

# Greek Philosophy and Mystery Cults



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Edited by

María José Martín-Velasco  
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## PREFACE

MARÍA JOSÉ MARTÍN-VELASCO

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In May 2012, the bimonthly meeting of the Iberian Society of Greek Philosophy was held at the University of Santiago de Compostela. The Society is composed of lecturers from various universities of the Iberian Peninsula who work on different areas of Greek philosophy. The topic proposed for discussion was that which lends its name to this book: *Greek Philosophy and Mystery Cults*. The main aim of the Society's meetings is to bring together experts with postgraduate students beginning their research in the same area, and thus to create a fruitful interchange of ideas. Consequently the contributions gathered in the present volume represent the work of writers at different levels of advancement in their research.

The various chapters are intended to offer a broad vision of the relationships that our discussions established between Greek philosophy and the Mystery Cults. Their authors focus their attention on thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Neoplatonists and Euripides, all of whom made use of—and in some cases criticized—doctrinal elements from the Mystery Cults, adapting them to their own thinking. Thus, the volume provides a new approach to some of the most renowned Greek philosophers, highlighting the influence that cults such as Orphism, Dionysianism and the Eleusinian rites had on the formation of fundamental aspects of their thought.

F. Casadesús's analysis of the language of both Plato and the early Stoic philosophers shows that these philosophers incorporated the characteristic language of cults such as Orphism, Dionysianism or the Eleusinian rites to underscore the notion that philosophical knowledge results from a process similar to a religious initiation. This use, noted in the preface of Parmenides' poem, reached its greatest expression in some of the main Platonic dialogues, and extended to Stoicism and many of the Neoplatonist philosophers. Access to the knowledge of ideal Forms, in Platonic philosophy, is presented as an initiation that requires the kind of attention and concentration that only the philosopher, adopting the priest's

role in the initiation function, can achieve. Similarly, early Stoic philosophers considered that they were the true priests, able to guide other men to the knowledge of the divine will that rules the cosmos.

Even Aristotle, who according to A. Bernabé was not interested in the mystery cults from a philosophical or religious viewpoint, sometimes alludes to Bacchic mysteries and to Orphic religion and literature, and offers some interesting testimonies on such phenomena. One of these (fr. 15 Rose) is especially interesting, because in it Aristotle denies the possibility of learning anything through the mysteries (unlike the Derveni commentator, who asserts the opposite view), yet he does attribute some value to them in terms of experience and as a psychological training for life and death. Other than these allusions, he does not consider any intervention of Bacchic possession (βακχεία) in philosophy at all, he sees no relation between initiation and philosophy, nor does he believe that philosophy is a true purification (κάθαρσις).

Some of Plato's principal ideas in relation to the Mystery Cults are developed over the next three chapters of the book.

The concept of injustice (ἀδικία), established as the main criterion for the eschatological judgment in the *Gorgias*, is discussed by A. De Castro Caeiro. In Plato's description of the way we face death, we pass over from life to live in accordance with this absolute suspension of being with others. Nothing there can rehabilitate us. This judgment, then, involves a state of not being capable of returning to the world. Present time is not reset, and we remain tied to what we were. This violation of guilt is what cancels out possibilities, of installation in the world. We are no longer able to be in any specific place, and the world closes up for us. This nudity, this hard truth, is detectable because we stop being channelled towards the world. Everything is attention and concern; everything is fear. This crisis occurs "suddenly and unexpectedly", that is, we do not prepare for it; rather, it occurs against our will, against every expectation, and we do not want to go through it. What is at stake is not a judicial or religious failing, or the idea of not living up to what others think of us. What is at stake is the loss of ourselves, the non-recognition of ourselves. We enter into the situation of reflecting upon the overall meaning of our life. It is an ontological not an ontical question. It is not connected to transgression as such. There are no specific elements with which we can compare what we are with what we think we are, but instead a different possibility: it is life that asks us how things are with us, without us having been who we were to be, if this great turning-point for things occurred.

The ἔπος as an essential element of access to true knowledge is seen by M. Gómez as an echo of the Mysteries of Eleusis. It is the body of a



beautiful boy alone that can inspire in the lover the memory of a previous knowledge. As in the ritual of the Mysteries, love is an initiatory path, a ritual trip that ends up converting one to philosophy.

Fidel Blanco examines the extent to which Plato's notion of soul ( $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ ) can be considered an Orphic element brought to Plato's doctrine. The author discusses how myths, taken from Orphic imagery, are used by Plato as a means of persuasion when reason fails to be convincing. Plato does not seem to have a positive vision of Orphic religion as a whole. He certainly repudiated those "professional" magicians who carried out their incantations in the name of Orpheus, and who promised to make amends for injustices and grievances in exchange for money. He also despised the Orphic promise of annulling an individual's faults through a simple incantation rather than through the exercise of virtue and knowledge. Nevertheless, he values positively some aspects of the Orphic religion. These include the depreciation of the body with regard to the soul, and the necessity of purification, seen as the initiation into philosophy, and salvation, seen as salvation through knowledge. Indeed, the fact is that these Orphic elements, although transformed, sustained some of the central ideas of Plato's thinking. As Guthrie observes, when "the same doctrine is shown now as the subject of an Orphic myth, and now as the object of dialectical proof, it becomes impossible to avoid the conclusion that Plato thought of the Orphic myths (we have to add, after a much needed process of selection and recycling) as the complementary mythological expression of profound philosophical truths".

Three articles are devoted to the Neoplatonic tradition and how the philosophers of this time, particularly Proclus and Iamblichus, made use of Orphic verses and the *Chaldean Oracles* to interpret the doctrine of the philosophers of the previous centuries.

A. Bordoi examines the methodology used by Proclus to incorporate Orphism into the exegesis of Plato's *Timaeus*, especially in terms of understanding one of the key elements of Platonic cosmology, the demiurge. He reviews the historiographical categories concerning the relationship between philosophy and religion in Neoplatonism, including Proclus' texts, such as the *Hymns* and the *Commentary to Chaldean Philosophy*, and analyses the four elements involved in the process: the definition of Orpheus as a "theological poet", contrary to others like Homer or Hesiod; the inherent nature of the speech on the origin of cosmos and the consequent use of theological doctrines; the importance of Pythagoras of Samos as a form of mediation between the doctrines of Orpheus and Plato; and the testimony of the history of the exegesis of Plato's *Timaeus*.

J. De Garay explores the fact that whereas the ideas of the theologians were criticized by Plato in their attribution of inappropriate behaviour to the gods, Proclus devoted his two works, *In Remp VI* and *In Crat*, to defending the value of myth and to showing how it should be correctly construed. His doctrine on imagination and nomination supports his explanations. Garay argues that the gods –and in particular the One– exceed nature and reason, as well as going beyond partial beauty. And for that same reason, the monstrous and execrable descriptions of the gods also express in an imaginative and symbolic way the transcendence of the divine *vis-à-vis* the human perspective. Moreover, all realities, both material and intelligible ones, belong to a series (*seira, taxis*) –that is, an order– which links them to the divine order (Inst 145), for which reason any action or material reality also displays the power of the divine. Among the Greek theologians Orfeo enjoys a paramount position (ThPl I-5, 25, 26-27) because he dealt with the absolute first cause, by contrast with Homer and Hesiod (*In Crat* CXIV y CXV). Likewise, the *Chaldean Oracles* show in a most inspired way the first realities.

