife from Hades. The enchanting Orphic song is somewhat analogous to the wind sound produced by an iunx-wheel: its peitho dalia—the charmed power of persuasion and seduction that tricks\textsuperscript{156}—belongs to Orpheus’ divine instrument, his lyre. Nicomachus of Gerasa, the Neopythagorean scholar, describes it as follows:

Hermes invented the lyre from the tortoise-shell, and providing it with seven strings, handed down the art of lyre-playing to Orpheus. And Orpheus taught Thamyris and Linus. Linus taught Hercules, by whom he was killed. He also taught Amphion, the Theban, who built Thebes with seven gates after the seven strings of the lyre. When Orpheus was killed by the Thracian women, his lyre was thrown into the sea and was cast up in the city of Andissa in Lesbos. Fishermen found it and carried it to Terpander and he took it to Egypt.\textsuperscript{157}

In the Orphico-Pythagorean milieu, mouike, mantike and iatrike (music, divination and medicine) are united in the contemplative harmony of the “yoking” and “joining” succession.


\textsuperscript{154} Jan Assmann, Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom, p. 44.


\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., p. 182.
of order—in Sanskrit terms, yoga and yuj—that “describe the harmonic connection of string to instrument” and “the weapon’s changing harmonic states”.158

XVI

The extension of Ananke’s arms throughout the entire universe is like the vastness of Nut-Hathor’s cosmic body. In one of the numerous late Orphic cosmogonies, the golden chain derived from an allegorical interpretation of Iliad 8.19 illustrates the divine unity of the cosmos. Zeus himself suffuses all things and makes them one. As a short but impressive verse of the Orphic theological hymn testifies: “One Zeus, one Hades, one Helios, one Dionysus.”159

Damascius cites Linus (the mythical singer and hierophant, presumed to be the son of the Muse Urania) and Pythagoras “for the doctrine that everything is one”.160 The lament of Linus’ poem, as it is quoted by Stobaeus, runs as follows:

So through discord all things are steered through all. From the whole are all things, all things from a whole, all things are one, each part of all, all in one;
For from a single whole all these things came,
And from them in due time will one return,
That’s ever one and many. . .
Often the same will be again, no end will limit them, ever limited. . .
For so undying death invests all things,
All dies that’s mortal, but the substrate was
And is immortal ever, fashioned thus,

158. John Curtis Franklin, Harmony in Greek and Indo-Iranian Cosmology, p 8
160. Ibid., p. 61.

Yet with strange images and varied form
Will change and vanish from the sight of all.161

Some Orphic theological narratives and “holy oracles” of Night provide a mythical prototype for the philosophical vision of Parmenides and Empedocles. But Plato is scarcely concerned to do justice to Orpheus and other ancient “theologians”, such as Musaeus and Epimenides, “who derive everything from Night”.162

Since the ultimate limit is akin to limitless transcendence, the darkness of the Orphic Night and the primaeval ocean of the Heliopolitan theogony are symbolic descriptions of what is supra-noetic, ineffable, formless and unstructured, out of which the light-like noetic structure appears as the archetypal triad of Atum, Shu and Tefnut. According to Egyptian traditional accounts, “the world emerges from a primeval darkness (kekau semau) and a primeval flood (nun). . . In sum, the monotheism of the Egyptians consists in the belief that in the beginning the divine was one, and that in the cosmogony that was the work of the one, the one became many.”163

It seems that Plato, as the dialectician of the one and the many, is just taking what he wants from Orpheus and certain limited Egyptian sources. Although Plato’s dependence on the Night’s prophets and Phanes’ “logicians” is deliberately concealed, Plato’s main philosophical doctrine is based on that of Parmenides; and Parmenides himself, in fact, depends on the Orphic myth. Even more, Parmenides (as a priest involved in the service of Apollo) and also the entire Velian school of philosophy, which is “plainly rooted in mysticism—it is rooted, in fact, in Parmenides’ own chariot-experience, which leads . . . to the great Goddess’ epiphany.”164

161. Ibid., p. 57
162. Ibid., p. 116
The chariot journey may be a literary and telcistic *topos*, of course, but this kind of metaphysical ascent (*anagoge*) is, moreover, the powerful symbol of a real dialectical alchemy, and serves as a paradigm of the divine revelation genre. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Parmenides’ description of Being as one and continuous is analogous to the Orphic theological myth, according to which the entire universe is united in the body of Zeus, “the only one”, in the sense of the Theban Amun, the invisible solitary One who manifests “millions of visible embodiments” by his breath of life.

Likewise, Empedocles has his poetic, prophetic and theological precursor in Parmenides, the sky-walker whose chariot journey takes him into the House of Night. This *nuktos oikia* is the ineffable darkness from which Phanes emerges as a chariot driving Sun, flying on its noetic wings. At the same time, it is the oracular sanctum, because Phanes himself bestowed the power of prophecy upon the primaeval Night.165

However, Night remains a source of wisdom and knowledge for all the universal rulers who follow her in the genealogical chain of theology. In fact, this mythology of succession and violence is crowned by the episode in which Zeus swallows Phanes (the totality of the noetic archetypes) and thereby becomes the “beginning, middle and end of all”. This myth is turned into “the philosophic basis for a monistic account of the genesis and governance of the world”.166

In this particular context “Titanic” means “manifold”, according to velvet Yates, because it is precisely the Titans, as the principle of separation, who are made responsible for the world of plurality, for “creating the Many from the One”.167 Yates writes:

---


---

On the cosmic level, the devouring of Dionysus’ limbs by the Titans represents the generation of the material Many from the immaterial One. Proclus equates the division of Dionysus’ body into seven parts by the Titans with the Timaeus’ division of the world-soul into seven parts. At the human level, the Zagreus myth explains the fragmented nature of human thought. The Titans can also represent the forces of separation and fragmentation on the level of the individual soul...168

This fragmentation and the subsequent forgetfulness only increase as the cosmic cycle evolves. Similarly in Egypt, Atum as the undifferentiated One in the transcendent darkness of Nun “comes into being by himself” (*kheper djesef*) and is turned (while essentially remaining the same) first into the Triad and then into the Ennead. In this way, the Egyptian scribes, like the later Neoplatonic dialecticians, unfolded a series of entities (at once numbers, symbols and iconographically fixed figures) that illustrates the unfolding of the paradigmatic structure of reality (conceived in the form of the decad) from its ultimate source in the One. According to the Pythagorean manual produced in the school of Iamblichus:

Both Orpheus and Pythagoras made a particular point of describing the ennead as “pertaining to the Curetes”, on the grounds that the rites sacred to the Curetes are tripartite, with three rites in each part, or as “Kore”: both of these titles are appropriate to the triad, and the ennead contains the triad three times.169

The number nine thus expresses the paradigmatic, all-encompassing and still noetic totality. Put otherwise, the One
still belongs to the realm of the ineffable supra-noetic transcendence, but the goddess Neith (equated by the Platonists to Athena, the mistress of philosophy) calls the world of manifestation (kheperu) into being "through seven statements, which in a later magic text become the sevenfold laugh of the creator god".

