

*The role of myth in Plato
and its prolongations in Antiquity*

In Ancient Greece, *mûthos* first meant “thought that is expressed, opinion”. This meaning was then modified in the wake of the transformations that affected the meaning of verbs expressing “saying” and nouns designating “speech”. This evolution found its ultimate development in Plato (428-348 BC), who was the first author to use the term *mûthos* in the sense we continue to give it¹.

Plato

When he uses the term *mûthos* in a non-metaphorical way, Plato designates a discourse of a specific type, fabricated by the poets, with a view to substituting for it another one, the *lógos* produced by the philosophers. Although he shows himself to be highly critical with regard to myths, Plato must recognize that philosophers cannot do without it. Thus, he takes his inspiration from the poets to develop certain points of his doctrine, and he goes so far as to fabricate myths, thereby recognizing their efficacy in the areas of ethics and politics.

Plato the anthropologist : the concrete nature of myth

Plato presents myth as a message by means of which a given collectivity transmits from generation to generation what it retains in its memory of its past, in the view that it is part of its history. The past myth speaks about has its starting-point in the origin of the gods, and its lower chronological limit is a period sufficiently distant for it to be impossible for the narrator to verify his discourse, either because he has no witnesses to the events he is reporting, or because he is not basing his story on the evidence of direct witnesses. From this perspective, myth transmits a knowledge that is shared by all members of a group. This knowledge deals essentially with the origin of the gods, of the world and of mankind. It sketches a geography that is both real and fantastic (when it evokes frontiers or what is distant). It replaces history, by reporting on a past that is more or less fabulous, and by proposing models of behavior, and therefore a system of values. This shared knowledge enables the constitution of a group's identity, which finds in this fact a primordial interest in transmitting them.

¹ On this point, see *Platon, les mots et les mythes*, Paris (Maspero) 1982. Seconde édition revue et mise à jour, Paris (éd. La Découverte), 1995. English translation in L. Brisson & G. Naddaf, *Plato, the myth maker*, Chicago and London (Chicago Univ. Press) 1999.

As a discourse, myth is equivalent to *lógos*, and is made up primitively of an interweaving of noun(s) and verb(s) (see *Sophist* 262b-c). In books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*, which deal with the role of culture², Plato enumerates the five classes of proper nouns, among which the characters of myth are distributed: gods (for instance, the twelve great gods in the central myth of the *Phaedrus*), demons (such as Eros in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*), the inhabitants of Hades (in the myths at the end of the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo*), and finally the heroes and men of the past (in the myth of Atlantis). All the names pertaining to each of these five classes display the same essential characteristic: they are proper names. Consequently, they refer not to classes - "gods", "heroes", etc., - but to individuals such as "Zeus", "Oedipus", and so forth, or to collectivities considered as individuals: "Muses", "Trojans", etc., that is, to beings that are animate and endowed with a rational soul, including animals, plants, and inanimate beings. Since gods, demons, heroes, or human beings separated from their bodies are described as men who could be encountered *hic et nunc*, this practice gives rise to a generalized anthropomorphism which was denounced quite early, particularly by Xenophanes.

The discourse constituted by myth may be fashioned in prose or in verse. When it is told, it can be recited, with or without musical accompaniment, or sung when it is interpreted, and a choreographic arrangement often plays a role. When the myth is sung, melody comes into play, including the three elements of discourse, harmony, and rhythm. In this context, harmony and rhythm have no autonomy, but must illustrate the discourse. In other words, harmony, that is, the strictly musical aspect of interpretation, takes up, in the domain that is proper to it, the imitation that is used in discourse, to increase its efficacy. The same holds true for rhythm, that is, dance. For Plato, however, dance, song, and music are always in a position of dependence with regard to the discourse they illustrate.

Yet the imitative process only achieves its goal if it moves the audience it addresses. So from the narrator, whatever technique he may use, we must move to the public. Imitation affects the listeners, who seek to make themselves actually similar to the beings evoked by the story to which they are paying attention. A problem of an ethical nature then arises. By means of the communicative process of myth, the reality that is the object of the communicated message becomes present to the receptor in a way that is so intense that its actual absence is forgotten. Consequently, the reality thus produced by imitation triggers a process of identification. This implies an emotional fusion that modifies the audience's physical and above all moral behavior.

² This is how I understand *mousiké*, in the broad sense of "all that concerns the Muses" in the education of the Guardians.

Plato presents this fusion as the effect of an incantation, a term which designates a mumbled formula that is to have a magical efficacy, and which plays the role of a medicine in the soul³, or of a charm, and certainly entails persuasion. All these effects are the results of the pleasure provided by the communication of myth to the lowest part of the soul (*epithumía*), which desires food and drink and is the seat of the sexual appetite. We can therefore understand why the first addressees of myths are children. For Plato, childhood and youth represent the savage part of human existence. For Plato, it is the appetitive part that dominates in the soul at this age. And since the term *paidía*, “game”, derives from the word *país*, “child”, Plato quite naturally considers myth as a game opposed to the seriousness (*spoudé*) of *lógos*.

Plato the philosopher : the defects of myth

The *mýthos* / *lógos* opposition may be interpreted not only as an opposition between verifiable discourse and unverifiable discourse, but also as the opposition between narrative discourse (or story) and argumentative discourse. Whereas the former opposition is based on an external criterion - the relation of discourse with the referent to which it is supposed to refer - the latter refers to an internal criterion, the organization of its development. It should be noted that this last opposition only makes sense in a philosophical context, since history, like myth, pertains rather to the genre of the story.