María Jesús Hermoso considers one of the most controversial points in relation to the exegesis of the thought of Iamblichus: the coexistence in his work of an indisputable valuation of philosophy and a substantial presence of theurgy. This question is particularly interesting in that it ultimately implies a much wider and more complex one: the meaning of the relationship between mystery religions and philosophy at that time.

Since proposing a chronology capable of dismantling this coexistence cannot be convincingly justified (even B. D. Larsen states that establishing a chronology of his works is impossible), an attempt at a theoretical understanding becomes inevitable. At this point most experts propose that since Iamblichus had distanced himself from the anthropological optimism of Plotinus, he was obliged to introduce theurgy as a supernatural aid to overcome the weakness of the intellect, incapable of joining with the divine of its own accord. This interpretation is difficult to support if the assertions made by Iamblichus throughout his work (e.g. *Myst.* 1.3.2-18) are taken seriously. These assertions open up the way for an exploration of a new interpretative framework to account for the convergence of philosophy and theurgy in the thought of Iamblichus, respecting its internal coherence and searching for the meaning and soundness of what he proposes. The profound theoretical implications of the notions of symbol and beauty are crucial in the search for this framework.

Euripides may also be considered a philosopher, and his work *The Bacchae* is undoubtedly problematic in terms of any attempt to reconstruct the rites and practices of the Dionysiac cult in classical Greece. The

tragedy allows us a closer view of the effects that this cult had on the mentality of the age. In *The Bacchae* we witness a theophany of Dionysus that shakes the deepest foundations of the city of Thebes. The god comes to claim recognition for his divinity and to demand his due cult; he punishes the women who have besmirched his mother's name and questioned his descent, and takes brutal revenge on Pentheus, along with Agave and Cadmus. More than a conflict of powers, there is in this play a conflict of values. Piety is exalted above political order and human wisdom; and a life which trusts in the deity, as exemplified by the Maenads that accompany the god, is presented as an alternative to the search for great feats and public esteem. It is in the stasima of the chorus that the distance between the two ways of life is best shown. The appeal of a carefree happiness, one of exaltation, feasts and dancing, is skilfully described in them. But the Bacchic possession, as ambiguous as the god himself, also shows in this tragedy its threatening and disturbing aspect. *Megála kai phanerá* are purity, piety and honouring the gods, but *phanerós* is also the unmerciful justice of Dionysus. *Megála kai phanerá* are also the words with which the insane Agave exalts the trophy of her heroic hunting, nothing less than the bleeding head of her own son.

The final chapter of the book is devoted to the Orphic god Protogonos. Two Orphic poems of the Hellenistic age, the *Theogony of Hieronymus* (OF 78-80) and the *Rhapsodies* (OF 114-158), feature a god introduced by the Orphics in the Greek pantheon: Protogonos. He is described as a primeval god born of an egg, blazing, androgynous and with golden wings (OF 121, 123, 134). He had many names, including Protogonos, Eros, Metis and Erikepaios (OF 140). This god is probably alluded to by Aristophanes (*Av.* 696-7) and Euripides (*Hyps.* 1103-1108), and is named in an Orphic gold tablet from Thurii (c. 400 BC, OF 492.3). Some details suggest that Plato took inspiration from this god as a means of conceiving the primitive men in Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposion* (189de, 190a, 191c). The allusion to Zeus as the first and last god in the *Laws* (715e-716a) also seems to imply a mythical scheme in which Zeus swallows Protogonos, as in the Orphic poem of Derveni (c. 500 BC). Besides, the figure of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* (28c, 29e, 30b, 32c) could be based on Phanes or the Orphic Zeus, considered as artisans of the world through their intellect (OF 15.1-2; 18.1; 127 1).

Given its interdisciplinary character, this book will be of great interest to a broad academic readership interested in the origin of Hellenic thought and culture. It will be especially useful for those eager for a deeper

approach to two fundamental areas of interest to many scholars of Antiquity: Greek philosophy and religion.

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# THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE INITIATION LANGUAGE OF MYSTERY RELIGIONS INTO PHILOSOPHICAL TERMINOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

Greek philosophy progressively incorporated the language of the Greek Mystery Cults, such as Orphism, Dionysianism, and the Eleusinian rites. This use, noted in the preface of Parmenides' poem, reached its greatest expression in some of the main Platonic dialogues, and extended to Stoicism and many of the Neoplatonist philosophers. This chapter focuses on the transposition of initiation language in the philosophy of Plato and the early Stoic philosophers. The analysis illustrates that Platonic and Stoic philosophies incorporated the characteristic language of the Mystery Cults to underscore the notion that philosophical knowledge results from a process similar to a religious initiation. In Platonic philosophy access to the knowledge of ideal Forms is seen as an initiation that requires the kind of attention and concentration that only the philosopher, adopting the priest's role in the initiation function, can achieve. Similarly, early Stoic philosophers considered that they were the true priests and could guide other men to the knowledge of the divine will that rules the cosmos.

## 2. Divine knowledge and Presocratic philosophers

From the time of its origins, Greek philosophy was regarded as an elitist path to a kind of knowledge available only to those privileged few who

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<sup>1</sup> This study forms part of the project "Utilización del vocabulario mítico-religioso en la formación de la terminología presocrática" (Use of mythico-religious vocabulary in the formation of Presocratic terminology), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Spanish Government, reference FFI2012-32647.

were bold enough to follow it. Consequently, many of these philosophers presented themselves to their contemporaries as extraordinary beings, gifted with a superhuman capacity that allowed them to access almost divine knowledge, impossible to attain for the immense majority of mortals. In fact, the acquisition of knowledge brought the philosopher closer to the divinity, being the only one capable of its possession. This is well illustrated in the anecdotes attributed to some of the seven sages, which reveal that they refused to be considered as such; owing to their mortal condition, they had to concede that only god is wise<sup>2</sup>. Socrates adopted this humble attitude by proclaiming his ignorance, and declaring that the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing. Thus, he refused to be described as a wise man because, indeed, such a description could only be applied to the divinity<sup>3</sup>. Because wisdom was considered divine, many philosophers were associated with the gods themselves, who in one way or another were thought to have granted them access to their superhuman wisdom.

This is the case, for instance, with Pythagoras. He presented himself as a descendant of Apollo and Hermes<sup>4</sup>, and claimed that he had learned a great deal of knowledge from these deities, including one of their most astounding and unique lessons: that the soul is immortal, and after the death of the body it transmigrates to other beings. As we know Pythagoras taught his theories to his disciples in southern Italy, demanding of them that they kept his teaching secret, and that they revealed nothing to those who were not part of his closed and exclusive circle. Ancient testimonies coincide in observing the strict structure of Pythagoras' school, and that stringent requirements were asked of his followers in order that they be allowed to listen to his teaching. Moreover, it is known that he divided his students according to hierarchies, as a function of the degree of acquired knowledge they had attained. Pythagoras' school, thus, was the first in the West to liken the process of knowledge acquisition to a slow initiation. This process led the initiate from ignorance to wisdom under the tutelage and guidance of a master, Pythagoras, who was considered divine, rather than human, by his followers.