Mankind originated from Atum-Ra's tears, "in a temporary blurring" of Atum's vision, though the period of the golden age is still regarded as the solar kingdom of Ra, where gods and humans inhabit the stage of the extended sacred mound of Heliopolis together. During this blessed time (paaut)—before the human revolt against Ra—the divine maat (truth, perfect harmonious order) reigns.

XVII

In Platonic parlance, the main "initiatory" and "philosophical" goal of fallen humanity consists in the recollection of an ideal beginning and in solar contemplation of the enneadic totality of the Ideas. In order to do so, and achieve the desired goal, writing is established by Thoth and Sesheta as the instrument of revelation which provides access to the world of the gods; this is simply because it is, at the same time, the instrument of theophany and creation. In fact, the hieroglyphs (medu neter) are viewed as traces of noetic being, as archetypes and metaphysical symbols, even epiphanies of the gods themselves. They constitute the revealed body of divine knowledge necessary for salvation.

After Ra's departure and the subsequent end of the direct divine rule, the distorted human race lives in a state of punishment and blindness. Hornung describes this as follows:

Henceforth war and violence shape the lives of human beings. Having lost the paradisiacal innocence of their beginnings, they can regain access to the world of the gods only in death. Moreover, their rebellion suggests a dangerous threat to the continued existence of creation itself, insofar as it hints at the existence of destructive forces that seek to bring the normal course of events on earth to a halt.

The memory of the divine presence is maintained by means of the Horus-like pharaoh whose rites enacted in the temple recall the initial foundation of the world as "revelation of the divine Face". The ritual act of unveiling and adoration of the Face establishes the royal paradigm of pious contemplation.

The Egyptians, in order to become a "holy people" once again, needed to walk "on the water of God", that is, follow the path of the deity (be it Atum-Ra, Amun-Ra, Ptah, Khnum or Sobek), proclaiming God's power even to the fish and the birds. This manifestation of divine power is to be regarded as a kind of revelation, as a miracle to be proclaimed, according to Assmann, so that the whole universe is told of the power of God.

This all-encompassing proclamation of social maat practice, recollection and revelation, means that the ideal person is one who "is able to remember". Accordingly, the ritual of the judgement of the dead assumes a kind of manual for the life-style and education of the living. The Egyptian initiate hopes "to go forth" and "to see Ra", ritually maintaining the metaphysical memory that conveys the pattern of alchemical transformation as well as rational calculability, responsibility and accountability. In this context the "initiate" simply means the official member of the pharaonic state who is able
to manage and present himself as a substitute (albeit inwardly and mystically) for the king—either ideally patterned as Horus’ image, or as the "mummified" and reanimated Osiris image. Finally, through the restored akh-identity, he hopes to be like a living god and stand in the sun barque.

Although the standard New Kingdom Egyptian is a politically responsible devotee of Amun and does not feel like a gnostic stranger in this world, death (mut) and initiation through the Osirian suffering and rebirth seems to be his only gateway to the noetic realm of Ra. Assmann argues that the gods are to be confronted "only by priests, indirectly in a statue ritual or directly after death", when the Egyptian in the form of his ba appeals to the court of Osiris for justice:

He does not accuse the gods for his misfortune, nor does he perceive his sufferings as unjust punishments for crimes he did not commit. He knows that the gods do not interfere in human affairs, and that a human being is exposed to all kinds of misfortunes that have nothing to do with the gods and have no religious significance whatsoever. They just occur. The only way to address the gods and to enter into forms of belonging and connectivity that bind him to the gods is to die and to present himself to the judgement of the dead.

Proclus provides the following account, which presents an analogous but different story of royal succession and cyclic regression, based on the myth of the Titanic act of violence. Here the dismemberment of Dionysus (that partly follows the Osirian pattern) represents the proceeding of the One into the Many. Proclus says:

Orpheus the theologian had handed down three races of man: first the golden, which he says Phanes governed; second the silver, which he says the mighty Kronos ruled; third the Titanic, which he says Zeus assembled from the Titanic limbs; thinking that in these three categories every form of human life was included (In Remp. II 74-75; Orph. frag. 140).

Yet another version is presented in the so-called Rhapsodic Theogony (the Hieroi Logoi in 24 Rhapsodies). In a related prayer to Apollo-Helios (at the beginning of the Orphic Rhapsodies) this poem is described as the twelfth revelation of Orpheus. According to this Orphic theogony, current among the late Neoplatonists (especially Proclus, Damascius and Olympiodorus), there were six successive divine kingdoms ruled by Phanes, Night, Uranos, Kronos, Zeus and Dionysus respectively. Phanes reigns before Night in this account, and his reign (understood both metaphysically and as a pedagogical myth of perfect politeia) is somewhat analogous to the reign of Ra. Dionysus corresponds to Osiris, who comes back to life at the level of anima mundi—not only as the ruler of Duat (the Netherworld, tantamount to his own, or Nut-Hathor's body-temple), but also as a model for the deceased, that is, for the "initiate" and "philosopher".

