

INITIATION INTO THE MYSTERIES:
THE EXPERIENCE OF THE IRRATIONAL IN PLATO

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INTRODUCTION

Plato is generally interpreted as if he were a purely rational philosopher. Except for the category of erotic madness, Platonic texts are usually evaluated according to the quality of the arguments contained therein.¹ Rather than define irrationality in terms of flawed arguments, it is possible to see the dialogues operating according to a different system of meaning, a different “logic.” Such a different sense of logic operates in myth and other narratives, where the argument is neither completely illogical nor rational in the positivist sense.²

Much has been written about Plato’s use of myth and the narrative logic of his dialogues.³ However, very little has been written on the Platonic dialogue as following a different methodology: the ritual structure in archaic experiences of personal transformation and salvation.⁴ In

¹ For example, see Annas 1981.

² In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates asserts that he has no time for the clever and rough ingenuity of rationalists who seek to explain myths and the creatures therein in positivistic terms (229e–230a). This is significant, since it anticipates Socrates’ critique of Lysias’ erotic sobriety, his defense of divine madness, and the divine vision of the Forms later in the dialogue. Notice that such frontal attacks on rationalism do not preclude the sober argumentation on rhetoric.

³ See, for example, Morgan 2000. I agree with her conclusion (289): “*Mythologia* must therefore take its place as an intimate and essential part of the Platonic philosophical project. It is no accident that Plato invented the word and gave it conceptual shape. It seems likely that he performed a similar role with the other words that define his enterprise, both positively and negatively: *rhetorike* (rhetoric) and *philosophia* (philosophy). Mythology, rhetoric, philosophy: all are formed in and through language, all interpenetrate and influence each other.” Conspicuously missing in this account, but crucial to this paper, is the transformation of self which is a part of the Platonic project. This transformation is not a mere study into whether these tools operate successfully on Socrates’ interlocutors in the dialogue. On the contrary, a transformation of the reader must be viewed as an essential aspect of these dialogues. I will argue throughout that the use of the dynamics of initiation is a technique distinct from mythology, philosophy, and rhetoric—a technique *par excellence*—in implicating the reader.

⁴ Hadot 2002 is a notable exception; see also Levenson 1999. Peter Kingsley (1995, 1999, 2003) brilliantly demonstrates this ritualistic aspect of philosophy

some dialogues, at least, narrative structure closely mirrors ritual structure. In demonstrating these parallels, we may reach the following conclusions: (1) Platonic philosophy is indeed closer to what we consider theology than to what we consider rational positivism.⁵ (2) Platonic philosophy is meant to transform the reader in the manner of an initiation ritual. This may involve a ritual disorientation from the profane or a symbolic “death” and rebirth. (3) Beyond the formalities and fallacies of arguments, something much more profound is at stake: the salvation of the philosophical initiate through Platonic dialogue. The ultimate aim of such salvation is a philosophical viewing of that which is immortal, and an experience of *eudaimonia* or happiness. Perhaps our own religious prejudices allow us to see *only* a “polis religion” in Greek religion, and perhaps our modern philosophical openness and emphasis on reason induce us naturally to rehabilitate Platonic philosophy by what we consider the highest standard of knowledge: proper argumentation. Only if we allow ourselves to see the Platonic dialogues as more than rational may we recognize their eschatological dimension. In this non-derogatory sense, at least, the term “irrational” can be applied to Platonic philosophy.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM

In Plato’s *Gorgias*, the great sophist impels Callicles to answer Socrates’ questions. Socrates begins his questioning with the following words (497c):

εὐδαίμων εἶ, ὦ Καλλίκλειε, ὅτι τὰ μεγάλα μεμύησαι πρὶν τὰ μικρά· ἐγὼ δ’ οὐκ ᾤμην θεμιτὸν εἶναι. ὅθεν οὖν ἀπέλιπες ἀποκρίνου, εἰ οὐχ ἅμα παύεται διψῶν ἕκαστος ἡμῶν καὶ ἠδόμενος.

You’re a happy man, Callicles, in that you’ve been initiated into the greater [mysteries] before the lesser. I didn’t think it was permitted. So answer where you left off, and tell me whether each of us stops feeling

among the Presocratic thinkers (1995, 1999, 2003). Christoph Riedweg’s important philological analysis (1987) informs the philosophical conclusions of this essay.