A discourse can be qualified as verifiable only if its referent, situated either in the world of intelligible forms or in that of sensible things according to Plato's philosophical thought, is accessible to the intellect or the senses. In all these cases, truth and falsity are defined as the adequation or lack of adequation of this discourse to its referent. By definition, however, insofar as myth speaks about the soul or the distant past, the referents of myth cannot be apprehended either by the intellect or by the senses, and it is therefore impossible to verify whether there is adequation between this discourse and its referent. It follows that myth is situated beyond truth and falsehood. Yet this does not seem to be the case. Indeed, Plato sometimes presents myth as a false discourse, and sometimes as a true discourse ; it is thus an unverifiable discourse.

A story reports events as they are supposed to have happened, without giving any explanation. The implication between events is thus contingent, at least at first glance, for several attempts have been made to extract a logic of the story⁴. Moreover, the sole goal of a story - or so it

³ “L’incantation de Zalmoxis dans le *Charmide* (156d-157c)”, in *Plato. Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides, Proceedings of the V Symposium Platonicum*, IPS Series, vol. 13, ed. Thomas Robinson and Luc Brisson, Sankt Augustin (Academia Verlag) 2000, p. 278-286.

⁴ See, for instance, the works of V. Propp and C. Lévi-Strauss.

appears - is to carry out, by means of the person who fabricates and/or tells the story, an emotional fusion between the addressee of the story and its hero. In contrast, argumentative discourse follows a rational order : on the basis of propositions held to be true from the outset - these are the axioms or premises -, one deduces true propositions (the theorems) by means of rules that are known to and accepted by all. The logical sequence of argumentative discourse unfolded after the model of mathematics, according to rules whose goal is to render their conclusion necessary. Rational agreement with the conclusion is sought by the person uttering this discourse.

Plato as teller and fabricator of myths

For Plato, then, myth exhibits the following two defects : it is an unverifiable discourse, and is often assimilable to a false discourse (for reasons of censorship, when it departs from such-and-such a doctrinal point defended by the philosopher) ; and it is a story whose elements are interconnected in a contingent way, unlike argumentative discourse, whose inner organization exhibits a character of necessity. This does not mean, however, that Plato renounces traditional myths, to which he makes abundant allusions in his work. What is more, he adapts some of them, and it can even happen that he creates new ones, as a function of the circumstances. Why ? For two reasons, one of a theoretical and the other of a practical nature. Plato recognizes the efficacy of myth in the areas of ethics and politics, for the great majority of those who are not philosophers, and in whose souls the desiring part (*epithumía*) is predominant. Plato knows, moreover, that he can only speak in mythical terms of a specific type of referents, that is, everything that concerns the soul and the distant past, which therefore remains inaccessible both to the senses and to the intelligence. The five classes of nouns enumerated in books II and III of *Republic* - gods, demons, heroes, and inhabitants of Hades and men of the past - refer to these two types of referents - the soul and the distant past.

Myths report the great deeds accomplished in a very distant past by men living in the sensible world, and whose memory has been preserved by tradition. Gods, demons, heroes and inhabitants of Hades, are also situated between the world of intelligible forms and that of sensible things, at the level of the soul and all that is immortal about it. Gods, demons, and heroes are either fully immortal, or else the offspring or mortals who have been rendered immortal. In addition, man is endowed with an immortal soul. This soul is therefore related both to the gods, who are to use it like a puppet, and to the demons and heroes. Since the human soul can subsist independently of a terrestrial body, a description must be given of its destiny before it falls into a body, and especially once it has left this body, that is, according to popular belief in ancient Greece, when it is in Hades. Such myths as those found at the end of the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedo* or

the *Republic* have as their object precisely to describe the judgment, which will determine the nature of its *post-mortem* existence as a function of its previous existence.

Plato therefore appeals to myth when he comes to deal with several domains : cosmology, history and politics. And above all, he embeds his philosophical doctrine, particularly concerning the Forms and the soul, within the mythical tradition.

Cosmology and the origin of the word : Timaeus

The first subject for which Plato introduces myth is that of the origin of the universe, of the beings it contains (gods, demons, men, animals and plants) and of the city. In the *Timaeus*, Plato takes up a project as old as Hesiod, by proposing an *eikḗs mýthos*, that is, an unverifiable story (*mýthos*) that describes these sensible realities known as the world, man, and even the city. Compared to genuine reality, that of the *éidos*, it has the status of an image (*eikḗs*). If we leave aside the city, evoked by the myth of Atlantis told at the beginning of the *Timaeus* and in the *Critias*, the essential part of the *Timaeus* describes the constitution of the body, and above all of the soul of the world and of men, by the demiurge and his assistants. A soul of the same nature causes the motions of the sphere of the world, the celestial bodies, the traditional gods, men, and animals who, as we shall see, are merely human beings subject to a particular system of retribution. Here we find the five classes of personages : gods, demons, heroes, inhabitants of Hades and men of the past, enumerated in books II and III of the *Republic* as constituting the characters of myth. In Plato, however, everything changes. The gods, demons, and heroes must obey the criteria of goodness and immutability, and are, to some extent, stripped of a good part of their adventures ; this is why it becomes impossible to fabricate elaborate stories about them. In addition, the men of the past who are to serve as models for the city are replaced by the philosophers in the *Republic*, and by the **Guardians of the Laws in the Laws**. **They are given grandiose funerals and a private sepulcher⁵. The only entity that maintains a privileged** place in myth is the human soul, whose origins and peregrinations are first evoked in the *Phaedrus*. For Plato, in sum, the human soul becomes the central character of myth, which evokes its descent and ascent along the scale of being.