The main difference between the Egyptian and the Hellenic models is that the attainment of life (ankh) in the noetic Heliopolis depends not only upon knowledge and piety, but (first of all) upon service to the Egyptian holy state and to the pharaoh, the son of Ra, suckled by the goddess Hathor. In the form of the ka-statue, located within the special mansions (wrongly designated as "mortuary temples" by modern scholars), he is expected to spend "millions of years" in

---

176 Ibid, pp 400-01. 
mystic union with the deity.\textsuperscript{180} His mummy (the symbolic image of Osiris) is the exemplary receiver of life (\textit{sheep rankh}), of the reviving solar rays, thus becoming “his hieroglyphic spell generating his immortality”,\textsuperscript{181} and showing the theurgic way to his “initiates”—the bureaucratic and priestly staff. In this respect, he is the death-conquering immortal Horus, the golden Falcon. As Alan Segal remarks: “Eventually, ordinary Egyptians understood themselves and the transcendent part of their lives, by imitating the Pharaoh’s path through the underworld. The afterlife became the mirror of the self.”\textsuperscript{182}

Since “the true and eternal life” begins (or rather, is regained) only with death, the term \textit{ankhu}, “the living ones”, as Gerhard Haeney aptly surmises, is used in a double sense: “of those alive on earth as well as of those living in the hereafter.”\textsuperscript{183}

\section{XVIII}

The language of Plato describing the Forms is reminiscent of the Parmenidean and Orphic revelations. This is not presump-ably an anachronistic “Platonic” reading of Parmenides, as cer-tain modern historians of Hellenic philosophy would claim. Parmenides’ otherworldly journey to the point where all the opposites meet, or are transcended, repeats that of Heracles and Orpheus. According to Kingsley: “Everyone runs from death so everyone runs away from wisdom. . . . Parmenides’ journey takes him in exactly the opposite direction. . . .” To die before you die, no longer to live on the surface of yourself: this is what Parmenides is pointing to.”\textsuperscript{184}

It is no surprise that Parmenides articulated the epistemological and ontological categories fundamental to Platonism. The deliberately pro-Platonic understanding of Parmenides’ “unmoving heart of well-rounded Truth” (\textit{altheice eukukleos atremes etor}; I.29)\textsuperscript{185} was common among later Platonists. Therefore, Plato’s actual reception of Parmenides must itself be important for an historically relevant interpretation of the Parmenides poem, a reception indicated by the \textit{Phaedrus} myth and Plato’s comparison of the soul to a charioteer with a pair of winged horses, not unlike the horses of Phanes “conveyed here and there by golden wings” (Hermeias, \textit{In Phaedr.} 142.13 ff; \textit{Orph. Frag.} 78). According to John Palmer, Hermeias properly connected Plato’s image of the chariot with analogous images used by Orpheus and Parmenides. He criticizes Leonardo Taran’s assertion, namely, that in Parmenides nothing suggests the comparison of the chariot with the soul, as absurd, saying: “Suggests to whom? Certainly not to one who would have recognized, for example, the parallels between the poem and Orphic accounts of the initiate’s experience of the afterlife.”\textsuperscript{186}

Regarding Plato’s description of the Forms in Parmenidean language, Palmer argues that both the \textit{Phaedrus} and the \textit{Republic} myths incorporate certain Parmenidean and Orphic elements into the context of a revelation of pure Being that repeats the revelation received in Parmenides’ \textit{anabasis}:

Each revelation in the \textit{Republic} takes place only after the soul’s journey to an ouranian (possibly hyperouranian) re-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{182} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 69.
\item \textsuperscript{183} Gerhard Haeney, \textit{ibid.}, p. 92.
\item \textsuperscript{184} Peter Kingsley, \textit{In the Dark Places of Wisdom} (Inverness, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 1999), pp. 64-65
\item \textsuperscript{186} John A. Palmer, \textit{Plato’s Reception of Parmenides} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 18
\end{itemize}
Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism

The Parmenidean and Platonic lover of knowledge is akin to the divine and immortal Being, thus reaffirming the "truest nature of the soul". Only the qualified Platonic Philosophos is purified to such a degree that he achieves what others do not, namely, the realisation of his affinity (sungenes) with the divine. Consequently, by becoming real knowers— that is, by imitating (mimeisthai) the Forms and making themselves likenesses of them—philosophers become akin to the noetic Forms. Or put otherwise, they become like the eternal hieroglyphs in the form of akhu.

As Gerson explains, "the person achieves his true nature in knowing Forms"; and this person is not a human being, because the human body does not belong ideally to one's identity. Only by acquiring knowledge does the righteous "dead man" acquire a new identity, because knowledge entails self-transformation. And this desired identity is a noetic or divine identity of sorts.

However, if philosophy is nothing but a practice for dying and being dead (Phaed. 64a.5-6; 67d.7-10), then philosophy, in its initial purificatory phase at least, is the Osiran way of life, in spite of any reluctance to acknowledge the theological identity of Osiris and Dionysus. And Orpheus may be called "the first philosopher" (as Diogenes Laertius asserts and questions: Vitae 1.5), but only in the same metaphorical and thoroughly "sloganised" sense in which Imhotep, the son of Ptah, "successful in his actions, great in miracles", is "the first philosopher" of the Egyptians.

The Platonic myth (muthos) which, presumably, "represents philosophy's culmination", is the Orphico-Pythagorean soteriological manifesto. For according to Plato, the souls of pious philosopher-gnostics (the knowers of Ideas, or Forms) are purified of the mortal body and thereby join the

---

187. Ibid., pp. 22-23.
190. Ibid., p. 15.
191. Kathryn A. Morgan, Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato, p. 185.
immortal gods. Philosophers are destined for the Isles of the Blest, therefore Socrates considers it most fitting for those who are about to make the other worldly journey "to examine and mythologise" (diaskein te kai muthologiein) about it (Phaedr. 61c1-3).192

XIX

Human learning may be contrasted to the divine omniscience as discursive reasoning is to Neoplatonic intellection (noesis). The first is a sort of dialectic which uses classifying division and collection, and strives for rational "scientific knowledge"; the second a kind of non-discursive dialectic which rules out not only transition from subject to predicate, but even language itself, and which noerically contemplates and apprehends all that is as a totum simul.193

This noesis is something more than the type of rational or intellectual activity capable of producing coherent texts, systems and interpretations, because it implies the soul's identity (or affinity with) ta noeta (the Forms). Such identity at the level of Nous may be designated as salvation achieved either by the unity of soul and intellect, or by "the reflection in the logical soul of noesis in the form of ennoia",194 that is, in the form of illuminating thoughts and mystical insights.