⁵ For an alternative view, see McPherran 1996. McPherran denies any mystical aspect to Socrates and portrays him as endowed with Apollonian modesty (293): “He is concerned very little with epistemology and metaphysics, but is passionately interested in obtaining some measure of adequate response to his various and relentless ‘What is x?’ questions.” Socrates is also credited with raising the stakes of Greek religion away from votives to elenctic practice. McPherran goes further and allows some bolder theological tampering on Plato’s part. Despite the evidence, especially from Xenophon, I am not convinced of this particular solution (or any other) to the Socratic problem of distinguishing Plato and Socrates.

pleasure at the same time as he stops being thirsty.⁶

We could explain the reference to “Great and Lesser Mysteries” as a mere metaphor. Socrates, it seems, is mocking Callicles for wanting to speak of great matters without first questioning the preliminary minor issues. Indeed, Callicles complains about Socrates’ “finicky little questions” in just the preceding line. However, this explanation is incomplete. As Riedweg has recently shown (1987), Plato’s use of the language of initiation into the mysteries is not merely accidental. Rather, Plato’s extensive use of mystery-initiation terminology in his dialogues is programmatic and philosophically significant. Further, the research of Peter Kingsley on the Presocratics shows the deep resonances between philosophic literature and the journey of the initiate undergoing *κατάβασις* (*katabasis*, ritual descent).⁷ These studies allow us to see that in the *Gorgias* passage above, Plato indicates both stylistically and lexically that Socrates is evoking a different form of knowing altogether. This other philosophical project begins with the vocabulary of initiation and concludes in the myth of an afterlife. The language of initiation is not a linguistic archaism carried over by Plato. Rather, this language comprises an essential aspect of Plato’s conception of philosophy, as illustrated in several of the other dialogues below. When taken seriously, we are forced to admit (paraphrasing Whitehead’s famous comment) that Western Philosophy is a series of footnotes to a radically de-theologized Plato, an alleged rational philosopher.

RATIONAL ENLIGHTENMENT OR INITIATION?

We may contrast two scholarly interpretations of the language of initiation in the *Gorgias*. Richard Janko (1998: 26) champions the first view. He writes: “Thus the [Derveni] papyrus reveals how, under threat of persecution, spiritually inclined freethinkers like Socrates exchanged the traditional polytheistic religion, with its shocking myths and peculiar rites, not for atheism or even agnosticism (for which Protagoras had been condemned), but for a new pantheism. Even this seemed so dangerous that the Athenians unleashed a veritable Inquisition against it.” This view, popular amongst many including Burnet and numerous other Anglo-American scholars,⁸ shows Socrates as chiefly participating

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, translations of Plato’s works in this essay shall be taken from *Plato: Complete Works* (Cooper 1997). In this passage, the word “mysteries” does not occur in the Greek; μεμύησαι, “you have been initiated,” is used instead.

⁷ Kingsley 1995 and 1999.

⁸ See, again, McPherran 1996.

in the “Enlightenment” of the period. Socrates is, in this view, a critic of the “old religion,” and while not atheistic, nevertheless constitutes a break in traditional “theology.”⁹

This interpretation of Socrates’ genius as a radical break with old religion as the Greeks understood it is not the only possible view. Perhaps philosophers of this era did not see themselves as merely iconoclastic, scientific truth seekers. Socrates himself, in his intellectual biography in the *Phaedo*, speaks about his “second sailing,” where he abandons the intellectual enterprise of natural philosophy for a new beginning, a “*techné* of *logos*.” However, this new methodology also proves insufficient to demonstrate the immortality of the soul or to give an account of life.¹⁰ Could the various references in the *Phaedo* to death, to a heroic journey to the labyrinth, to the Bacchic cults, as well as the clearly described eschatological myth and the detailed geography of the underworld, hold the key to a solution? Could the immortality of the soul be one of those philosophical matters which are attainable through the practice of initiatory rituals rather than through the logical argumentation of the *elenchus*? The recent work of Peter Kingsley (1995), who follows the research of Walter Burkert (1969), supports this interpretation: The philosopher was also a prophet, a skilled knower and leader of initiates into the mysteries. In light of this research (to be discussed in the next section), it is evident that the true meaning of Socratic teaching continues to operate on the basis of an ancient philosophical experience, one closer to a *katabasis*, a ritual descent, than to an *elenchus*, or argument.¹¹ In the *Gorgias*, the language of initiation should be interpreted as a clue that Socrates is leading Callicles on a very different philosophical path, one that culminates in the vision of a great myth. To understand the highest philosophy is to undergo an intense experience akin to participation in a ritual. Without this experiential basis, philosophy becomes mere sophistry.

An explicit dovetailing of initiatory and technical philosophical vocabulary can already be seen in the works of Parmenides, Pythagoras, and Empedocles.¹² Even within the Platonic corpus, initiatory language

⁹ Janko 1998: 26.

¹⁰ *Phdr.* 96a–100e. For alternative readings of the second sailing, see Benardete 1989, and Burger 1984. These two scholars provide “eidetic analysis” and misology as interpretative strategies to understand Socrates’ reorientation and its relative successes and failures. These interpretations work together beautifully in providing a non-initiatory account of this dialogue.

¹¹ McPherran, who discounts the “mystic” element in Socrates, is forced to conclude that Socrates is agnostic regarding the immortality of the soul.

¹² Kingsley 1999.

is abundant in several dialogues, including *Meno*, *Gorgias*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Euthydemus*, *Phaedrus*, and *Alcibiades I*.¹³ Even an explicitly political dialogue like the *Republic* is loaded with the imagery of mystery-initiation rituals.