Something similar could be said of Parmenides, who devoted the entire poem of his poem to an explanation of how he had received all his knowledge from an unnamed goddess. The terminology used in those first verses evokes the language of initiations. He refers, for instance, to the transition from the darkness of the night to the light, accompanied by the

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<sup>2</sup> D. L. 1.28.

<sup>3</sup> Pl. *Ap.* 23a.

<sup>4</sup> Heraclid. *Pont. Fr.* 89 Wehrli.

Heliades in his voyage “to push back with their hands the veils from their heads”<sup>5</sup>, and to the culminating moment of going through the doors to enter the realm of the goddess. This crucial moment, when the goddess benevolently welcomes him and begins to instruct him with her didactic speech, is used by Parmenides to establish that every one of his statements about 3, and not being originated from divine wisdom, to which he had the fortune of being the first initiate.

In a similar but more radical vein<sup>6</sup>, Empedocles, in the *Katharmoi*, legitimized his condition of master before the citizens of Agrigento. He claimed to be “an immortal God, no longer mortal”, therefore placing himself above all other men<sup>7</sup>. For this reason, he could address them in an imperative and solemn tone, proudly asserting: “I know indeed that truth is in the words I shall utter”<sup>8</sup>. Likewise, in the *Peri physeos* Empedocles presents himself to his disciple Pausanias as someone inspired by the immortal Muse Calliope, who permits him, as if he were a supplicant, “to reveal an account of the blessed gods”<sup>9</sup>. In this way, Empedocles counsels all who listen to him that, having attained his divine condition, he is ready to initiate other mortals into such supernatural wisdom.

Finally, Heraclitus claimed to be in exclusive possession of the knowledge of a divine Logos, which most men are unable to learn and understand, regardless of how much effort he made in trying to explain it to them<sup>10</sup>. His arrogant attitude is reminiscent of that of an oracle, like the Delphic Sibyl, who conveys the words of the god Apollo in an obscure and enigmatic manner, such that the attendants are incapable of understanding them<sup>11</sup>. In fact, Heraclitus himself seems to have adopted the role of a prophet announcing the word of god before the astounded listeners, who are unable to comprehend them. For this reason, he also established a clear division between those few fortunate ones who, like himself, know the divine Logos, and the mass of ignorant men who do not. This proud attitude, as we will see later, inspired the first Stoic philosophers to consider themselves as priests, and to present themselves as the only ones capable of deciphering divine design.

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<sup>5</sup> DK 28 B 1.10.

<sup>6</sup> Trépanier 2004: 37: “While Parmenides presented himself as the passive recipient of divine knowledge, Empedocles claimed to be himself a divine authority, the active possessor of some final truth about the world”.

<sup>7</sup> DK 31 B 112. Cf. DK 31 B 113.

<sup>8</sup> DK 31 B 114.

<sup>9</sup> DK 31 B 131.

<sup>10</sup> DK 22 B 1.

<sup>11</sup> DK 22 B 92. Cf. DK 22 B 93.

### 3. Plato and the initiation into divine wisdom by means of the languages of Mystery religions

Plato incorporated into his philosophical system this sharp and radical separation between divine wisdom and the ignorance of humans who struggle to attain it, characteristic of some of the most renowned Presocratic philosophers, making it the pillar of one of the main axes of his thought. Indeed, he continued the line initiated by the Presocratic philosophers by postulating the existence of divine and eternal truths, the ideal Forms, which the souls of men, notably the souls of philosophers, aspire to behold and comprehend. To explain the epistemological process that leads to them, Plato postulated the immortality of the soul, inspired by notions that had Orphic-Pythagorean origins<sup>12</sup>. Thus, in the *Phaedrus*, he tells of how souls were originally part of the divine entourage that had the opportunity of fleetingly beholding the Forms, in a place even above the heavens of the Olympic gods. He referred to this place, which even the gods visit only rarely<sup>13</sup>, as “supracelestial”, a *topos hyperouranios*. In this very context, Plato described how human souls finally lost the privilege of living among the gods, resulting in their fall into human bodies, and hence initiating a long and arduous terrestrial pilgrimage far from the world where they had dwelled so joyfully. To illustrate this, Plato presented the well-known myth of the charioteer governing a chariot pulled by a good, docile and beautiful horse, and another unresponsive, evil and ugly one. This striking image is used to illustrate that men’s souls, of divine and immortal nature, were forced to live in this world, buried in a body that tyrannizes them and prevents them from returning to the yearned paradise where they once lived joyfully and blessedly in the company of the gods.

Plato devoted a considerable part of his work to explaining how souls could return to the sacred and divine place whence they came. Moreover, he was aware that postulating such a divine space had religious connotations, and therefore resorted to the language of the Orphic, Dionysian, and Eleusian Mystery religions to describe a process that could hardly be expressed through philosophy’s more conventional terminology. In fact, Plato admitted the impossibility of expressing the notion of “immortality” with words, given that it lies beyond the bounds of human understanding. And thus, “about its form we must say the following: that what kind of thing it belongs to a completely and utterly superhuman exposition, and a long one; to say what it resembles requires a lesser one,

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this issue, see Casadesús 2013a.

<sup>13</sup> Pl. *Phdr.* 247c.



one within human capacities”. For this reason, the immortal “cannot be expressed by any reasoned word, but we, though we have never seen or rightly conceived a god, imagine an immortal being which has both a soul and a body which are united for all time”<sup>14</sup>. Note how Plato was aware of the limits of the rational *logos*, the *logos lelogismenos*, when describing and expressing a reality that eludes human knowledge. Similarly, Plato also had to accept that the description of such supradivine places could not be achieved with poetic language either, even though it was specialized in describing the Olympic gods and the sacred places they inhabit, for the *hyperouranios topos*, “was never worthily sung by any earthly poet, nor will it ever be”<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, after accepting the limitations of the rational language of philosophy, and the figurative and fictitious language of poetry, Plato chose to introduce into his dialogues the language of Mystery religions to attempt to describe a reality that resisted explanation with other sorts of language. Conditioned by the use of Mystery terminology, he therefore developed his philosophy in the image of the initiation process that characterized those religions. Consequently, he regarded the initiation into philosophy as a similar process to a religious initiation in which the purification of the soul, by complying with specific precepts and rites, is a strict requirement. Plato viewed the process of purification of the soul as a progressive relinquishing of ignorance leading to the attainment, in life, of the greatest degree of wisdom; once completely initiated, this allowed the soul to free itself from the cycle of reincarnations and return to the divine world from which it originated. A passage from the *Phaedo* well illustrates the analogy that he used to express these ideas:

I fancy that those men who established the initiations in the mysteries were not unenlightened, but in reality had a hidden meaning when they said long ago that whoever goes uninitiated and unsanctified to the other world will lie in the mire, but he who arrives there initiated and purified will dwell with the gods. For as the initiated say, ‘many bear the thyrsus, few are the bacchi’; and these initiated are, I believe, those who have rightly philosophized<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Ἀθάνατον δὲ οὐδ’ ἐξ ἐνός λόγου λελογισμένου, ἀλλὰ πλάττομεν οὔτε ἰδόντες οὔτε ἰκανῶς νοήσαντες θεόν, ἀθάνατόν τι ζῶον, ἔχον μὲν ψυχὴν, ἔχον δὲ σῶμα, τὸν αἰεὶ δὲ χρόνον ταῦτα συμπεφυκότα. Pl. *Phdr.* 246c.