The main driving force of Platonic paideia is not simply a one-sided logos, but the god-given eros, that is, one's striving for unification with the supreme arche and the desire of noctic immortality through the daemon that God has given to each of us. Plato says: "And so far as it is possible for human nature to have a share in immortality, he will not in any degree lack this. And because he always takes care of that which is divine, and has the daemon that lives with him well ordered (eu kekosmenon), he will be supremely happy (eudaemon)" (Theaet. 90c). Gregory Vlastos therefore connects Plato's theory of love with his "religious mysticism", arguing that the convergence of mania and nous in love shows Plato's affinity to the "orgiastic Dionysian rites".195

Since the embodied soul is "dismembered" and "scattered" like Osiris, its recollection, restoration and ascent to the One by means of Nous is related to the soul's going "out of its mind drunk with the nectar", as Plotinus would say (Enn. VI.7.35.25-26), that is, out of its discursive logismos. Therefore Shaw concludes that rational thinking for Plato "has a purely cathartic function", because the soul's purification and the subsequent restoration of its lost divinity "was the way of Platonic paideia, and while a well-exercised skill in rational analysis was necessary to strip the soul of false beliefs, it could never awaken it to its innate dignity."196

This teaching of philosophical katharsis as a way of release from the wheel of rebirth and entry to everlasting noetic bliss—the privilege of ruling the whole cosmos with the gods (moving in the barque of Ra or following the chariot of Zeus)—is based on "a religious doctrine, which Plato took over from Orphics or Pythagoreans, a doctrine of sin, purgatory, reincarnation, and eventual purification", according to David Bostock.197

Therefore, the Platonic learning itinery follows the eternal standards (paradigmata) established in divine reality, and consequently associates the ideal of contemplating (theorein) with that of serving or "caring for" (therapeuein) the divini-

192 Ibid., p. 194.
ty. Since God is the measure of all things and the standard for justice, to become like God, for Plato, means to become just, holy (hosiotes) and wise, for he says: "And that is why we should also try to escape from here to there as quickly as we can. To escape is to become like god so far as it is possible (phuge de homoisosis theoi kata to dunaton), and to become like god is to become just and holy, together with wisdom" (Theaet. 176a).198

The erotic pathway to wisdom is presented by the priestess Diotima (whose name means “honor of god”) of Mantinea (related to mantis, “prophet” or “seer”).200 Her task as the ideal Platonic mystagogue is to destroy the initiate’s constructed “old self” following the Orphic spiritual method: “No ideology could survive Diotima’s scrutiny,” as Rappe observes: “mind and body arise together as mutually conditioned constructions. Self-identity ebbs away in the flow of memory while consciousness disappears without a trace of its previous contents.”201 The lover of wisdom in his upward movement hopes to participate in the absolute Beauty (metechei ekeinou tou kalou), and not simply arrive at a “clear definition” by using division (diairesis) and collection (sunagoge) in the manner of a priest dissecting a sacrificial animal (hoion hiericon: Soph. 287c3).202

The soul of the dialectician is able “to see the truth” (aletheia horatai: Rep. 527c3) only when it reaches the “limit of the intelligible” (tou noetou telei: Rep. 532b2). However, the dialectical procedure of “exhaustive classification” carried out by tortuous division, collection and definition is viewed

as a divinely revealed path (hodos), that is, as a “gift from the gods to men” (Phileb. 165c; 165b; 1648).203 According to Plato, one can never gain knowledge (episteme, not merely opinion) by simply reasoning about something, because one needs to be “enamoured” by the “godly method”. In short, one needs some kind of inducement in order to turn “the eye of the soul” (Rep. 540a7) upward towards the final revelation of the Beautiful and the Good.

Kenneth Sayre argues that the philosophical goal to be achieved cannot be reached simply by taking certain steps in that direction, because the Platonic methodos has nothing to do with “a routine procedure for cranking out certain results, like the method of long division in arithmetic”.204 He explains:

The Greek term methodos comes from hodos (way) plus meta (in the sense of "according to"), so that a methodos literally is a path or a way that one might pursue to a given goal. . . . Plato’s term dalektike, after all, is a derivative of the verb dalegomasai, meaning to converse with another person. And the manner of conversation in question is one in which the master philosopher directs the steps of the relative neophyte.201

XX

The Egyptian term sia is difficult to render. However, Dimitri Meeks and Christine Favard-Meeks maintain that it designates the special noetic faculty “that enabled the gods to perceive an event the instant it occurred, together with the reason for its occurrence”.206 Being thus equivalent to noetic il-

199 Ibid., p. 794.
201 Sara Rappe, Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascus, p. 152
202 Kenneth M. Sayre, ibid., p. 149.
lumination and all-embracing gnosis, sia presumably includes all possible knowledge, and is found in Atum-Ra's shining Eyc as its universal irradiation. In a pair with Hu (the creative utterance), the personified Sia (sometimes interpreted as meaning "perception") stands in the solar barque of Ra:

This capacity, which every god possessed in some measure, was a dormant kind of knowledge that became active in the presence of the event that brought it out; it enabled a god to grasp, in the fullest sense of the word, what was going on. It made it possible for already existing knowledge, reactivated by a signal, to emerge at the conscious level. "Sign of recognition", that is the basic meaning of the word sia in Egyptian. . . . Thus was established a rather clear-cut distinction between sia, or synthetic knowledge, and knowledge as technique and praxis, called rekhi. Sia operated like an absolute intuition irreducible to logical knowledge. Rekhi implied a way of defining concepts that necessarily entailed the use of speech, and, later, writing; they endowed it with . . . the capacity to be transmitted.207

However, one cannot be sure that the term rekhi simply means something like discursive or scientific-encyclopaedic knowledge. In many contexts, rekhi is an equivalent of the initiatory gnosis necessary for the successful arrival at "the shore of the great island", namely, the divine realm, and for appearing as a god.

The disciple to whom the god of wisdom reveals different types of useful scribal, theological and scholarly knowledge in the Egyptian demotic Book of Thoth is the "lover of wisdom" (mer-rekhi), that is, the "philosopher" in its original Pythagorean sense.