JOURNEY INTO HADES: THE *PHAEDO*

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates describes philosophy not as securing rational knowledge or as reviewing the methods to obtain it. None of the usual concerns of philosophy as we understand it today—such as ethics, politics, epistemology, or theology—are operative here. Socrates says (64a): κινδυνεύουσι γὰρ ὅσοι τυγχάνουσιν ὀρθῶς ἀπτόμενοι φιλοσοφίας λεληθέναι τοὺς ἄλλους ὅτι οὐδὲν ἄλλο αὐτοῖ ἐπιτηδεύουσιν ἢ ἀποθνήσκειν τε καὶ τεθνάναι. (“I am afraid that other people do not realize that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death”). Later on, Socrates argues that without wisdom, virtue is only an illusory appearance of virtue; and such impersonal virtue is in fact fit for slaves. Socrates demands a personal transformation. He emphasizes that moderation and courage and justice are a purging away of things such as fear. Significantly, Socrates concludes that virtue itself is a kind of cleansing or purification (69b). These two passages closely follow initiatory ritual in which the initiate ritually confronts death and undergoes purification. The next step of initiatory rituals roughly corresponds to a symbolic descent into Hades, where acquaintance with the myth of Persephone provided the eschatological function of immortality. Socrates gathers these elements in a complex definition of philosophy as an initiation into the mysteries (69c–d):

καὶ κινδυνεύουσι καὶ οἱ τὰς τελετὰς ἡμῖν οὗτοι καταστήσαντες οὐ φαῦλοί τινες εἶναι, ἀλλὰ τῷ ὄντι πάσαι αἰνίττεσθαι ὅτι ὅς ἂν ἀμύητος καὶ ἀτέλεστος εἰς Ἄιδου ἀφίκηται ἐν βορβόρῳ κείσεται, ὁ δὲ κεκαθαρμένος τε καὶ τετελεσμένος ἐκεῖσε ἀφικόμενος μετὰ θεῶν οἰκῆσει. εἰσὶν γὰρ δὴ, [ὥς] φασιν οἱ περὶ τὰς τελετὰς, “ναρθηκοφόροι μὲν πολλοί, βάρκχοι δὲ τε παῦροι.” οὗτοι δ' εἰσὶν κατὰ τὴν ἐμὴν δόξαν οὐκ ἄλλοι ἢ οἱ πεφιλοσοφηκότες ὀρθῶς. ὧν δὴ καὶ ἐγὼ κατὰ γέ το δυνάτον οὐδὲν ἀπέλιπον ἐν τῷ βίῳ ἀλλὰ παντὶ τρόπῳ προθυμήθη γενέσθαι

It is likely that those who established the mystic rites for us were not inferior persons but were speaking in riddles long ago when they said that whoever arrives in the underworld uninitiated and unsanctified will wallow in the mire, whereas he who arrives there purified and initiated will dwell with the gods. There are indeed, as those concerned with the

¹³The authenticity of *Alcibiades I* is disputed. I am in the minority who believe this to be Plato's work.

mysteries say, many who carry the thyrsus but the Bacchantes are few. These latter are, in my opinion, no other than those who have practiced philosophy in the right way. I have in my life left nothing undone in order to be counted among these as far as possible, as I have been eager to be in every way.

The *Phaedo* unfolds elenctically only in the superficial sense; the concrete overarching concern is with salvation. The so-called proofs for the immortality of the soul give way to a grand eschatological myth. Even the rational proofs are scattered with such statements as “coming to life again in truth exists, the living come to be from the dead, and the souls of the dead exist” (72d ἀλλ’ ἔστι τῶ ὄντι καὶ τὸ ἀναβιώσκεσθαι καὶ ἐκ τῶν τεθνεώτων τοὺς ζῶντας γίνεσθαι καὶ τὰς τῶν τεθνεώτων ψυχὰς εἶναι), and “the soul is likely to be something immortal” (73a ἀθάνατον ἢ ψυχὴ τι ἔοικεν εἶναι).

Philosophy, as Socrates conducts it, directly addresses the existential mortal condition and undertakes the task of providing a means to salvation and a remedy for fear: “You seem to have this childish fear that the wind would really dissolve and scatter [the soul], as it leaves the body” (77d–e δοκεῖς ... δεδιέναι τὸ τῶν παίδων, μὴ ὡς ἀληθῶς ὁ ἄνεμος αὐτὴν ἐκβαίνουσαν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος διαφυσᾶ καὶ διασκεδάννουσιν). The task of philosophy, according to Socrates, is to charm that “child in us who has these fears” (Cebes’ expression: 77e ἐν ἡμῖν παῖς ὅστις τὰ τοιαῦτα φοβεῖται) and to “try to persuade him not to fear death like a bogey” (77e τοῦτον οὖν πειρῶ μεταπεῖθειν μὴ δεδιέναι τὸν θάνατον ὥσπερ τὰ μορμολύκεια). Socrates recommends that philosophy should “sing a charm” (ἐπάδειν) “until you have charmed away [his fears]” (ἕως ἂν ἐξεπάσγη, 77d–e). We are in no doubt that this is Socrates’ mission; as Cebes asks, “Where shall we find a good charmer for these fears, Socrates ... now that you are leaving us?” (78a πόθεν οὖν, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, τῶν τοιούτων ἀγαθὸν ἐπωδὸν ληψόμεθα, ἐπειδὴ σύ, ἔφη, ἡμᾶς ἀπολείπεις;). Socrates’ overlapping of philosophy and initiatory ritual is sometimes undeniable: “A true lover of wisdom ... [knows] that he will never find it to any extent except in Hades” (68a); also 69c–d, quoted above.