<sup>15</sup> Τὸν δὲ ὑπερουράνιον τόπον οὔτε τις ὕμνησέ πω τῶν τῆδε ποιητῆς οὔτε ποτὲ ὕμνησει κατ’ ἄξιαν. ἔχει δὲ ὧδε – τολμητέον γὰρ οὖν τό γε ἀληθὲς εἰπεῖν. Pl. *Phdr.* 247c.

<sup>16</sup> Pl. *Phd.* 69c-d.

The text distinguishes between the initiated and the uninitiated, whose souls, upon arriving in Hades after separating from their bodies, will be rewarded or punished as a function of their degree of purification. The punishment of lying in the mire of Hades has a distinctive Orphic origin, whereas the reference to the bearers of the thyrsus is evocative of the Dionysian rites<sup>17</sup>. Nevertheless, the most striking aspect of this passage is that Plato stated that those who instituted the initiations “are those who have rightly philosophized” (πεφιλοσοφηκότες ὀρθῶς). Thus he suggested that the doctrinal principles of Mystery Cults were philosophically valid. Such principles, conveniently transformed, constitute the ideal way for the soul to reclaim its divine condition. Moreover, we believe that the expression “rightly philosophize” offers an interpretative clue to what Plato intended to express here. It is no coincidence that he repeats it twice again in the *Phaedo* as a means of insisting that only the pure soul, uncontaminated by the body and concentrated on itself, will dwell in the company of divinity because it “has rightly philosophized” (ὀρθῶς φιλοσοφοῦσα)<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, only “those who rightly philosophize” (ὀρθῶς φιλόσοφοι) abandon bodily passions. Only they, therefore, are apt to gain access to the lineage of the gods<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4. Memory and oblivion. The model of Orphic doctrine

Plato made masterful use of the possibilities afforded by the terminology of initiations, which he did when introducing the notions of memory and reminiscence to explain how the souls could recover their knowledge of divine truth, forgotten when buried in a mortal body.

In the *Gorgias*, he wrote these ideas as the words of Socrates, in a context of initiation, to warn Callicles about the punishments he would receive in the afterlife for his arrogance and unfairness. Thus, after citing Euripides<sup>20</sup>, and asking himself “who knows if to live is to be dead, and to be dead, to live?”<sup>21</sup>, Socrates resorts to the notion of the *soma-sema*, of a strongly Orphic flavour<sup>22</sup>, when claiming that “I once heard sages say that we are now dead, and the body (*soma*) is our tomb (*sema*)”. He thereafter refers to “some smart fellow, a Sicilian or Italian”, a description that might

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Pl. *R.* 363d where it is stated that the reward in Hades for the initiated is “an everlasting drunkenness”.

<sup>18</sup> Pl. *Phd.* 80e.

<sup>19</sup> Pl. *Phd.* 82b-c.

<sup>20</sup> E. *Polyid. Fr.* 12 Jouan-Van Looy 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Pl. *Grg.* 492e.

<sup>22</sup> Pl. *Cra.* 400c. On this issue, see Bernabé 1995.

allude to some Pythagorean familiar with Orphic doctrine, who, expressing himself in a mythical manner, referred to the thoughtless (*anoetous*) as “uninitiate” (*amuetous*). Thus, Plato likened the ignorant men who lack understanding and sense to the uninitiated (*amuetoi*) in a Mystery religion. This leads to an association of those who do have knowledge with the initiated or *mystai*; ultimately, with those who, according to the above expression from the *Phaedo*, “rightly philosophize”.

In fact, the passage from the *Gorgias* concludes with the reminder of the punishment that awaits the uninitiated in Hades: to carry water in a sieve to a leaky jar, another of the Orphic punishments, besides lying in the mire<sup>23</sup>. However, the passage is remarkable because of the interpretation it offers of this punishment, when Socrates explains that, according to the anonymous character that told him about it, the water leaking through the sieve’s holes symbolizes the lack of memory and forgetfulness of the ignorant and uninitiated:

These uninitiates will be most wretched, and will carry water into their leaky jar with a sieve which is no less leaky. And then by the sieve as my story-teller said, he means the soul: and the soul of the thoughtless he likened to a sieve, as being perforated, since it is unable to hold anything by reason of its unbelief and forgetfulness<sup>24</sup>.

Socrates, aware of the surprise that might be caused by this transposition of Mystery terminology to the domain of his own philosophical postulates, conceded thereafter that “all this, indeed, is bordering pretty well on the absurd (*atopa*), but still it sets forth what I wish to impress upon you”<sup>25</sup>.

On the same lines, in the *Meno* he associated the notion of the soul’s immortality to the domain of religion by attributing it to priests and priestesses, in addition to Pindar, whose verses he cites, and to other poets he regarded as “divine” (*theioi*):

They were certain priests and priestesses who have studied so as to be able to give a reasoned account of their ministry; and Pindar also (...). They say that the soul of man is immortal, and at one time comes to an end, which is called dying, and at another is born again, but never perishes.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Pl. R.* 363c; *Phd.* 69c.

<sup>24</sup> *Pl. Grg.* 493b-c. For a more detailed analysis, see Bernabé 2011 and Casadesús 1997.

<sup>25</sup> *Pl. Grg.* 493c.

Consequently one ought to live all one's life in the utmost holiness:

For from whomsoever Persephone shall accept requital for ancient wrong, the souls of these she restores in the ninth year to the upper sun again; from them arise glorious kings and men of splendid might and surpassing wisdom, and for all remaining time are they called holy heroes amongst mankind<sup>26</sup>.

After citing Pindar's verses, Plato stresses the notion that the soul is immortal, and that it is subjected to a cycle that leads it from here to Hades and vice versa. Moreover, in a new demonstration of his tendency to make the most of the possibilities offered by the terminology borrowed from the Mysterious religions, he again directly relates the notion of immortality with memory and reminiscence, to conclude that the soul, in its comings and goings from the afterlife, has learned it all<sup>27</sup>:

Seeing then that the soul is immortal and has been born many times, and has beheld all things both in this world and in the nether realms, she has acquired knowledge of all and everything; so that it is no wonder that she should be able to recollect all that she knew before about virtue and other things (...) since, it would seem, research and learning are wholly recollection<sup>28</sup>.