Richard Jasnow and Karl-Theodor Zauzich argue that the role of the mer-rekhi "raises the problem of initiation and mysticism", because among the goals of the mer-rekhi are partici-

pation in alchemical transformations (liturgies, rituals, hermeneutical events) in the Duat and eventually joining Ra in his solar barque. They say:

We know of no examples of this striking Egyptian parallel to Greek Philosopher outside of the Book of Thoth. . . . Mer-rekhi designates the aspiring student or scholar who desires to be initiated into the wisdom of Thoth. . . . His relationship with the deities is a close one; Thoth treats him virtually as a son. . . . 208

The dialogue between the The-one-of-Heseret (Thoth) and the mer-rekhi is modelled on an initiatory underworld dialogue employed in the literature of the New Kingdom. The Platonic dialogues follow this pattern. Though the demotic Book of Thoth itself is perhaps later than Plato, its patterns and ideas are based on the Ramesside theological rekhi.

In the context of priestly mystagogy, Imhotep (the chief lector-priest of Heliopolis) was regarded as an ideal sage or bearer of knowledge (rekhi-ikhet). He is a paradigm for every subsequent Egyptian Philosophos, since, though designated as the son of Ptah, he was a mortal man whose bo ascended to heaven and became a god. Consequently, Imhotep is the model for the initiatory death and transformation which every mer-rekhi hopes to accomplish.209 As Hornung plainly states, there is a constant "gnostic" stress on knowledge (most frequently secret knowledge), "through which alone, in good Egyptian tradition, salvation and redemption is achieved".210

The dialectical action of the Book of Thoth (which survives in damaged fragments) probably is set in the mandala-like

---

207 Ibid., pp 95-96.
209 Ibid., p. 95.
House of Life (per ankh) and dramatised in connection with divine festivals (a connection also suggested by the dramatic setting of certain Platonic dialogues). Jasnow and Zauzich write:

There is little doubt that the constituent elements of the House of Life could be imbued with symbolic force; the author may conceive this institution as reflecting the underworld or, perhaps better, the divine world. Similarly, the author of the Book of Thoth may sometimes employ metaphorical language. The process of attaining mastery of scribal knowledge, for example, may mirror the deceased’s striving to attain rebirth. . . . Thereupon the mer-rekh praises Thoth for his advice, and expresses his own hopes for what amounts almost to a spiritual rebirth. . . . The mer-rekh offers a recitation of praise to Thoth or Imhotep at the festival of Imhotep. He expresses the wish to join his entourage, become a seer, and worship Se- seshat. The mer-rekh further proclaims personal experience and knowledge of such events as Thoth’s defeat of the enemies of Ra in the underworld. . . . He introduces himself, answering the question: “Who are you?” with the words: “I am the mer- rekh.”211

Hence, he is the “lover of wisdom”, and wisdom is embodied by Thoth to whom he avows his loyalty, showing desire to worship this god, partake in his rituals and processions, and understand their hidden symbolic meaning. It seems that the ideal mer-rekh is a pious scribe or scholar, sometimes functioning as the lector priest, like Imhotep. In accordance with the chief theological paradigm, he enters the barque of Ra, thus being like the transfigured akh, and not the material corpse (mut). He is both “prophet” and “craftsman”, the servant of Thoth and other gods, including Ptah.

211 Richard Jasnow and Karl-Theodor Zauzich, ibid., pp. 3, 6 & 8 (The transliteration of some Egyptian words is slightly altered, for example mr- rh became mer-rekh in order to make it more readable.)

In this respect, “the-one-who-loves-knowledge” (mer-rekh) is analogous to the great Imhotep or Amenhotep, Son-of-Hapu. The Egyptian scribes and religious scholars, those concerned with the sacred books—“manifestations of Ra” (bau Ra)—hope to be united with Amenhotep and Imhotep in the afterlife.212

The holy “books” (the hieroglyphic and hieratic compositions of texts and symbolic pictures, as well as statues, reliefs, sanctuaries and tombs) are solar in their essential nature. Therefore, the “souls of Ra” (bau Ra) may be depicted as constituting the crew in the barque of Ra. Thereby the close relationship between prophecy and writing is assumed and emphasised.

The Egyptian verb ser means to show, to announce, hence, to prophesy. When the mer-rekh receives instructions from “He-who-praises-knowledge” (Thoth), the “prophecy” virtually becomes revelation and reception of “philosophy” (using this word in its strictly etymological sense as the “love of wisdom”).

The lord of the bau of Ra is the messenger of prophecy, and the servant of Thoth is a receiver of prophecy brought by Thoth. Therefore, the mer-rekh is also the writer and the reciter, following the standard request for revelation and the divine command to recite (somewhat resembling the Quranic command): “Come you, O one who lives as the craftsman of Isten. O praised one of the heart of Ra, may he cause that you recite.”213

The Book of Thoth speaks of the chamber of Darkness, and mentions “a lamp of prophecy”. Moreover, its dialogues may be staged as an initiatory drama, performed by priestly actors. The mer-rekh is frequently designated as a “youth” (nekhen), analogous to the Hellenic Apollonian kouros or the Arabic fata. He hopes to participate in rituals of the divine

212 Dietrich Wildung, Egyptian Saints: Defecation in Pharaonic Egypt, p 105.
213 Richard Jasnow and Karl-Theodor Zauzich, ibid., p. 32.
realm, to become the “blessed deceased” in the entourage of Thoth and other gods, thereby stressing the secrets of his patron Thoth and the related knowledge of the Osirian Duat. Accordingly, the mer-rekh strives for spiritual rebirth.214 Jasnow and Zauzich comment as follows:

It does seem fair to say that in the Book of Thoth the mer-rekh, be he priest or student, undergoes a type of initiation and spiritual rebirth. The knowledge imparted is strongly, but not solely, underworldly in character. We believe that the process takes place while the mer-rekh is alive, within the context of the temple House of Life, and probably in connection with festivals. It is quite likely that in entering the sacred space of the temple and House of Life the participant was simultaneously conceived to be entering the underworld or, at least, the divine otherworld. . . . The disciple achieves a sort of rebirth, perhaps through the equivalent of the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony, which then results in his rechanneling of a hymn to Imhotep/Thoth. . . . Rekh prepares one's way into the Beyond 215

XXI

Robert Lamberton states that the inspired Orphic poetry had a privileged religious position from the time of Socrates and before, to the time of Damascus and holy Serapion, who “possessed and read almost nothing except the writings of Orpheus” (Damascius Phil. Hist. 111).216 No wonder Orpheus was designated simply as “the Theologian”, in much the same way as Homer was named “the Poet”.217 Homer, as a privileged mythical auctoritas, supplied the Hellenes with the highly selective and largely spurious “sacred map” of Heroic Greece, thus deliberately shaping their collective memory and using a language “never spoken by any living person”.218 This modified picture of the heroic past and a shadowy afterlife, codified in sixth century BC Athens, provided the pattern of the initially aristocratic pan-Hellenic unity and the alleged “theological” continuity of their world view.