Recent scholarship has been willing to read these lines without prejudice and to provide philosophical and philological support for the identification of ritual and existential elements in philosophy. According to Peter Kingsley, “there can be no doubting that for the main source of Plato’s eschatological myths in general, and particularly for the eschatology in the *Phaedo*, we must look to the Pythagoreanism of southern Italy and Sicily.” He continues: “Syracuse ... was an extremely important center of the Persephone mysteries, and there is undoubtedly a connection here with the fact that Orphic literature itself was focused

to a very large degree on the future and fate of Persephone.”¹⁴ If Kingsley is correct, we may surmise that Platonic texts were like the Orphic literary texts, which “exhibited a marked tendency to gravitate towards the mysteries of Demeter and Persephone, and assume the role in relation to them of sacred narrative texts—as clearly emerges in the case of the Eleusinian mysteries.”¹⁵

Already it should be clear that Socratic philosophy and initiatory ritual are not two separate activities. Let us examine this relationship further.

RITUAL IN THE *REPUBLIC*

In the *Republic*, Socrates begins by relating that he went down (κατέβην) to Piraeus to worship the Goddess Bendis. The dialogue begins thus (327a1–5):

κατέβην χθὲς εἰς Πειραιᾶ μετὰ Γλαύκωνος τοῦ Ἀρίστωνος
προσευξόμενος τε τῇ θεῶ καὶ ἅμα τὴν ἑορτὴν βουλόμενος θεάσασθαι
τίνα τρόπον ποιήσουσιν ἅτε νῦν πρῶτον ἄγοντες. καλὴ μὲν οὖν μοι
καὶ ἡ τῶν ἐπιχωρίων πομπὴ ἔδοξεν εἶναι, οὐ μέντοι ἦττον ἐφαίνετο
πρέπειν ἢν οἱ Θραῖκες ἔπεμπον.

I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon, the son of Ariston. I wanted to say a prayer to the goddess, and I was also curious to see how they would manage the festival, since they were holding it for the first time. I thought the procession of the local residents was a fine one and that the one conducted by the Thracians was no less outstanding.

The first three verbs and verb-phrases of the dialogue are κατέβην, “to descend” or “to go down,” προσευξόμενος, “to pray,” and βουλόμενος θεάσασθαι, “to wish to see.” Although the literal meaning of κατέβην is “to descend,” this word is loaded with other specific meanings. “*Katabasis*,” signifying ritual descent as a part of initiation into mysteries, already played an important role in philosophical expositions in Presocratic philosophy. Burkert has clarified the role of *katabasis* for Pythagoras,¹⁶ and Kingsley for the writings of Parmenides and Empedocles.¹⁷ Scholars note the importance of this theme in the *Republic*. Rosen, for example, notes (2006: 16–17): “The theme of descent plays an important role in the dramatic structure of the *Republic*. To note only the obvious, Socrates and Glaucon descend from Athens to Piraeus at the very beginning of the dialogue; Book Seven begins with a descent

¹⁴ Kingsley 1995: 88.

¹⁵ Kingsley 1995: 115.

¹⁶ Burkert 1969.

¹⁷ Kingsley 1999.

from the sunlight into the cave of shadows ... the dialogue closes with an account of the descent of Er into Hades. Each of these descents is described in considerably greater detail than the outstanding example of ascent to the Idea of the Good, or more properly, to its surrogate, the image of the sun."¹⁸

Throughout the dialogue Socrates uses language evoking initiation to describe his philosophical message. The goddess Bendis¹⁹ is associated with Lemnos and Thrace, where women performed traditionally male tasks such as hunting, shepherding and working the land. Further, she is associated with Cybele and Hecate, and sometimes depicted as holding a branch, which grants passage to the underworld. Bendis is a night goddess, and both in myth and ritual, she is related to a play of light and dark, symbolized by her relationship to the moon and to torches. Significantly, the *Republic*, popularly interpreted as a monument of rational politics, begins with Socrates' initiation into the cult of a foreign goddess, whose very nature is subversive. After all, her religion recalls the mythic revolt of the women of Lemnos. One would expect a *Kosmokrator* such as the Olympian Zeus to oversee a discussion on Justice and on the establishment of a state. Instead, a gynocratic, foreign, chthonic goddess is invoked.