By associating the notion of immortality with the process of retrieving what souls already know but have forgotten, Plato paved the way to transform the process of initiation of a Mystery religion into a philosophical kind of learning. Through this process, the reminiscence of that which has been learned but forgotten leads progressively to the maximal level of knowledge, the moment of ecstasy when the soul reaches the highest degree of philosophical initiation.

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<sup>26</sup> Pi. *Fr.*133 Maehl. Bernabé 1999: 244: "The reasoning that follows the verse citation (*sc.* by Pindar) is clearly Platonic in nature, to apply this set of ideas to his own about knowledge as reminiscence".

<sup>27</sup> Guthrie 1952: 242: "It becomes impossible to avoid the conclusion that Plato thought of the Orphic myths as the complementary mythological expression of profound philosophical truths. The theory of recollection is the most striking instance, since it is shown to be inextricably bound up on the one hand with the whole doctrine of transmigration, even down to its details, and on the other hand with the characteristically Platonic theory of Ideas".

<sup>28</sup> Pl. *Men.* 81a-c.

## 5. The myth of Er and the Plain of Oblivion

In the eschatological myths of the *Phaedo*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic*, Plato described what becomes of souls in Hades before they reincarnate<sup>29</sup>. In the “myth of Er” he used strongly Orphic terminology to explain that souls are required to drink water from the River of Forgetfulness and, after choosing their new life, they march towards the Plain of Oblivion (τὸ τῆς Λήθης πεδίον). There, they camp next to the River of Forgetfulness (τὸν Ἀμέλητα ποταμόν) “whose waters no vessel can contain”, and from which they are required to drink. This is the reason why, before reincarnating, they forget all that they have witnessed in Hades.

The reference to forgetting is reminiscent of the text contained in the Orphic tablets which tells of a path to the left that leads to a spring, next to a white cypress. The tablets recommend avoiding this path, and mention instead the lake of memory, *Mnemosyne*. On its shores there are some guardians who ask the thirsty souls why they roam the darkness of Hades, to which the souls must answer:

I am the son of Earth and starry Heaven, but my race is heavenly: know this you too. I am dry with thirst and dying. Give me quickly then water from that which flows fresh from the lake of Mnemosyne<sup>30</sup>.

Although there are certain differences between the description in the tablets and the one given by Plato<sup>31</sup>, the main notions —salvation or condemnation depending on the chosen path, and the possibility of drinking from the waters of memory or forgetfulness, respectively— relate the Platonic eschatological myths with these Orphic texts. And it is precisely this opposition between memory and oblivion that seems to have interested Plato, and which he freely adapted to his own system.

Indeed, the tablets stress that the thirsty soul yearns to drink water from the spring of memory. The spring of forgetfulness is not mentioned by name, but it is easy to gather that it is the one on the left, recognizable by its proximity to the white cypress. The directive is clear: avoid drinking water from that spring, because it leads to what the soul of the initiated most wants to avoid, that is, to lose its memory and reincarnate once more. The other spring, of memory, is much more inaccessible, given that it is

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<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the Platonic eschatological myths, see Casadesús 2013b.

<sup>30</sup> Tablet from Petelia.

<sup>31</sup> As highlighted by Bernabé-Jiménez 2008.

protected by guardians that question the soul, which must answer with the aforementioned formula, as a sort of pass phrase.

Plato, however, proceeds in the opposite manner. He focuses on the moment at which the souls have already been judged. Condemned to reincarnation, the souls must gather at the Plain of Oblivion (τὸ τῆς Λήθης πεδῖον) and drink water from the River of Forgetfulness<sup>32</sup>. For the souls, this act has the opposite consequence from that of the initiated in the tablets drinking water from the spring of memory: the return to a body, and the recommencement of the cycle of reincarnations once more. It is very illustrative that Plato defined the waters of that river as “waters which no vessel can contain”, because they are evocative of the punishment for the soul of the senseless mentioned in the *Gorgias*, which “by reason of its unbelief and forgetfulness”, is forced to carry water in a sieve to a leaky jar. As noted above, the impossibility of retaining the water, according to the Platonic interpretation, symbolizes the inability of the uninitiated and ignorant to keep their memory<sup>33</sup>.

However, Plato did not simply offer this negative vision. In the *Phaedrus* he describes a converse geography to that of the Plain of Oblivion (τὸ τῆς Λήθης πεδῖον) when explaining that the philosopher aspires to return to the Plain of Truth (τὸ ἀληθείας πεδῖον)<sup>34</sup>, of which the souls managed to catch but a glimpse in their celestial entourage during their first voyage in the winged chariot, before returning to the cycle of reincarnations. The Plain of Truth is, thus, geographically and conceptually opposed to the Plain of Oblivion. Notably, this contrast is implicit in the etymological meaning of the Greek word ἀλήθεια, “truth”, which is explained as ἀ-λήθεια, literally, “non-oblivion”. It is thus highly meaningful that in the Pharsalos<sup>35</sup> tablet, the soul of the initiated is ordered to

Tell them the whole *truth* (ἀληθείην) straight out

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<sup>32</sup> Pugliese Carratelli 2003: 47 notes that, indeed, the situation described by Plato in the *Republic*, where souls destined to be reincarnated are required to assemble at the plain of Oblivion and drink water from the river of Forgetfulness, “is opposed to the fate reserved for the initiates in the Orphic eschatology (known to Plato), that related Memory with the liberation from the repetition of limited and distressing existences”.

<sup>33</sup> Pl. *Grg.* 493a-d.

<sup>34</sup> Pl. *Phd.* 95c also alludes to the philosopher’s confidence that he will reach, after death, this eternal and divine place.

<sup>35</sup> *OF* 477.

when meeting the guardians that watch over the spring of memory (Μνημοσύνη). This seems to be a veiled etymological word game in which truth, ἀλήθεια, is understood as “non-oblivion”, at a crucial moment for the initiated, just before stating the pass phrase to the guardians that will grant it access to the spring of Memory. Likewise, Plato also shows that he is very aware of the etymological meaning of truth as non-oblivion (ἀ-λήθεια), when emphasizing that the proper nourishment for the souls is to be found in the field of the Plain of Truth (τὸ ἀληθείας πεδῖον)<sup>36</sup>.

In this manner, Plato modified the Orphic initiation and soteriological scheme to transfer it to his own ethical and epistemological system. Whereas here it is the philosopher’s soul that has the chance, by virtue of its memory and wisdom, to return to the divine entourage mentioned in the *Phaedrus*, the soul of the Orphic initiate yearns to recover its divine condition, which—as deduced from the myth of the Titans—entails recovering Dionysian purity. In sum, the soul, aware of its condition, longs to return to its heavenly condition, as can be read in some of the Orphic tablets:

I am the son of Earth and starry Heaven, but my race is heavenly<sup>37</sup>.  
 You have been born a god, from the man that you were<sup>38</sup>.  
 Happy and fortunate, you will be god, from mortal that you were<sup>39</sup>.