Of course, the Homeric poems were read as Pythagorean or Stoic philosophical allegories, and Proclus defended Homer by linking his poetry with the god Apollo and claiming that the Homeric poems remind us of transcendent things. In this case, “a symbolic mode of representation becomes a necessity.”219 Likewise, in the Egyptian tradition of ritual exegesis (followed by the Orphic “paradoxical and implausible interpretive strategies”220)) everything related with cultic communication and mystagogy must be symbolic. According to Assmann:

For nothing in the Egyptian cult is just what it appears to be. The priest is not a priest; the statue is not a statue; the sacrificial substances and requisites are not what they are usually. In the context of the ritual performance all acquire a special “mythical” meaning that points to something else in “yonder world” . . . Everything in this sacred game becomes a kind of hieroglyph . . . The more there was to interpret, the more mysterious the rite became. The dialectics of interpreta-

214 In this respect, see Algis Ustavynys, Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth: From Ancient Egypt to Neoplatonism (Westbury: The Prometheus Trust, 2008).
217 Robert Lamberton, ibid., p. 207
tion and arcanization led to a cultural split between a surface structure of religious practices of sometimes appealing absurdity...and a deep structure of religious philosophy, which finally developed into hermeticism, where the esoteric science of Egyptian paganism and the philosophical religion of neo-Platonism met to form the last stage of Egyptian religion. 221 After the so-called Homeric age (or even simultaneous with it), a radical shift had occurred in the ancient Greek mentality as regards the understanding of the soul and its relation to the body. This shift coincides with the so-called Saite renaissance in Egypt and the Egyptian “holy war”—using Greek mercenaries—with Assyria. Precisely at this time, Egypt systematically turned to the models of the past, and this pious codification of cultural standards according to the “eternal” schemata is later reflected and made programmatic in Plato’s Laws. Assmann writes:

Much more comprehensively than in the Ramesside age, Egypt now discovered its own antiquity and elevated it to the rank of a normative past. Almost the entire literate upper stratum—above all, the kings themselves—now began to emulate Prince Khasekhemwy by visiting and copying the monuments of their forefathers. This wholesale return to the models of the past was tantamount to a cultural revolution and it spread into every aspect of Egyptian life. 222

It therefore cannot be assumed that the people of Greece suddenly and rather spontaneously started to question the reliability of their traditional cosmology and anthropology, making inquiries into “the metaphysical background of physical phenomena” and eventually discovering “a difference between the corporeal and the spiritual aspects of life”, as Rein Ferwerda supposes. 223 However, all kinds of cultic associations were incorporated into the ritualised and interiorised procedures of salvation in the attempt to release that part of the person now called the “immortal soul” (psyche), following (with the enthusiasm of recent converts) Egyptian theological and soteriological paradigms.

The road leading to Osiris Un-nefer trodden by the initiates in their hope that death is not akin to complete dissolution (leading simply to the lamentable condition of the simulacrum of the body being lost) now became the “mystic road to Rhadamanthus”, marking the release of the soul from the body. This separation from the ultimately devalued mortal body and subsequent transition may be somewhat ritually anticipated, or even performed, by the mystical symbols of the Dionysiac initiations (ta mustika symbola ton per ton Dionyson orgiasmon). Hence, the Orphic golden tablet addresses the deceased (the one who has died in either the philosophical or the physical sense, or one who is still in the process of learning the eschatological rhetoric) as follows: “Happy and blessed one, you will be a god instead of mortal” (olbio kai makariste, theós d'éseti anti brotio). 224

At first this Orphic teaching of soteria was a secret teaching which, perhaps, would look too unconvincing and ridiculous for the traditionally minded majority of Hellenes. The rhetoric of the “secrecy” was structured so that any “secret” (be it just a pedagogical fiction) needed to be revealed, whilst

221. Jan Assmann, Semiosis and Interpretation in Ancient Egyptian Ritual, pp. 104 & 106.
at the same time maintaining the inadequacy of attempting to communicate in words the mystical essence of the telete, which is to be realised only by ritual participation.

In the context of establishing and keeping various practices and orders, the claims of secrecy do not consist in concealing some exclusive or dangerous knowledge, as the romantic Protestant “esoterism” of a nineteenth century Western mentality imagines in its obsession with “secret societies” and “inward experiences” of “genuine initiations”. Rather it serves for the formation and maintenance of social boundaries. For the insiders, the established practices, signs of distinction and solemn slogans of “secretly” must be preserved and transmitted in order for them to survive as a community of privileged truth-bearers.

It goes without saying that these groups which celebrated all sorts of festivals and practised teletic rites (that imitate festivals anyway) were neither the “secret societies” of Masonic fantasy, nor “esoteric centres” in the sense employed by the “universal” post-Hegelian theosophy of those who accept the crazy theory of secret forces of evil operating in history and plotting against the versus Israel. Accordingly, Luther Martin analyses the “syndrome of secrecy” in certain “textual communities”, especially in relation to the Hermetic distinction between secret (unofficial, underground, forbidden) and public (official) knowledge. Due to this cultural schizophrenia (that unfolded between Athens and Jerusalem), the entire world theatre was transformed (following Egyptian and Babylonian scriptural paradigms) into the esoteric book, open to sectarian readings and rereadings. As Martin explains:

Like secrecy, such literary productions create their alternative world, and such textual societies... reviled and rejected the external world which represented, from their perspective, a universe of diminished literacy beyond their own revelatory texts. They did not, however, fear this world like the local associations and oral cultures they replaced. Rather than covering with the protective embrace of secret enclaves, the goal of such textual societies was nothing less than the militant


tion “through closeness to the divine”, depended on a private and personal decision and a vow.