History

The domain of myth that deals with the men of the past covers *grasso modo* the territory that would subsequently be claimed by historians, as can be observed in the myth of Atlantis (*Timaeus* 21e-26d and *Critias*), while the beginnings of human life are evoked in Book III of the *Laws*. Quite naturally, Plato evokes its diverse origins with the help of myth : that of writing (*Phaedrus* 274c-275b, the myth of Theuth), that of human nature (*Symposium* 189d-193d, the myth of Aristophanes) that of the cicadas (*Phaedrus* 259b-d).

Politics

What is more, in the *Republic*, the myth of autochthony (*Republic* III 414d-e), also evoked, as a lie, in the *Laws* (II 663d-e), as well as that of metals, serve to convince the inhabitants that the state is

⁵ Luc Brisson, “Les funérailles des Vérificateurs (*eúthunoi*) dans les *Lois*. Une lecture commentée de *Lois* XII 945c-948d”, *Ktema* 30, 2005, 189-196.

one and indivisible, even if it is made up of distinct groups. The myth of Gyges (*Republic* II 359d-360b) gives a splendid illustration of the thesis rejected by Socrates, according to which injustice is good from the viewpoint of nature. In the *Laws*, myth plays a considerable role in legislation. In book IV of the *Laws* (719c-723d), Plato examines the practice of the legislator, comparing him to the poet and the physician. Unlike the poet, who does not hesitate to develop contradictory discourses on the same subject, the legislator's discourse must not be contradictory. Although his discourse on one and the same subject is identical, however, the legislator need not necessarily restrict himself to a simplistic discourse.

Philosophy

The idea that the soul has an existence separate from all body, in the course of which it has acquired a particular knowledge, which it must recall in its subsequent existences, is explicitly referred to religious traditions in the *Meno*⁶, the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. The idea that one's previous behavior is subject to retribution is affirmed in several eschatological myths. Finally, the idea that the soul is incarnated in various bodies of human or animal beings is formulated in the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus*. Moreover, everything concerning the intelligible is associated, through the intermediary of these beliefs about the soul, with myth : the “ image ” of the cave (*Republic* VII 514a-517a), which is completed by that of the sun (*Republic* VI 508a-509d) and of the line (*Republic* VI 506d-511d). It follows that myths constitute a fertile ground in which fundamental philosophical speculations take root : those concerning the soul and the intelligible forms. Myths thus represent a reservoir of premises for philosophers like Plato, who separates the soul from the body and gives as the object of the higher part of the soul, that is, the intellect, the true realities known as the intelligible forms, in which sensible things, which are only their images, participate. Only the question of the soul, which is fascinating, shall be mentioned.

Soul

In Plato, it is the soul, and particularly its highest function, which enables the determination of what such-and-such a man truly is. For Plato, man is to be defined not by his body, but by his soul, which is what is most precious in him. Nevertheless, the body has very strong relations with the level of excellence the soul can achieve. The body in which a soul is present illustrates the quality of that soul's intellectual activity. Here we find the famous play on words *sûma-sêma*, of

⁶ See, for instance, W. Hirsch, *Platons Weg zum Mythos*, Berlin/New York (de Gruyter) ; and on a specific point, see Luc Brisson, “ La réminiscence dans le *Ménon* (80e-81e) et son arrière-plan religieux ”, in *Anamnese e Saber*, ed. José Trindade Santos, Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon (Impresa Nacional - Casa da Moeda) 1999, p. 23-61. Discussion [48-61].

which Plato mentions three interpretations in the *Cratylus* (400b-c). In the case of the body, to interpret *sêma* as a ‘ tomb ’ is the result of an over-determination that is easy to understand. A tomb is a ‘ sign ’ indicating that a corpse, or what is left of it, is present underground. The body, for its part, is a ‘ sign ’ indicating that it is animated by a specific type of soul, which, because it is present in a body, is dead to a certain extent, insofar as it does not live completely by and for its intellect. As a function of its previous existence, the soul finds itself and such-and-such a body, where, so to speak, it serves a sentence. In short, during its terrestrial lives, the soul is enclosed inside a body which is the external sign of its value.

At death, this soul is once again separated from the soul in which it was present. Since it is immortal, however, it is subject to a judgment, as a result of which it receives punishment or reward, and in most cases it is ordered to pass into another body. In the last pages of the *Gorgias*, we find themes that traverse Plato's entire work. Death is conceived as the separation of the soul and the body. The genuine personality of a human being is to be found in the soul. Since the soul survives even when it has left the body it inhabited previously, it will be judged by beings that are more powerful than men. In most cases, they will impose punishments upon it with a view to its own improvement, or to that of others. Unlike other eschatological myths, the one told at the end of the *Gorgias* remains quite concrete. Here, the soul appears as a double of the body, which moves in the space and time of our universe.

Although Plato opposes myths when they propose as a model a system of values that does not correspond to the one the philosopher seeks to establish, he nevertheless does not hesitate, when he describes the judgments to which the soul is subject⁷ and its peregrinations, to have recourse to the kind of story known as myth, as is the case particularly at the end of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, in the *Phaedrus* and even in the *Symposium*. Since, when he evokes the soul, situated as it is between the sensible and the intelligible, Plato can no longer have recourse to opinion or science, we can understand why the soul, in its judgments and peregrinations, has become the subject of myth *par excellence*.

The question of the soul in the Greek tradition : the body's motor or its provisional host

In the tradition of Plato, which goes back at least to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the question of interiority is detached from the body, but not in a radical way. It moves from the body to a semi-corporeal entity that is always attached to the corporeal element. This quasi-corporeal element is

⁷ See, among other, S.P. Ward, *Penology and eschatology in Plato's myths*, Lewiston [NY] (Edwin Mellen Press) 2002

the soul, which is present inside the body according to two modalities : as the body's motor or as its provisional guest⁸.