Book 1 of the *Republic* was perhaps an independent "early" work by Plato. Annas argues in favor of this hypothesis (1981: 16–20). Book 2 resurrects the central argument of Book 1, the "Thrasymachean" position. If Annas is right, and Plato returned to the original one-book *Republic*, he did not forget the theme of descent into the underworld. Book 2 also contains a descent, this time by the ancestor of Gyges (359d).

Annas believes that Book 10 is also a much later addition. She points out that very few of the themes in the first nine books of the *Republic* survive into Book 10. One theme that does survive, however, is the theme of descent. Here, Er literally descends into the underworld, and the metaphorical allusions to this descent in previous books are unequivocally substantiated. The first word of the *Republic*, κατέβην, evokes initiation. This theme is also highlighted in the final portion of Socratic teaching in this dialogue (namely, the myth of Er), and that teaching evokes a journey into the underworld, where the philosophical

¹⁸ Rosen interprets the significance of κατέβην as follows (20): "The descent is not only from the city to the harbor and from daylight to firelight, it also brings philosophy into a zone of freedom, privacy and openness to what is foreign." I argue a much stronger thesis here. The descent is to be read according to the dynamics of ritual initiation—thus suggesting that the *Republic* is to be read as a document of *personal* transformation, rather than a bittersweet political treatise on the construction and maintenance of a just *polis*.

¹⁹ For a description of Bendis and her cult, see Planeaux 2000.

initiate (like Er) dies a symbolic death in order to experience the immortality offered by philosophy.

The ritual structure of initiation, which includes disorientation away from the profane everyday perceptions of Thrasymachus, Cephalus and Glaucon, the imagery of being led (myth of Er), of seeing (*theasasthai*), and the use of ritual symbols, underpin the dialogue from beginning to end, each time putting these ritual images to a philosophical use. In the myth of Er, for example, Socrates describes the journey of the souls as they are led to the enjoyments, purifications, lottery and the consequent embodiments (614b–621b). This initiation structure is the same, whether we are dealing with Socrates' epistemology (the allegory of the cave) or with his eschatology (the myth of Er).

Let us consider a few further examples to demonstrate Plato's obsession with the experience of the ritual initiate as a parallel to philosophical initiation. From these, it will become obvious that Plato's implied goal of philosophy is not significantly different from the goal of initiation into the mysteries.

THE SYMPOSIUM

The *Symposium* provides the most sustained example of Plato's application of initiatory ritual to philosophical practice. One may understand philosophy as a ritual confrontation with death and a striving for immortality. We may further analyze Plato's use of initiatory terminology from many standpoints—sociological, historical, political, and philological.²⁰ Consistently, however, these models prevent the reader from undergoing philosophical transformation. The language of initiation evokes the experience of the individual: my death is mine alone, and my life is thus at stake. Understanding Platonic philosophy in terms of initiation rituals makes philosophy supremely relevant to the reader, in so far as it deals in matters of life and death. This aspect of Platonic philosophy rescues Plato from the charge of the "*déformation professionnelle* of all Western philosophers, who preferred to speak of man [abstractly] as a universal" In that dismissive judgment, "Philosophers have been the covert civil servants whose expertise has secured the (legitimizing) law of (juridical, ethic, and discursive) laws."²¹ Death, however, saves us from confusing ourselves with our identities, be they civic or metaphysical. Death belongs to the individual, whereas identi-

²⁰ See Morgan 2000, and Riedweg 1987. Throughout her book, Morgan relates early Greek religion and ritual to Plato's conception of philosophy. While I accept Morgan's analysis, I do not follow the conclusions derived from the division of Plato's dialogues into early, middle, and late periods.

²¹ Schürmann 1988: 1–2.

ties are shared. In this way, when I know myself truly, I know that my mortality and my possible immortality are at stake. Plato's continuous refusal to write philosophy not as texts but as dialogues set among actual existing individuals attests to his desire to preserve philosophy in relation to real individuals such as Socrates. While professional philosophers subsume individuals to categories, Plato presents philosophy as a function of Socrates.

If philosophy is the initiation into immortality, it only makes sense that the reader must keep his own death in view. Death is not an abstract category, unlike civic law; death chooses each one of us separately. It is this confrontation and singularization that makes initiation the proper metaphor for Plato's philosophizing. Therefore, in the *Symposium*, while others speak of *eros* in general, Socrates invokes Diotima in her individuality, and Alcibiades in turn invokes Socrates in his individuality. Diotima herself speaks of mortal love as a longing for immortality (206e):

ἔστιν γάρ, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἔφη, οὐ τοῦ καλοῦ ὁ ἔρωσ, ὡς σὺ οἶει.

Ἄλλὰ τί μὴν;

Τῆς γεννήσεως καὶ τοῦ τόκου ἐν τῷ καλῷ.

Εἶεν, ἦν δ' ἐγώ.