In order to realize such longing, it is crucial that it drinks water from the spring of Memory, distancing itself from the spring of Forgetfulness. This sublime moment crowns the initiation process, as suggested by the final invocation of the Orphic hymn dedicated to Mnemosyne:

Blessed Goddess, awaken for the initiates (μύσται) the memory  
 of the sacred rite (τελετή), and ward off forgetfulness from them<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Pl. *Phdr.* 248b-c. The cycle to which souls are subjected is suggested in some of the terminological oppositions engraved in the bone tablets discovered in Olbia. They mention the Orphics and Dionysus, they allude to the cycle of reincarnations, life-death-life, and they relate, through confrontation, lie-truth/body-soul.

<sup>37</sup> *OF* 476.6-7. Cf. 475.12 y 15.

<sup>38</sup> *OF* 487.2.

<sup>39</sup> *OF* 488.9.

<sup>40</sup> *OH* 77.9 s.

## 6. The philosophical retrieval of truth and divine wisdom

Plato invested a great effort in explaining how the soul can progressively retrieve the memory and understanding of what it already knew but has forgotten when returning to the world in a new body. Resorting in this case to terms taken from Mystery rites, in the *Phaedrus* he explained what is entailed by this process of philosophical initiation, which, identified with the process of learning and reminiscence, must conclude with the freeing of the soul when, in full ecstasy and enthusiasm, it regains the plenitude of its divine condition:

For a human being must understand a general conception formed by collecting into a unity by means of reason the many perceptions of the senses; and this is a recollection of those things which our soul once beheld, when it journeyed with God and, lifting its vision above the things which we now say exist, rose up into real being. And therefore it is just that the mind of the philosopher only has wings, for he is always, so far as he is able, in communion through memory with those things the communion with which causes God to be divine. Now a man who employs such memories rightly is always being initiated into perfect mysteries and he alone becomes truly perfect; but since he separates himself from human interests and turns his attention toward the divine, he is rebuked by the vulgar, who consider him mad and do not know that he is inspired (ἐνθουσιάζων)<sup>41</sup>.

Note how, indeed, Plato linked memory to the initiation process, to the point of forcing the etymological word game with the term “initiation” (*telete*): “a man who employs such memories rightly is always being initiated into perfect mysteries and he alone becomes truly perfect”, τοῖς δὲ δὴ τοιούτοις ἀνὴρ ὑπομνήμασιν ὀρθῶς χρώμενος, τελέους ἀεὶ τελετὰς τελούμενος, τέλος ὄντως μόνος γίγνεται. Thus, when noting the relation between the words τελετή, “initiation”, and τέλος, “finished”, “perfect”, Plato is suggesting that philosophical initiation consists of using rightly (*orthos*)—by means of the dialectic method—the memories that the soul keeps by virtue of its divine condition, but has nevertheless forgotten when reincarnating again. In fact, the expression ὑπομνήμασιν ὀρθῶς χρώμενος, evokes the action of philosophizing “rightly” οἱ πεφιλοσοφηκότες ὀρθῶς, mentioned on three occasions in the *Phaedo*, which refers to regaining the soul’s condition by means of the practice of reminiscence, presented as the most complete of initiations. In this context it is most illustrative that Plato considered that he who—like the

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<sup>41</sup> Pl. *Phdr.* 249b-d.



philosopher— attains this degree of initiation is in a state of “enthusiasm”, ἐνθουσιάζων, that is to say, in the most literal and etymological sense, is possessed by the divinity. Plato described the reencounter between the soul and the divine using terminology that evokes the ecstasy of the Bacchic rites and the followers of the god of wine, possessed by their effluvia and by Dionysian frenzy or mania. In fact, in the *Symposium*, Plato had Alcibiades, in his defence of Socrates, define the philosopher as someone who is possessed “by the bacchic frenzy”, τῆς φιλοσόφου μανίας τε καὶ βακχείας<sup>42</sup>. To clarify that with this expression he was alluding to the Mystery cults that adored Dionysus, he added that those intimacies of Socrates that Alcibiades was about to describe should not be heard by domestic servants or the profane, who “must clap the heaviest of doors upon their ears” to avoid hearing them. This is a clear allusion to the well-known Orphic maxim “close the doors to the profane”<sup>43</sup>, used to draw the limits between the initiated and uninitiated in his doctrine.

In any case, after describing the state of “enthusiasm”, Plato goes on in the *Phaedrus* to tell of that moment of greatest splendour for the few souls who, because they had kept sufficient memory, are able to overcome the oblivion of what they had seen when living amongst the gods, and by means of the use of reminiscence can regain their divine condition. Here he used terminology that originated in the Mysteries of Eleusis, in addition to Orphic and Dionysian language:

They saw beauty shining in brightness, when, with a blessed company— we following in the train of Zeus, and others in that of some other god— they saw the blessed sight and vision and were initiated into that which is rightly called the most blessed of mysteries, which we celebrated in a state of perfection, when we were without experience of the evils which awaited us in the time to come, being permitted as initiates to the sight of perfect and simple and calm and happy apparitions, which we saw in the pure light, being ourselves pure and not entombed in this which we carry about with us and call the body, in which we are imprisoned like an oyster in its shell<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Pl. *Smp.* 218b. In the *Sophist* 216c-d, Socrates also refers to philosophers as divine, and as giving the impression of being completely insane.

<sup>43</sup> For a detailed study of this expression, see Bernabé 1996.

<sup>44</sup> Κάλλος δὲ τότε ἦν ἰδεῖν λαμπρόν, ὅτε σὺν εὐδαιμόνι χορῶ μακαριάν ὄψιν τε καὶ θέαν, ἐπόμνητοι μετὰ μὲν Διὸς ἡμεῖς, ἄλλοι δὲ μετ’ ἄλλου θεῶν, εἶδόν τε καὶ ἐτελοῦντο τῶν τελετῶν ἣν θέμις λέγειν μακαριωτάτην, ἣν ὀργιάζομεν ὀλόκληροι μὲν αὐτοὶ ὄντες καὶ ἀπαθεῖς κακῶν ὅσα ἡμᾶς ἐν ὑστέρω χρόνῳ ὑπέμενεν, ὀλόκληρα δὲ καὶ ἀπλᾶ καὶ ἀτρεμῆ καὶ εὐδαιμόνα φάσματα μυσούμεοι τε καὶ ἐποπτεύοντες ἐν αὐγῇ καθαρᾷ, καθарοὶ ὄντες καὶ ἀσημάντοι τούτου ὃ νῦν δὴ

In this passage, the expression εὐδαίμονι χορῶν is evocative of a festive gathering or a dance celebrated in a religious ceremony, such as in the Dionysian or Eleusinian rites<sup>45</sup>. Likewise, it conveys the idea that the divine vision attained at that moment is a result of having being initiated into the mysteries, ἐτελοῦντο τῶν τελετῶν, and having taken part in the corresponding celebrations, ὀργιάζομεν. The text insists, moreover, that beholding such a blissful vision, ὄψιν τε καὶ θεῶν (...) μακαριωτάτην, in its purest brightness, ἐν ἀυγῇ καθαρᾷ, is only possible for the initiates and *epoptai*, μούμενοι τε καὶ ἐποπτεύοντες<sup>46</sup>, after the souls have been purified and freed from the burial known as “body”, καθαροὶ ὄντες καὶ ἀσήμαντοι τούτου ὃ νῦν δὴ σῶμα περιφέροντες ὀνομάζομεν. In this fashion, Plato interwove the culminating moment of the Eleusinian rites, the contemplation of sacred objects, *epopteia*, and the Orphic theory that the body is the soul’s tomb, *soma-sema*. He contrasted here the most arduous and harshest moment for the soul—being locked in the darkness of a body tomb—with the moment of its liberation and the sight of the brightest and purest light.