To make an oath and be initiated into the thiasos (a remote antique prototype of the Sufi tariqah, likewise based on a relationship between a patron and his clients) is tantamount to making a covenant (or legal treaty) with a deity in the Neo-Assyrian and Biblical contexts. This is so because the divine saviour is regarded as the patron of the client who is to be saved. Consequently, the human royal patron and saviour may be called theos epiphanes eucharistos, as Ptolemy V of Egypt is designated (the hieroglyphic equivalents, according to Arthur Nock, being the god “who comes forth” and “lord of beauties”).

According to Burkert, charisma and the display of power override all other forms of reverential awe (sebaei), because the attraction of the royal epiphany (like Amun’s epiphany in New Kingdom Thebes) is overwhelming. Hence:

The experience of “epiphany” came to concentrate on the person of the ruler who had acted as a “savior” and inaugurated an age of bliss and abundance—a process that easily assumed a Dionysiac coloring. . . . The monarch was the victor, the savior, the god, “present” (epiphanet) to a degree gods had hardly ever been. Not only the actors followed in his wake, but “all sorts of thiasoi”, including those of mustai and bakchos.

Every professional association (hetaireia) claimed the patronage of one or more deities, and was made up of the deities’ servants, vassals and cult-worshippers. These societies were sometimes called orgeones, from orgiao, “to pay ritual service to the gods”, and their ritual practices were ta orgia. They usually included a banquet (symposium) where the members of the hetaireia or initiates sat crowned with garlands on sacred couches. In this way, the stephanos (wreath, garland) was worn by the “dead” initiate and the corpse alike. The participant of the earthly drinking party—playing the role of Dionysus restored or Osiris resurrected—imitated the “living one” of the heavenly symposium.

The ceremonial drinking and its established representational hierarchy brings the rulers and the royal initiates to the divine status of bliss, making them close to the gods. Since the gods are no longer in fact homotrapeoi, “table companions” of men, and are to be addressed through ritual mediation, the ceremonial banquet serves as a means to imitate (or play) the gods and thereby restore (symbolically, at least) perfect heavenly bliss.

According to Rappe, for the late Neoplatonists the dismemberment of Dionysus signified both a phase in the manifestation of the cosmos (in the sense of the Pythagorean numerical progression) and the setting of the stage for the soul’s ultimate liberation and glorification at the noetic symposium. She explains:

For Proclus, the Orphic theology, in offering a vision of the great world encompassed in the pleroma of the human intellect and embodied within the perfect person, Phanes, shows forth the soul as an imago dei. It is this recognition that in itself constitutes a form of initiation, making possible the soul’s access to the fullness of reality. . . . Once more, the creative,
divine energy that pours itself through the various stations of being as stages within the theology is initiatory in function.232

Presumably, ritual initiation into the early Hellenic hetairia implied a pedagogical rather than a hidden or concealed relationship—and, consequently, one’s preparation for the a priori established role of the “blessed initiate”, and not a sort of miraculous transubstantiation.

As Martin emphasizes, “initiation into the Eleusinian, as in the other mysteries, was equivalent to adoption by the presiding deity,”233 like adoption into an Arab tribe in order to become a maola, a client of the Islamic Arab patron and a member of the “central community” (ummatar nasatun) of believers. Martin comments:

The strategy of recruitment for the fictive, as for natural, kinship societies was adoption, a legal fiction that permits kin relations to be created artificially, and which provided the model for the discourse of conversion and the practice of initiation in genealogically articulated systems. The Greek juridical term for adoption, huiothensa, is used in this derivative sense most notably by Paul.234

The initiate into the Eleusinian Mysteries, for example, is therefore regarded as a kinsman (gennetes) of the gods. The “mystery societies” were organised on the constitutional model of municipalities, and were not distinguished by their concealment of particular or extraordinary secrets, but by their pedagogical silence or “secrecy” (arrhetos)—even a real or pretended Socratic “ignorance”—as a rhetorical strategy for structuring social relations in religious and educational contexts.235

The families of telestai that belonged to the groups (thiasoi) called Orphikoi viewed Dionysus as their soter; the Orphic mustai of Dionysus were promised soteria (salvation). In short, they were “initiates whom blessed Dionysus saves” (mustai hou sote make狄nusos),236 and they travelled the divine and royal path of purification, death and rebirth.

XXIII

Several teachings of Plato are based on Orphic and Pythagorean doctrines. It is, then, no wonder that even Socrates is portrayed by Plato as expecting after his death to meet Orpheus in Hades (Apol. 41a).

Some contemporary scholars argue that Plato, in certain cases, deliberately distorted, or rather reinterpret and thus “modernised”, the esoteric doctrines of Orpheus and Pythagoras. Ferwerda, for example, doubts that the Orphics (though surely craving for the liberation of the fettered soul) viewed the human body as a prison.237 In Cratylus 400c, Plato states as follows:

Some people maintain that the body (soma) is the tomb (sema) of the soul because the soul is buried there for this moment. And because, on the other hand, it indicates (semainet) by that body whatever the soul indicates, it is also for that reason rightly called sign (sema). However, it seems to me that Orpheus and his followers in the first place are the givers of that name (soma) because, in their opinion, the soul

233. Luther H. Martin, Secrecy in Hellenistic Religious Communities, pp. 105-07.
234. Ibid., pp 105-106.
235. Ibid., p 114.
236. Susan Guettel Cole, Voices from beyond the Grave: Dionysus and the Dead, p. 293.
is being punished for something; the soul has the body as its enclosure (peribolos) in order to be saved (hina sozetai), just as a prison.

The word soma stands for the corpse in Homer, and only later acquires the meaning of body. So the following verse is attributed to Euripides by Plato: "Who knows whether living is not being dead, while being dead is living?" Plato's Socrates continues: "Perhaps we too are dead. I at least heard this from the wise men that now we are dead and that for us the body is a tomb" (soma estin hemin soma: Gorg. 492e-493a).

In his Commentary on Plato's Gorgias, Olympiodorus explains this as follows:

[Socrates] says "Euripides says to live is to die, and to die is to live." For on coming here, the soul, so that it may give life to the body, also gets a share in certain lifelessness. . . . So it is when it is separated that it is really alive. . . . The argument from the Pythagoreans is symbolic. For it employs a short myth, which says "We are dead here and we inhabit a tomb. . . ." (In Gorg. 29.4).