In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, although the life-principle called “ soul ” (*psukhê*) is not corporeal, it remains associated with the blood. In these two poems, the soul, since it is inside the body, is not directly perceptible as such during the course of life, and is observable only when it leaves the body. The soul is associated with a breath (*Iliad* XXIII 98) which can exit from the mouth (*Iliad* IX 409), or with a vapor that rises from the blood that flows from a wound in the chest (*Iliad* XVI 505) or in the side (*Iliad* XIV 518). In order to cheer up his comrades, Agenor reminds them that Achilles has only one soul (*Iliad* XX 569). Achilles, as he chases Hector around the walls of Troy, proclaims that his enemy's soul will be the prize of his victory (*Iliad* XX 569).

This is the formula which, in the *Iliad*, describes two celebrated deaths : that of Patrocles, killed by Hector (*Iliad* XX 569) and that of Hector, killed by Achilles (*Iliad* XXII 362) : “ scarcely had he spoke : death, which finishes all, had already enveloped him. His soul left his limbs and flew away to Hades, weeping over its fate, abandoning strength and youth ”. When the soul has left it, the body is no more than a cadaver, or a pile of rotting flesh. The soul, for its part, is presented as an image (*eidolon*) of the deceased (*Iliad* XIII 72, XI 476, XXIV 14; *Odyssey* XI 83, XX 355), his *alter ego*, as Achilles implies when he evokes the soul of Patrocles that has come to ask him to organize a funeral in his honor : “ Ah ! No doubt, something still lives in Hades, a soul, a shadow, but where the spirit no longer dwells. All night, the soul of the unhappy Patrocles stood before me, lamenting, grieving, and multiplying its injunctions. It resembled him prodigiously (*Iliad* 102-107) ”. Although this image is his *alter ego*, when it has left the body it had animated, the soul is bereft not only of physical force, since it lacks consistency, but also of psychic strength, since it loses its thought. Achilles can no more seize Patrocles' soul than Odysseus can take his mother's soul into his arms (*Odyssey* XI 205). It is only after having drunk the blood of the slaughtered victims that, in the *Nekyia*, the seer Tiresias can predict the future to Odysseus (*Odyssey* XI 90-96) and that the rest of the dead, including his mother, can be interrogated by him.

In this context, death constitutes a considerable diminishment for the individual, even if something may indirectly survive of him if he has been able to prolong himself in the body of his children, who have received his genetic capital, and in the memory of his near and dear ones and of the society in which he lives. As such, however, this individual continues his existence only in the form of an evanescent double that comes out from inside the body, a piece of air that

⁸ On this subject, see in particular J. Bremmer, *The early Greek concept of the soul*, Princeton (Princeton Univ. Press) 1983.

vegetates under the earth for an indeterminate time. Reduced to the state of an inconsistent image of the deceased, the soul seems, with the one exception of Tiresias, the seer *par excellence*, to be deprived of the faculty of thought. Consequently, the soul, whose survival is of limited duration, is practically bereft of all individuality, and can therefore find no place within a retributive system dedicated to correct in another world the injustices undergone or committed in this world. In the Homeric poems, moreover, only the souls of great criminals are punished and given over to exemplary tortures.

The second model presents the soul as an autonomous entity that can travel outside the body it animates. Already in Homer, the soul, when separated from the body, travels in a certain way. It goes to Hades, which is an inhospitable place, and may return to speak with the living, like the soul of Patrocles and souls evoked by Odysseus. However, these displacements are limited and relatively insignificant. On the other hand, stories speak of personages (particularly Aristeas, Abaris, Epimenides, and Phormion) who are able to separate their soul from their body and make it travel while leaving their body unmoved, often for a long period of time. The following anecdote gives a good illustration of this phenomenon. It was said that the soul of Hermodotus could abandon his body and go traveling, later returning to his body. One day, his enemies, taking advantage of his wife's betrayal, threw his body, bereft of its soul, into the flames (see Plutarch, *On the demon of Socrates* 22, 592c-d). In this context, the soul of individual has its own life, independent of the body it moves, and a genuine personality, which enables it to experience specific adventures.

The question of the soul in Plato

The interest of Plato's position resides in the fact that he associates these two models in his representation of the soul. The model of the soul attached to the body, which it animates from within, prevails everywhere Plato speaks of the living being, whereas that of the soul as temporary guest of the body it inhabits appears particularly when Plato evokes the doctrine of reincarnation. Above all, this position must be situated within a specific philosophical context.

Plato maintains a paradoxical philosophical doctrine, characterized by a twofold reversal. The first reversal is that the world of things perceived by the senses, in which we live, is a mere image of a world of intelligible realities (or Forms), which, as the models of sensible things, constitute genuine reality. Unlike sensible things, the Forms possess the principle of their existence within them. The second reversal consists in the fact that man is not reduced to his body, and his true identity coincides with what we designate by means of the term "soul", whatever definition may be proposed of that entity that accounts for all motion, not only in man, but also in the totality of

the universe, both material (growth, locomotion, etc.) and spiritual (feelings, sense perception, intellectual knowledge, etc.). Throughout the history of philosophy, this twofold reversal has enabled a definition of the specificity of Platonism.