## 7. The gradual transition from obscurity to the sudden contemplation of light. Diotima’s Speech and the myth of the cave

It is in the *Symposium*, during the so-called Diotima’s Speech—which includes the description of the path that leads to the vision of ideal Forms—that Plato resorted most evidently and manifestly to the model afforded by the Mystery initiations. In fact, the whole passage in which Socrates narrates his experience with Diotima is structured as an initiation session, in which a priestess or diviner initiates her disciple, as if she were a *mystagogos*. Moreover, it seems that Plato introduced this fictitious character in the dialogue for literary and philosophical reasons. With the pretext of instructing Socrates on the power of Eros, he presented his own thoughts framed as a Mystery initiation, specifically an Eleusinian one<sup>47</sup>.

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σῶμα περιφέροντες ὀνομάζομεν, ὀστρέου τρόπον δεδεσμευμένοι. Pl. *Phdr.* 250b-c.

<sup>45</sup> “Not a single ancient mystery cult can be found that is without dancing” τελετήν οὐδεμίαν ἀρχαίαν ἔστιν εὐρεῖν ἄνευ ὀρχήσεως, Luc. *Salt.* 15. Cf. E. *Ba.* 220.

<sup>46</sup> Riedweg 1986: 41: “Mit μούμενοι τε καὶ ἐποπτεύοντες sind wir nun unmissverständlich auf die Mysterien von Eleusis verwiesen”.

<sup>47</sup> Bury 1909: xxxix: “Diotima is a fictitious personage. Plato, no doubt purposely, avoids putting his exposition of Eros into the mouth of any historical person: to do so would be to imply that the theory conveyed is not original but derived. It is only

Plato did not hide his inspiration for putting these words in Diotima's mouth at the beginning of the speech, which must gradually lead Socrates from the earthly world to the contemplation of ideal Forms:

These are aspects of the mystery of love that perhaps you too, Socrates, might be initiated into. But for the final initiation and revelation, to which all this has been merely preliminary for someone on the right track, I am not sure if you have the capability<sup>48</sup>.

As noted by several scholars, Diotima's warning exhibits the typical gradation of the Mysteries of Eleusis: the initiation itself, *μηθειής*, having reached it, *τέλεα*, and the resulting access to the culminating moment, the vision or revelation, *ἐποπτικά*<sup>49</sup>. That is to say, a first phase, the *μύσις*, leads to the *τελετή*, which in turn leads to the culminating moment of vision or *ἐποπτεία*<sup>50</sup>. Finally, the adverb *ὀρθῶς*, used by Plato in the *Phaedo* to guarantee the correct use of the philosophical method, as noted above, is also repeated on several occasions throughout Diotima's speech to stress that these steps must be taken in a gradual fashion, in the specified order.

After reminding Socrates again that the culmination of the process is only possible if followed correctly, *ἐὰν ὀρθῶς ἡγήται ὁ ἡγούμενος*, Diotima explains the ascending path that leads from the initial phase of initiation, *μύσις*, the love for a single beautiful body, to the *ἐποπτεία*, the pure contemplation of Beauty itself. In fact, the first phase of initiation includes progressive steps that take the initiate from the love for bodies to the beauty of souls, and from these to the contemplation of the beauty of the laws and, immediately after, to that of sciences. When reaching this

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for purposes of literary art that Diotima here supplants the Platonic Socrates: she is presented, by a fiction, as his instructor, whereas in fact she merely gives utterance to his own thoughts”.

<sup>48</sup> Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐρωτικά ἴσως, ὃ Σώκρατες, κἄν σὺ μηθειής: τὰ δὲ τέλεα καὶ ἐποπτικά, ὧν ἕνεκα καὶ ταῦτα ἔστιν, ἐάν τις ὀρθῶς μετή, οὐκ οἶδ' εἰ οἶός τ' ἂν εἴη. ἐρῶ μὲν οὖν, ἔφη, ἐγὼ καὶ προθυμίας οὐδὲν ἀπολείψω· πειρῶ δὲ ἔπεσθαι, ἂν οἶός τε ἦς. Pl. *Smp.* 209e.

<sup>49</sup> Riedweg 1986: 5: “Die eleusinische Einweihung, das *μηθῆναι*, is ein mehrstufiger Prozess, bei dem es ein τέλος gibt, mit dem die *τελετή* erst richtig vollständig wird: τὰ ἐποπτικά”.

<sup>50</sup> Des Places 1964: 11ff.: “En principe, si *τελετή* désigne le degré d'initiation supérieur à la *μύσις*, *τελεῖν*, qui dans l'usage courant signifie “parachever, parfaire”, devrait dir plus que *μεῖν*. (...) L'epoptie, elle, ne peut être que le dernier acte, la contemplation des objets sacrés que l'hiérophante présentait en une ostension solennelle”. Cf. Burkert 1985: 276.

point, the initiate is able to perceive beauty abstractly, dispossessed of its material supports, bodies, laws, or sciences. It is at this point that the initiate, after overcoming each of the initiation grades, or μύησις, “turning towards the main ocean of the beautiful”, discovers the existence of the ideal Form of Beauty. It is then that he starts to reflect, to reason, and to engender “many fair fruits of discourse and meditation in a plenteous crop of philosophy”<sup>51</sup>.

To clarify that this point in the journey is the beginning of the second phase of the initiation process, Plato has Diotima speak these words:

When a man has been thus far tutored in the lore of love, passing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly (ἐξαίφνης) he will have revealed to him, as he draws to the close of his dealings in love, a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature; and this, Socrates, is the final object of all those previous toils<sup>52</sup>.

Note the admirable subtlety with which Plato employs the concepts to suggest that the initiate, after his effort to progress past the previous steps, has achieved the τελετή. First, he uses the verb παιδαγωγηθῆ in the passive voice, which is evocative of the verb μυσταγωγέω, to emphasize that the journey along that path has been led by a guide, Diotima, who has exercised a didactic function as mistress and initiator into the Mysteries. Thereafter, in order to establish that crucial moment at which the first phase of the μύησις is over, Plato suggests in a veiled manner that having reached the end, πρὸς τέλος ἤδη ἰὼν in fact means having completed the τελετή which gives the initiate access to the contemplation of the ideal Forms, the ἐποπτικά. Thus, he resorted to an etymological word game with the term *telete*, which, as noted above, he also used in the *Phaedrus* to emphasize that the culmination of the initiation has been reached.