The word sema principally stands for "sign" (Odyssey 20.111), therefore the body (soma) may be understood as a means by which the soul indicates (sema-ntai) its eidetic paradigm and the goal to be achieved. Likewise, sema is an enclosure (peribolos), the morphic frame of the soul: it keeps the soul within its limits that it may be saved (hina sozetai).

Microcosmically, this human body imitates the macrocosmic body of the Egyptian goddess Nut (Heaven), understood and depicted as the temple-like Duat, mundus imaginalis, into whose depths the ram-headed Ra descends as a ba-soul. The mummy (the completed and eternalised sah-body) inside the sarcophagus is an imago of Osiris. Therefore, the entire tomb of Osiris may be regarded as a symbol of spiritual alchemy.240 According to Theodor Abt:

The mummy that remains in the netherworld is called "the image of Osiris". As every deceased, man or woman, became an Osiris through the process of mumification, this mummy at the end of the Amduat is of course also the mummy of the dead person. Out of this "secret of the corpse", namely the unique individual image or structure of the deceased, the blessed immortal part became liberated by this journey through the twelve hours. He or she can now rise in the morning with the Sun god to immortality.241

The enclosure (peribolos)-like sarcophagus is sometimes protected by Isis and Nepthys at the corners at the head and Selket and Neith at those at the feet. The multi-structured tomb is like the House of Life (per ankh) which the goddess Seshet is said to open for the deceased. The sacred writings ("manifestations of Ra", bau Ra) are located in the animated House of Life as the recomposed sah-body of Osiris. Since in this respect writing and drawing are closely bound up with the dialectical and sacrificial dismembering and subsequent re-collection and resurrection of Osiris, the House of Life is both the sanctuary of the bau (het bau) and the place to die one's "philosophical death", that is, the Osirian netherworld which opens the road for one's spiritual journey:

---

In this way, the spiritual journey of the aspiring scribe may be described by images and terms drawn from the journey of the deceased in the underworld. In P. Salt 825 the per-ankh of Abydos is said to consist of four parts, dedicated to Isis, Nepthys, Horus, and Thoth, while the interior is Osiris: "the living one." 242

Consequently, for the ancient Egyptian initiates the "tomb" means an entirely different thing to what the majority of modern scholars imagine. The so-called "tomb", first of all, is the sanctuary-house by means of which the "living one" (the deceased) remains incorporated in the social net of the theoplastic state. It is the akhet (a word deriving from the verb meaning "to be radiant", "to shine", "to make into a spirit of light"), 243 that is, the pyramid-like gate where the sun rises and the solar rebirth takes place. At the same time, it is the school of mystical pedagogy with its library and animated hieroglyphs—the divine speech fixed and eternalised in stone. As solidified light, the stone itself (as building material) refers to the primaevus ben-ben stone of Heliopolis. It is symbolically related with the royal conception of one's immortalisation through the ascent to heaven and inclusion within the circuit of Ra. The "tomb" is therefore sema in the sense of hieroglyph, the effective theurgic sunthema, like the Osirian djed-pillar or the solar obelisk standing on the primaevus mound. At the same time, it is the womb-like cave from which the restored Eye of Horus—the healed and restored initiate—emerges in the form of the golden Scarab.


XXIV

It is plausible that various scattered Egyptian notions and images of the soul's immortality and ascent (through the alchemical descent to the Osirian Duat) were adapted and reused by the Orphics, Pythagoreans and Platonists. The association of heaven (in the sense of solar kosmos noetos) with immortality is an Egyptian theological doctrine, "occurring many millennia before it becomes part of Biblical or Greek tradition", according to Segal. 244 The winged ba of the pharaoh—the ideal mer-resh, "lover of wisdom"—is transformed into the winged akh or the archetypal noetic star.

To indicate the ultimate Egyptian provenance of certain fundamental religious tendencies, patterns and ideas is not the same as to be passionately involved in a kind of "Platonic Orientalism", as analysed by John Walbridge. 245 At the same time, one needs to remember that "an afterlife belief" in its contemporary Western (or late antique) form "is not necessarily the essence of religion." 246 Or rather, it is not the explicit teaching of every ancient religion, including First and Second Temple Judaism (which Jacob Neusner emphasises in the plural). 247 "The Bible at first zealously ignores the afterlife." 248

The Platonic Greek (and ultimately Egyptian) notion of the soul's immortality, its divine nature and its mystical union with the noetic or supra-noetic principle is very problematic even for early Christianity, which was initially a sectarian branch of late Second Temple ideologies and movements.

246 Alan F. Segal, ibid. p. 17.
248 Alan F Segal, ibid., p. 16.
based on the innovative rhetoric of the glorious resurrection promised for the Maccabean Jewish martyrs. But even this crucial doctrine rests on reshaped Graeco-Egyptian paradigms viewed through Persian lenses and attuned to Enochian apocalyptic expectations.

If all this seems unbelievable, or even offends certain romantic sensibilities, one should turn to W.K.C. Guthrie, L.J. Alderink and E.R. Dodds. But we do not belong to the camp of such respectable scholars as Dodds, whose knowledge “about early Orphism” diminished the more he read about it. He says: “I have lost a great deal of knowledge; for this loss I am indebted to Wilamowitz....”

This writer must confess to knowing very little as well—about either early Orphism or late Pythagoreanism. But I know that He-of-Heseret benefited my knowledge through madness, by diminishing it to such an extent that I cannot answer his question, “Who are you?” Perhaps I am the mummy-like jackal who has come from the four corners of Nun and wishes to bark among the dogs of Seshat.

M.L. West says that “scholars sometimes choose to believe strange things.” And he himself becomes a primary example of this bizarre phenomenon, arguing that “Olympiodorus’ interpretation of the Orphic myth is to be rejected,”

because it is a “merely Neoplatonist interpretation”. When the Orphic and Bakchic sunthemata are handed down in the rites of the Orphics and the symbolic story of the dismemberment is enacted, for West, all this merely offers “temporary escape from ordinary life into a piquant, romantic, voluptuous fantasy-world”.

---

251. Ibid., p. 166.
252. Ibid., p. 164.
253. Ibid., pp. 173-74

---

254. Larry J. Alderink, Creation and Salvation in Ancient Orphism, p. 3