Πάνυ μὲν οὖν, ἔφη. τί δὴ οὖν τῆς γεννήσεως; ὅτι ἀειγενές ἐστι καὶ ἀθάνατον ὡς θνητῶ ἢ γέννησις.

"You see, Socrates ... what Love wants is not beauty, as you think it is."

"Well, what is it, then?"

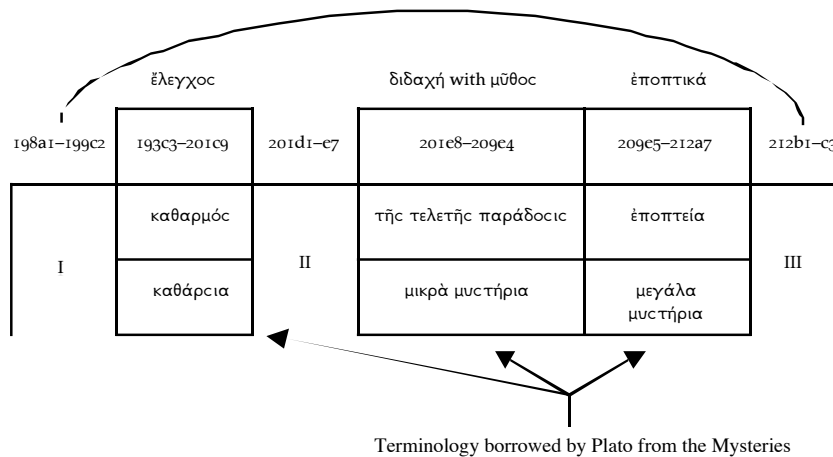
"Reproduction and birth in beauty ... Now, why reproduction? It's because reproduction goes on forever; it is what mortals have in place of immortality."

Diotima continues later (207c–d):

ἐνταῦθα γὰρ τὸν αὐτὸν ἐκείνῳ λόγον ἢ θνητῆ φύσις ζητεῖ κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν αἰεὶ τε εἶναι καὶ ἀθάνατος.

"For [among animals] the principle is the same as with us, and mortal nature seeks so far as possible to live forever and be immortal."

One may understand mortal love itself as a ritual approach to immortality through reproduction. While practical constraints do not allow a full explication of the profound relationship between philosophy, ritual, and the mortal search for immortality in the *Symposium*, the significant use of language borrowed from the mystery religions themselves should in itself indicate the importance of this relationship. The following analysis of the structure of the *Symposium* (on the basis of Plato's use of mystery terminology) demonstrates these structural parallels (translation of Riedweg 1987: 21).



I. Transition from Agathon to Socrates (with certain signals for the uniqueness of the following; truth-claim, foregoing rhetoric—199b4–5).

II. Change due to the introduction of Diotima (important signals: priestess; supposedly just a “factual report”; *elenchos* is linked in earlier).

III. Final comments (perform the function of a return and reintegration of the unique Socratic “narrative” into the common framework of the drinking binge; → the counterpart to the transition 198a1–199c2).

MYTH IN THE *PHAEDRUS*

In *Phaedrus* 229b–d, the myth of Oreithuia falling to her death after being ravaged by Boreas, the wind deity, bears striking parallels to the story of Persephone. Both of these maidens, while playing with friends and gathering flowers, encounter an immortal and suffer tragic fates.²² Socrates criticizes the “clever” demythologizers and rescues the myth from rationalistic dissolution. He invokes the Delphic oracle (whose utterings exceed mere literal interpretations) and links his search for self-knowledge to a mythic figure bound forever in the underworld: Typhon (230a). The critique of Lysias’ rational sobriety as well as the

²² One of the maidens mentioned here is Pharmaceia. See Derrida 1981 for an alternative reading of this myth. Derrida sees writing, not individuals such as Oreithuia and Socrates, as a victim, overlooking mortality in order to make a philosophical point. I argue against Derrida’s interpretation in my dissertation (Adluri 2002).

defence of prophecy and madness show that the Socratic search for self-knowledge is not merely a rational enterprise.²³

The motifs of purification (presented through Socrates' palinode, 243a–d), the grand myth of the journey of the soul, the *katabasis* or descent of the soul (through the soul's loss of its wings, 246a–249d), and a divine revelation (249d–257b) are the chief features that provide not only structure but also philosophical content to the *Phaedrus* dialogue. Significantly, Plato sets this dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus, the beautiful boy who was to be exiled from Athens for profaning the mysteries, outside the city walls.²⁴ Riedweg's study of the role of mystery terminology in this dialogue is indispensable in understanding the deeper meaning of this text. The following observations should suffice here.