The soul as invisible motor of a body

The soul is associated with the body which it animates, and which it provides with spontaneous motion, thereby establishing an opposition between the living and the non-living, according to the following definition : the soul is “ source and principle of motion for all that is moved ” (*Phaedrus* 245c-d.). Here we encounter once again the model of the soul as the invisible motor of a body. The soul is invisible, because it is situated at a level intermediary between the sensible and the intelligible. This is what Plato implies in two passages (*Timaeus* 35a-b, 41d) that contain a description of the mixture from which all souls derive, whether the soul of the world, of the gods, of the demons, of men or of animals. According to the interpretation I maintain, the soul cannot be reduced to a process or an activity, but it is an autonomous entity that has a personality and a history. We must take seriously the “ description ” of the mixture, carried out by the demiurge in the *Timaeus*, whence the soul of the world and the soul of the other living beings derive. In order that a retributive system such as that proposed by Plato may work, there must be an autonomous entity that subsists when death intervenes, understood as the separation of the body from the soul which it inhabited, and this entity must pass from one body to another.

This invisible entity is the source of all motion, both corporeal and incorporeal, or rather, of all the external activities and all the internal activities of a living being. Yet there is a hierarchy among them, for external activities must be subordinate to internal activities. What is more, beginning with the *Republic*, the soul within the body is itself assigned to functions that are also hierarchized : intellect (*noûs*), spirit (*thumós*) and appetite (*epithumía*). In the *Timaeus*, we find these functions attached to a place in the body, but still inside it : intellect (*noûs*) is situated in the head, spirit (*thumós*) in the area of the heart, and appetite (*epithumía*) in the area of the liver. Since the last two functions must enable the human body to defend itself against the dangers that threaten it in the case of spirit (*thumós*), and to ensure survival and the reproduction of this body in the case of appetite (*epithumía*), these tasks are subordinated to that of the intellect (*noûs*), which is interested only in the intelligible. In short, interiority corresponds in Plato to the soul as principle of all spontaneous motion in a living being, and in the soul to the intellect (*noûs*), which is interested not in the sensible, but the intelligible.

*The soul as provisional guest of a body*⁹

The representation of the soul as the temporary guest of the body is anchored in a magnificent passage from the *Phaedrus*. This passage establishes the following two points :

1) The reality (*ousía*) in which the soul consists is formulated in its definition (*lógos*) as the principle of motion and hence of life. It can therefore neither be born nor die. If it did, and did so throughout the world, everything would cease or die.

2) The soul is by nature a compound power (*sumphutê dunámis*). In both gods and men, it includes three elements : intellect (*noûs*), spirit (*thumós*) and desire (*epithumía*). In the central myth of the *Phaedrus*, Plato abandons any attempt at a well-argued description of the soul's structure, and limits himself to evoking the image of a chariot pulled by two horses, led by a charioteer. Nevertheless, this image raises the question of the soul's unity.

3) From this perspective, a thing's immortality can be defined as its persistence in being. In the case of the soul, this being is situated in motion, and hence in life. Therefore, the soul, in its totality, as a principle of motion, must always move and move other things, despite the distinctions that may be established within it.

In the case of living beings, that is, of beings endowed with a soul and a body, death (*thánatos*) must be defined as the separation of the soul and the body. “ But that which is called ‘ death ’, is it not precisely the fact, between the soul and the body, of being loosened and separated ? ” (*Phaedo* 67d). This definition implies a consequence that is also paradoxical : death does not concern realities - for the soul is immortal and the body only decomposes in order to recompose one or more other bodies - but a link or a proportion.

Yet let us return to the *Phaedrus*. Only soul as an incorporeal whole is immortal. Individual souls are recycled every 10,000 years. Throughout these years, the soul can be attached to a specific body, which is subject to destruction. In this way, the soul can be punished or rewarded for its previous lives (punished, for instance, by becoming attached to an animal that is low on the scale of beings). Another cycle for this soul begins, now deprived of its previous individuality. Here, Plato's thought on soul is not very different from Oriental doctrines of reincarnation. Since the presence of soul in a body means that this body is temporarily alive, we note that, in this scheme, it is not individual life that persists, but what remains constant is – so to speak – the

⁹ Through his soul, which provides man with a degree of immortality, man can be assimilated to god, a characteristic which is completely opposed to the previous Greek tradition, based as it was on the opposition between mortals and immortals. On Plato's role in this question, see W. Burkert, *Greek religion. Archaic and classical* [1977], trans. by J. Raffan, Oxford (Blackwell) 1985, pp. 321-325.

available pool of souls, almost as if it were the phenomenon of life *per se* that persists. Let us next consider the soul's wanderings in more detail.

During the first millennium, the soul is separated from all destructible bodies, whereas during the following nine millennia, it passes from body to body as a function of the moral value of its previous existence, which is determined by the quality of its intellectual activity. At the end of the first millennium of recurring transmigrations, all those souls that are worthy of being associated with a sensible body inhabit the body of a man - that is, a male, even though the sexual organs are still missing ; this association remains in force for the following millennium. A man who loves knowledge or beauty, and who has chosen an upright life for three consecutive millennia, will be able to escape from the cycle of reincarnations, and rise back up to the heavens.

The others will travel from one body to another, beginning with the third millennium. The first category of bodies mentioned is that of women : whoever displays cowardice enters into the body of a woman, since virility is associated with war in Ancient Greece. Only in the course of this millennium does the distinction of the sexes appear, thus allowing sexual reproduction. Then come incarnations in various kinds of what we call “ animals ”, although there is no term in ancient Greek to designate this category of living beings. They are classified as a function of the elements (beginning with the air, since fire is reserved for the gods), in a vertical order. At the top, birds fly through the air. Then come the living beings that inhabit the surface of the earth ; these are the quadrupeds, insects, and reptiles. Finally, come the aquatic animals : fish, shellfish, and others ; they are the most stupid.