It is also striking that after insisting that the process of μύησις consists of “passing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent”, θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὰ καλὰ, after the corresponding effort, πάντες πόνοι, the contemplation of Beauty itself takes place “suddenly”, ἐξαίφνης. By using this adverb, Plato stresses that owing to the didactic teachings of Diotima, only after his slow and effortful process

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<sup>51</sup> Τὸ πολὺ πέλαιος τετραμμένος τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ θεωρῶν πολλοὺς καὶ καλοὺς λόγους καὶ μεγαλοπρεπεῖς τίκτηι καὶ διανοήματα ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ ἀφθόνῳ. Pl. *Smp.* 210d.

<sup>52</sup> ὅς γὰρ ἂν μέχρι ἐνταῦθα πρὸς τὰ ἐρωτικά παιδαγωγηθῆ, θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὰ καλὰ, πρὸς τέλος ἤδη ἰὼν τῶν ἐρωτικῶν ἐξαίφνης κατόψεται τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν, τοῦτο ἐκεῖνο, ὃ Σώκρατες, οὗ δὴ ἔνεκεν καὶ οἱ ἔμπροσθεν πάντες πόνοι ἦσαν. Pl. *Smp.* 210e.

of progressive upward initiation, will Socrates suddenly pass from being profane and ignorant into the supracelestial world where Beauty itself roams<sup>53</sup>. Diotima's words aim to solemnize the transition from the profane and ignorant to the divine and sacred space where true knowledge dwells, a place only the philosopher's soul can reach<sup>54</sup>. This moment, as is also the case in the myth of the cave, is presented as a sudden illumination, a spark, that culminates the entire previous process. Thus, Plato suggests that achieving the contemplation of eternal truths requires, as in initiation rites, a learning process guided by a master who must teach it correctly. That is to say, the process necessarily requires a propaedeutic phase, a didactic phase, which prepares for the culminating moment of the initiation: the sudden illumination<sup>55</sup>.

Some scholars have suggested, likewise, that this division is reminiscent of the distinction between the Lesser and the Greater Mysteries<sup>56</sup>. The Lesser ones, celebrated in Agras during the spring, were a prelude to those celebrated in Eleusis in autumn. Initiation in the former was a requirement to gain access to the final initiation in the latter<sup>57</sup>, which were expected to end with the sudden vision, *epopteia*, of some sacred object<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> Tordesillas 2013: 263: “Il apparaît clairement que seule une méthode qui procède par ordre et correctement (ephexes te kai orthos) – et le terme orthos est récurrent dans ce passage – permettra de saisir à l'improviste et tout soudain (exaiphnes) «une certaine beauté merveilleuse par nature» (ti thaumaston ten phusin kalon), immuable et soustraite à toute forme de devenir”.

<sup>54</sup> Martin 1973: 48: “Im dem Aufstieg zur Idee des Schönen, wie ihn das symposium schildert, wird die endgültige Erfahrung der Idee des Schönen ausdrücklich als ein Schauen bezeichnet. Auch der Philosoph, der in Phaidros dem Götterzug zum Hyperouranios topos folgt, schaut dort die Ideen”.

<sup>55</sup> Bonnechere 2003: 177: “In oracles of Trophonius' kind, the voyage of the soul and the vision served as a revelation with a “visible manifestation” and spoken explanation, all in an atmosphere very similar to those Mysteries whose essential was to *experience* Truth through a montage of images combined with explanations. Some mysteries, those of Demeter and Meter, could also include frenzied behaviour *in some participants*”; this was experienced as an intense moment of privileged contact with the divinity”. Cf. Arist. *Fr.* 45 Rose.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Boyancé 1962: 468.

<sup>57</sup> This is what Socrates suggests when speaking ironically to Callicles: “You are fortunate, Callicles, in having been initiated into the Great Mysteries before the Lesser” εὐδαίμων εἶ, ὃ Καλλίκλεις, ὅτι τὰ μεγάλα μεμύησαι πρὶν τὰ μικρά: ἐγὼ δ' οὐκ ὤμην θεμιτὸν εἶναι, Pl. *Grg.* 497c. Cf. Des Places 1964: 12.

<sup>58</sup> Although it is not known with certainty what object or objects were contemplated, several options have been proposed, including wheat spike (Hippol. *Haer.* 5.8), statues, or images of divinities. The only thing that is known with

Plato conceived of the dialectic method in a similar way. It requires much initial dedication and effort to finally attain, in a flash, true knowledge. He expressed this on two occasions in the seventh letter:

As a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden (ἐξαίφνης), as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself<sup>59</sup>.

It is by means of the examination of each of these objects, comparing one with another, names and definitions, visions and sense-perceptions,—showing them with appropriate proofs and employing questioning and answering void of envy— it is by such means, and hardly so, that there bursts out the light (ἐξέλαμψε) of intelligence and reason regarding each object in the mind of him who uses every effort of which mankind is capable<sup>60</sup>.

Comparing this terminology with that used in the myth of the cave to explain how a prisoner frees himself from his chains to begin his path up a steep slope —symbolizing the effort and difficulty in leaving the darkness and entering the sunlight— reveals several coincidences with Diotima’s Speech that appear not to be casual. Indeed, in the *Republic*, we find that if the prisoner “was freed from his fetters and compelled to stand up suddenly (ἐξαίφνης) and turn his head around and walk and to lift up his eyes to the light (...) what do you suppose would be his answer if someone told him that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned toward more real things, he saw more truly?”<sup>61</sup>. A careful analysis of the passage reveals that the prisoner, just as Diotima’s initiate, turns around, radically changing the way he sees by facing the light. This is a crucial movement, for it represents an “epistemological turn”. The prisoner in the cave

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certainty is that, as referred to in several testimonies, light played an essential role: “Sur l’éoptie, ils confirment qu’elle consiste surtout en une contemplation. Pour cette contemplation les effets de lumière sont essentiels. Ils suggèrent que des effigies divines sont l’un au moins des objets de cette contemplation”, Boyancé 1962: 473.

<sup>59</sup> Pl. *Ep.* 7.341c.

<sup>60</sup> Pl. *Ep.* 7.344b.

<sup>61</sup> Ὅποτε τις λυθείη καὶ ἀναγκάζοιτο ἐξαίφνης ἀνίστασθαί τε καὶ περιάγειν τὸν αὐχένα καὶ βαδίζειν καὶ πρὸς τὸ φῶς ἀναβλέπειν (...) τί ἂν οἶει αὐτὸν εἰπεῖν, εἴ τις αὐτῷ λέγοι ὅτι τότε μὲν ἑώρα φλυαρίας, νῦν δὲ μᾶλλον τι ἐγγυτέρω τοῦ ὄντος καὶ πρὸς μᾶλλον ὄντα τετραμμένος ὀρθότερον βλέποι. Pl. *R.* 515c.