Plato intersperses [the *Phaedrus* with] fascinating elements of the Eleusinian cult activities as a way of representing the philosopher's orientation towards the highest ontological reality and the sudden (re-)experience of it in the here and now. These elements in turn refer almost exclusively to the highest stage of the initiation in Eleusis, the *epopteia*. Socrates' second speech on the subject of Eros remains transparent in regard to the invocation of the mysteries atmosphere for the cultic processes in the Telesterion of Eleusis

Riedweg convincingly demonstrates how Plato uses terminology derived from Bacchic and Eleusinian mysteries to make a soteriological point:

[T]he philosophical revelation of the pure essences, just like the epoptism of the *hiera* in the Eleusinian mysteries, guarantees a better fate in the afterlife. The philosopher, according to Socrates, fares better in the cycle of death and rebirth (248e5). The others end up before a court where the dead are tried.²⁵

EUTHYDEMUS AND THE CORYBANTIC RITUAL

The structure of the *Euthydemus* follows that of a specific rite. The dialogue has been seen either as a critique of the absurdity of eristic discussion, or as the possible Sophistic threat to the Socratic enterprise.²⁶ The ritual interpretation provides a third possible approach to understanding this dialogue.

Carl Levenson offers a ritual analysis of the *Euthydemus* as an actual

²³ For an alternative reading, see Griswold 1986.

²⁴ See Nails 2002: 232–234.

²⁵ Riedweg 1987: 68–69.

²⁶ Sprague 1962. Sprague argues that in this dialogue Plato examines the misuse of reason.

philosophical reenactment of the Corybantic Rites. He describes the parallel to the ritual performance as follows (1999: 11):

The first part of the performance is the “chairing” [*thronosis*] of Cleinias, the boy who plays the role of a neophyte. The brothers (the initiators) “dance” around Cleinias, and shout strange things at him, and make him blush and feel disoriented.

The second part of the performance we will call “the harrowing transition”: the brothers invent a scenario in which Cleinias is to be murdered by the people who care most for him—by Ctesippus, his lover, and Socrates, his friend (285a). In the third part of the performance, which we will call “the final revelation”—the brothers try to induce the intense ecstatic experience at which the rite aims. Socrates comments that this is the “serious” part of the rite (330e).²⁷

In this case, the actual form of the dialogue mirrors the form of the mystery rite. Once again—unless one were to assume this structural parallel to be an unlikely accident of Plato—we must admit that initiation plays an essential role in Platonic philosophizing.

MENO: RECOLLECTION OR INITIATION?

As we have seen, in many dialogues, the religious, ritual motif frames Socrates’ philosophizing in an explicit manner, and conditions how we read the argument it frames. As a further example, consider the *Meno*, a dialogue usually read as expounding Plato’s epistemological theory of recollection. Socrates says (76e):

Ἄλλ’ οὐκ ἔστιν, ὦ παῖ Ἀλεξιδήμου, ὡς ἐγὼ ἑμαυτὸν πείθω, ἀλλ’ ἐκείνη βελτίων· οἶμαι δὲ οὐδ’ ἂν σοὶ δόξαι, εἰ μὴ, ὡς περ χθὲς ἔλεγεσ, ἀναγκαῖόν σοι ἀπιέναι πρὸ τῶν μυστηρίων, ἀλλ’ εἰ περιμείναις τε καὶ μνηθεῖης.

It is not better, son of Alexidemus, but I am convinced that the other is, and I think you would agree, if you did not have to go away before the mysteries as you told me yesterday, but could remain and be initiated.

Is the Socratic method in *Meno* a paradigm of his dialectical recollection, a second-best? Would “initiation” have created a better framework for Socrates to reveal the unity of virtue?²⁸ Is the explicit absence of ini-

²⁷ Levenson 1999: 11.

²⁸ Mark Joyal commented on this point in a personal communication. He noted that in this dialogue Socrates is compared to a wizard who practises witchcraft (*Meno* 80a–b). What is the difference, he asked, between references to wizardry and *katabasis*? Socrates is compared to many things throughout the dialogues. Some appearances are comical, for example his resemblance to a torpedo fish or a gadfly. Other appearances are dark and complicated, such as Socrates’ resemblance to a wizard, and, in the *Sophist* (216 c–d), the real philosopher’s appearance as a madman, statesman or sophist. Socrates explains that these misapprehensions are caused by the ignorance of men. The evidence I am

tiation in this dialogue related to the absence of a great myth? Not only the “Son of Alexidemus” but also Socrates himself seems to require, on occasion, initiation. Even for Socrates, such a required initiatory experience is neither trivial, nor metaphorical, nor easy. In the *Symposium*, Diotima prefaces her erotic teaching with the following words (209e–210a):

Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐρωτικά ἴσως, ὧς σώκρατες, κἄν σὺ μνηθεῖης· τὰ δὲ τέλεια καὶ ἐποπτικά, ὧν ἕνεκα καὶ ταῦτα ἔστιν, ἐάν τις ὀρθῶς μετή, οὐκ οἶδ’ εἰ οἷός τ’ ἂν εἴη. ἐρῶ μὲν οὖν, ἔφη, ἐγὼ καὶ προθυμίας οὐδὲν ἀπολείψω· πειρῶ δὲ ἔπεσθαι, ἂν οἷός τε ἦς.