In fact, Plato describes a psychic *continuum*, in which we find a hierarchical order of gods, demons, human beings, and the animals that live in the air, on the earth and in the water, and even, as we shall soon see, plants. Intellectual activity, conceived as the intuition of Ideas, constitutes the criterion that enables a distinction to be established between all these souls. Gods and demons contemplate the intelligible reality, that is the Forms, directly, and, as it were, incessantly. Human beings share this privilege only during a certain period of their existence, when their souls are separated from all bodies. Once human souls have been incarnated, their contemplation of the Ideas is mediate, since it must pass through the intermediary of the senses ; above all, it is more or less uncertain. For their part, animals use their intellect less and less as one goes down the scale of beings.

Within the psychic scale mentioned above, we note two discontinuities : (1) A discontinuity between the souls of gods and of demons, which never fall into a body subject to destruction ; and the souls of human beings and of animals, which inhabit destructible bodies with diverse

appearances. (2) A discontinuity between the souls of human beings and of animals, which are endowed with a rational power, and the souls of plants, which are reduced to the desiring power.

After Plato

Plato died in 348, but his school, the Academy, continued to illustrate his doctrine and to defend it, first against Aristotle and his disciples, then against the Stoics. As time went by, Platonism took on several features of the systems it fought, Aristotelianism and Stoicism. In the Imperial period, however (at the beginning of the Christian period), a renewal took place, and Platonism gave considerable importance to myths, but in a new perspective. The goal was now to ensure the salvation of individual souls. Here, we will give two famous examples of this new orientation : the Chaldaean Oracles and the Gnostic *Revelations*.

Faced by a Platonism strongly influenced by the Aristotelianism or Stoicism taught in the Schools that claimed allegiance to the Academy, the need was felt in the Imperial period for a more religious philosophy, which aim at the “salvation of the soul”. Plato's philosophy now reappeared as the best means for achieving this goal, and according to circumstances it grew closer to poetry, divination and initiation as practiced in the mysteries. Poetry, interpreted in the context of allegory, was considered as a means of transmitting profound truths, oracles were held to be the expression of the very words of the gods, and access to another order of reality than the sensible was described in terms of an initiation.

Middle Platonism, obviously influenced by Neo-Pythagoreanism, was to furnish the conceptual structure of famous religious texts : Hermetic “revelations”, *Chaldaean Oracles* and *Orphic Rhapsodies*. The Neoplatonists placed the elements of these systems in correspondence with those of their own doctrine, with several oracles transmitted by other gods also playing an important role. Under Marcus Aurelius, Plato expressed himself through the mouth of a medium, and, in the context of oracular consultations, set forth the essential features of his doctrine in the form it assumed in the *Timaeus*. This is how this strange interpretation of Platonism, which developed in the context of magic, and to which the surviving fragments of the *Chaldaean Oracles* bear witness, presents itself¹⁰.

¹⁰ The *Chaldaean Oracles* are cited after the following edition : *Oracles Chaldaïques avec un choix de commentaires anciens, texte établi et traduit par Édouard des Places*, Paris, 1971, 1989²; there is an English-language equivalent in : *The Chaldean Oracles*, Text, translation and commentary by Ruth Majercik, *Studies in Greek and Roman religion* 5, Leiden, 1989. For the commentaries by Psellus, the standard edition is henceforth Michaelis Pselli *Philosophica minora II : Opuscula psychologica, theologica, daemonologica*, ed. D. O'Meara, Stuttgart & Leipzig, 1989 n° 38, 39, 40, p. 126-148. The main works on the *Chaldaean Oracles* are : Wilhelm

*The Chaldaean Oracles*¹¹

Traditionally, the origin of the *Oracles* is traced back to two “Chaldaeans”¹², that is, two magicians, both named Julian, who are mentioned by the *Suda*¹³. A work *On the demons* is attributed to Julian Senior, who is also described as a philosopher. Works on Theurgy (*Theourgikâ*) and Initiations (*Telestikâ*), as well as *Oracles* (*Lógia*) in verse, which must be the *Chaldaean Oracles*, are attributed to Julian Junior, whom his father had turned into a medium¹⁴, and who is the only one qualified as a “theurge”. Yet in what did this collection consist? What we now call the *Chaldaean Oracles* contains two parts: first, an ancient traditional background, constituted by the *Oracles*, of that particular form of magic called “theurgy”, followed by revelations concerning the

Kroll, *De Oraculis Chaldaicis*, Breslauer Philologische Abhandlungen 7,1, 1894; Hans Lewy, *Chaldaean oracles and theurgy*, 1956, Nouvelle édition par Michel Tardieu, Paris, 1978.

¹⁰ In these paragraphs, I take my inspiration from an article by H.D. Saffrey, “Les néo-Platoniciens et les *Oracles chaldaïques*”, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 27, 1981, pp. 209-225; reprinted in *Recherches sur le néo-Platonisme après Plotin* (Histoire des doctrines de l'Antiquité classique 14), Paris, 1990, pp. 63-79.

¹¹ Here I collect the essential parts of what I have written in: “*Les Oracles Chaldaïques dans la Théologie Platonicienne*”, Proclus et la *Théologie Platonicienne*. Actes du Colloque International de Louvain (13-16 mai 1998), en l'honneur de H. D. Saffrey et L. G. Westerink, édités par A. Ph. Segonds et C. Steel, avec l'assistance de C. Luna et A. F. Mettraux, Leuven (Univ. Press) / Paris (Les Belles Lettres) 2000, pp. 109-162; “*Plato's Timaeus and the Chaldaean oracles*”, *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*, edited by Gretchen J. Reydam-Schils, Notre Dame [Ind.] (University of Notre Dame Press) 2003, pp. 112-132.

¹² The adjective “Chaldaean” did not necessarily imply an Oriental origin, but may simply mean that Julian practiced the Chaldaean “sciences” of magic, astrology, divination, etc. For the Romans, “Chaldaeans” meant “charlatans”. Yet H. D. Saffrey hesitates on this point, for a passage from Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides* (VII, transl. William of Moerbeke, pp. 58.30-60.9 Klibansky-Labowsky = p. 512 Steel) evokes the name of the Syrian god “Hadad” in a context reminiscent of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, and Saffrey therefore wonders whether these Chaldaeans might have lived in Syria. On this, see Saffrey “*Les néo-Platoniciens et les Oracles chaldaïques*”, pp. 220-225 = *Recherches sur le néo-Platonisme après Plotin*, pp. 74-79.

¹³ S.v. *'Ioulianós*, vol. II, p. 641.32-642.4 Adler. These two notices have been translated with a commentary by Father Saffrey, in “*Les Néo-platoniciens et les Oracles chaldaïques*”, pp. 210-215 = *Recherches sur le néo-Platonisme après Plotin*, pp. 64-69.

¹⁴ In his *Commentary on the Golden Chain* (new edition in Michaelis Pselli *Philosophica minora I: Opuscula logica, physica, allegorica*, etc., ed. J. M. Duffy, Stuttgart & Leipzig, n° 46, p. 164-168; French transl. by Pierre Lévêque, *Aurea catena Homeri. Une étude sur l'allégorie grecque*, Paris, 1959, pp. 78-81. H.D. Saffrey gives a French translation with commentary of the cited passage in “*La théurgie comme phénomène culturel chez les Néo-platoniciens (IV^e-V^e siècles)*”, *Koinônia* 8, 1984, pp. 162-163; reprinted in *Recherches sur le néo-Platonisme après Plotin*, pp. 52-53).

doctrine of Plato, obtained by Julian the Theurge after he had been trained by his father in the procedures of theurgy.

According to the remaining fragments, the *Timaeus* seems to have been the text of reference ; nevertheless, the *Phaedrus* (above all the central myth, 246a-249b), the *Symposium*, the *Statesman*, and even the *Protagoras* also seem to have been used. This is not surprising, for the Middle Platonists referred especially to the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*. They sought to find in these dialogues views on divinity, on the world, man, and on society, in the context of a system articulated around three principles : God, the Model, and Matter.

For Atticus, as for Plutarch, and for Alcinoos, God is to be identified with the Good of the *Republic* and the Demiurge of the *Timaeus*. Since this God is the very first God, nothing can be superior to Him. This supremacy determines the type of relation that God maintains with the second principle : the Model. The Middle Platonists were accustomed to envisaging the problem by recalling the passage from *Timaeus* 29a where the demiurge is said to “ set his eyes on that which always remains identical ”. From this they derived the belief that in a way, the intelligible forms were the “ thoughts ” of God, which did not prevent the forms from having an existence in themselves, outside the divine intellect. The Model thus corresponded to the Intelligible, which, as the object of thought of the first God, the Intellect, was external and inferior to him. Atticus declares, moreover, that Plato did no more than follow the opinion of his predecessors and that, following their example, he admitted only four elements, from which all the other bodies emerged as a result of transformations and combinations according to definite proportions. These are earth, water, air, and fire, which occupy positions in space that are determined by the very constitution of the universe. These elements have emerged from a matter that is unique, homogeneous and undifferentiated. This is no doubt what Plato in the *Timaeus* called “ the third kind ”, the “ wandering cause ”, “ extent ”, or the “ receptacle ”.

As far as we can tell, the vision of the world in the *Oracles* is related to the one we find in religious trends of the beginning of the Empire. Reality as a whole, as described in the *Oracles*, is made up of three nested worlds. The world of fire is exclusively that of the intelligible. This first world is the seat of the gods ; here, distant and inaccessible, dwells the Father of all spiritual entities. The ethereal world, which is probably a mixture of fire and air, includes the celestial bodies (stars and planets). This second world is the scene of that part of the soul's trajectory in which it seeks to rise back up toward the principles, where it meets the Teletarchs, who are responsible for helping it in its ascent. Finally, the material world comprises the sublunary realm, including the four elements (fire, air, water and earth) and the entire terrestrial world, a world given over to becoming, to birth and to death, whence the soul must escape by purifying itself

with the help of the techniques of theurgy. In this lower world, the soul must confront matter and the evil demons who are linked to it. These three worlds are structured with the help of the three principles advanced in Middle Platonism : God, the Model and Matter.

The supreme God of the *Chaldaean Oracles* is threefold, consisting of the following three entities ; the Father, Hecate, and the Demiurge. In fact, there are two Intellects, which are masculine entities : one of them contents itself with contemplating the Intelligibles - he is the Father - while the other fashions the universe and all the realities it contains, and he is the Demiurge. Between these two masculine beings we find a feminine entity, Hecate, who simultaneously separates and unites them.

- The figure of the Father is contradictory. On the one hand, he is completely separate from the world, yet at the same time he receives a series of positive attributes.

- Alongside this first Intellect, there is a second one, the Demiurge, whose role is to fashion the sensible world in accordance with the thoughts of the Father, that is, the Forms.

- Between these two, we find a third divine entity, a feminine divinity often identified with Hecate. She is qualified as the “ intermediary center ”.