Even you, Socrates, could probably come to be initiated into these rites of love. But as for the purpose of these rites when they are done correctly—that is the final and highest mystery, and I don’t know if you are capable of it. I myself will tell you ... and I won’t stint any effort, and you must try to follow if you can.

The parallels between this passage, which contains Socrates’ erotic education, and the *Meno*, quoted above, show not only the pervasiveness of the language and experience of initiatory ritual, but also its essential role in the Platonic philosophical project.

CONCLUSION

These examples demonstrate that the Platonic dialogue presents philosophy as more than abstract rational inquiry. Contrary to a univocal “Enlightenment,” the philosophical situation in which Socrates operated can be summarized as follows: “Towards the end of the sixth century, certain circles in Greece witnessed a birth of a type of a philosophical and religious thought absolutely opposed to that of the Sophists. The thought of the Sophists was secularized, directed towards the external world, and founded on praxis, while the other was religious, introverted, and concerned with individual salvation.”²⁹

Socrates, I argue, operates within the duality of this philosophical-religious framework, and his criticism of the Sophists is thus more than merely epistemological. Rather, this criticism represents a fundamental attitude towards philosophy, demanding a concrete, lived philosophical experience, one that transforms the participant in a way akin to the rit-

presenting here consists for the most part of words used by the (literary character) Socrates himself. Plato’s Socrates clearly distinguishes himself from those “appearances” that confuse him with a sophist. By contrast, Plato does not seem to be concerned with keeping Socratic rationalism pure of any mystagogy. On the contrary, Plato programmatically and delightfully insists on mixing these two aspects of his master’s philosophical practise.

²⁹ Detienne 1996.

ual of initiation. His philosophical activity is, in this sense, also religious, demanding a turn inward to the individual. This individualistic, experiential component of Socratic philosophy is manifest in the divine commandment, "know thyself." Socrates' concern with the fate of an individual after death, both as a psychology and as an ethics, also belongs to this other non-epistemological religious program. Considered against this philosophical-religious background, the dialogue *Gorgias* can be seen as a rich and comprehensive document of Plato's philosophical program. This conception of philosophy goes significantly beyond the narrow limits of rationality. Far from being merely reductive and positivistic, his philosophical interests include sophistic and eristic exchanges, the *elenchus*, and great myths, carefully and dialectically articulated to reveal both the "soul" and the "heavens."

Some scholars agree that Socrates does not do away with religion altogether, but critiques it by positing pantheism. The pantheistic turn, as Janko argues, comprises Socrates' critique of religion. This interpretation does not go far in outlining Socrates' paradoxical synthesis and reformation of religious practice. Ironically, such a critique belongs to the epistemological and not to the religious aspect of Socrates' philosophy. The religious aspect survives *all* positivistic critique in the way I described above.

The mystical vocabulary and the evocation of ritual experience subscribed to by Plato cannot be an uncomplicated return to archaic ritual practices. Socrates irrevocably recasts the experience of the mysteries as a philosophical, transformative experience, which reaches its culmination in the visions embodied in the great myths. The content of the mysteries, such as the concerns of mortals and the redemptive "contemplation" (*theorein*, simultaneously implying "science" and "mystical viewing") of the heavens, remains intact. The Athenians were correct in their suspicions that the philosopher had "profaned" the mysteries by revealing them. However, the philosopher's intent was never to mock or destroy these mysteries, but rather to preserve them in a new idiom: philosophy. This new idiom does away with the ritual mechanics of the mysteries, but preserves the experience. The philosophical rigor Socrates demands replaces the rigor of the rituals. By failing to understand Socrates' extreme philosophical commitment and discipline, those not stunned by Socratic philosophy in a positive way accused him of profaning the mysteries. Those who see only a mere rationalist in Socrates also belong among the blind Athenians, and not amongst his students.

The language of initiation is neither a mere metaphor nor a literal invitation to a cult practice or a call to conversion to a religious institution. It is however an inscription marking the "sacred experience" which philosophy must preserve, a task at which the Sophists have de-

plorably failed. The vocabulary of initiation modulates Socratic teaching on a surprisingly mortal and personal level: one that preserves the existential, ethical and eschatological concerns of the philosopher—"know thyself"—amid his scientific, "sophistic," and skeptical philosophical exercises.³⁰

The key philosophical point here is not a decision about Platonic dialogues in their literary or epistemic aspects. Rather, the reader is invited not merely to think but to participate in philosophy by experiencing a conversion. The reader, like the ritual initiate, has an ultimate concern neither in politics for their own sake nor for the city. At the level of salvation, Platonic philosophy addresses the reader in his singularization to come, that is to say, in his *death*, and in the fear associated with this fate. Participation in immortality is only sociologically and superficially a phenomenon of the *polis*, but is in reality the result of individual philosophical initiation and *theorein*. In this sense, the dialogues are not about philosophy, but rather show that philosophy is about the transformation of the reader.

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³⁰See Rappe 2000 for a brilliant exposition of the legacy of Platonic ritual in Neoplatonic texts.

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