This triad in which God consists is associated with several other divinities, whose role is to account for the action of the supreme divinity at various levels of reality. Among these divinities, the most important are the Iynges, the Maintainers, and the Teletarchs. The term Iunx is a feminine noun, designating a climbing bird, the wryneck (*iunx torquilla*). In erotic magic, this bird was used to bring back those who had been guilty of infidelities. In the Hellenistic world, this term therefore came to denote the “ binding ” force of love in the context of erotic magic. In the *Oracles*, the Iynges are presented as the thoughts or works of the Father : in a Middle Platonist perspective, they are therefore the Forms, which, as we know, serve to “ maintain ” the universe for the Chaldaeans. They are even reduced to their role as charms, which is natural, insofar as the Intelligible, in a Platonic context like that in which the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* are suffused, is associated with Good and the Beautiful, that is, the objects of love, through the intermediary of Eros.

The third principle, Matter, is present metaphorically in the terms of the bed of a river or of the ocean. The description given of it in the *Oracles* corresponds roughly to what is found in Plato's *Timaeus*.

These three principles, God, the Model and Matter, must account for everything else, particularly bodies and souls. The class of souls presents a very great diversity : soul of the world, higher souls, and human souls.

It seems that the soul of the world is conceived on the basis of the myth of Er in book X of the *Republic* and on the basis of the *Timaeus*, for it consists in two circles - that of the Same, which moves toward the right, that is, from West to East, and that of the Other, which goes toward the left, that is, from East to West - which Lachesis, the most venerable of the three Moirai, maneuvers with her two hands. Lachesis' two hands are related to those of Hecate. At the level of the soul of the world, the providential Intellect manifests itself through the intermediary of Fatality, which is described in the form of a bird, which souls must learn to recognize in order to be able to escape it. In addition, Proclus (*Theol. Plat.* V 32, p. 119.11-19) seems to identify Fatality and Nature, whose source is to be found in Zeus, the demiurge *par excellence*. “That is why Timaeus also says that souls see both the ‘laws of Fatality’ and ‘the nature of the all’, that is, encosmic Fatality and its powers ; and the Elian Stranger, in the *Statesman* (272e), names Fatality the motive cause of the natural circular motion of the all : ‘Fatality and a connatural desire make the world go round’”. In short, Nature, identified with Fatality is the soul of the world considered not in itself, but as the cause of all the motions that serve to weave destiny, or Fatality. As such, that is, as a soul, Nature, and therefore Fatality, is assimilated to a winged bird. Moreover, we can understand why all the allusions to Nature and therefore to Fatality come from the Myth of Er in book X of the *Republic*, from the *Statesman*, the *Timaeus*, and book X of the *Laws*.

At this level, we must distinguish between several classes of entities : gods, angels, demons, heroes, disincarnate souls, to which Proclus refers. Only two allusions in the *Chaldaean Oracles* refer to angels. In contrast, the class of evil demons, linked to the material world, who seek to drag the soul down into the material depths, is often evoked. They are connected to the sublunary elements. Their designation as “dogs” obviously brings them close to Hecate, who is the soul of the world, and therefore the goddess of Nature.

In *Timaeus* 41e, the demiurge teaches the laws of Fatality to the human souls he has just fashioned, a scene which must have inspired the *Chaldaean Oracles*, and which Proclus recalls in a text that has just been cited. To enable it to carry out the task of getting back to the Father, the soul finds allies in the Teletarchs, that is, the Masters of initiation, who ensure for the soul the existence of connections between the three worlds : ethereal, empyrean, and sensible. There is a Teletarch of the ethereal world, a Teletarch of the empyrean world, and a Teletarch of the sensible world.

The ascent takes place by means of symbols (*símbola*) which the higher divinities have sowed throughout the scale of realities. Commenting on the tale of the ascent of the souls in the central myth of Plato's *Phaedrus*, Proclus connects this ascent with that of the scale of reality according to the *Chaldaean Oracles*. In this passage, Proclus describes the ascent of the souls, the demons, and the gods, throughout the entire divine hierarchy, by using the vocabulary of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, placed systematically in parallel with the text of the *Phaedrus*. Expressed in the Chaldaean vocabulary of the theurges, the ascent takes place from the gods separated from the world to the intelligible gods, by way of the source-gods, the perfective gods, and the maintainer-gods. The hegemonic gods, like Zeus, make the gods who are inferior to them rise back up to the Sources, that is, to the intellectual gods, especially by means of initiations.

Here we find striking proof of the fact that the *Chaldaean Oracles* feature an omnipresent and highly pronounced soteriological character. In other words - and this seems to be just as true of the *Orphic Rhapsodies* - theogony, cosmogony and anthropogony serve essentially to fix the background against which the salvation of the soul, which constitutes the framework of this mythic ensemble, is carried out.

*The Gnostics*¹⁵

In 1945, several dozen “Gnostic” treatises in Coptic were discovered in Upper Egypt, near Nag Hammadi. In general, we can say that the Gnostics were Christians belonging to various groups who, in the course of the first four centuries of our era, made use of a knowledge (*gnôsis*) of Platonic origin, in which the stories of the Old and New Testament and several traditional Greek myths also play a role. This knowledge was supposed to have been transmitted in the form of revelations, and to procure the salvation of the soul of whoever possessed it. Eleven of these treatises belong to “Sethian” gnosis, a modern designation which is explained by their claim to have issued from the seed of Seth (not the Egyptian Seth, but the one from the Bible, son of Adam and father of Enosh).

Like most of the other Gnostics, the Sethians had a doctrine that includes a theogony, a cosmogony, an anthropogony and a soteriology. Together, these account form the genealogy of the divinities, the production of the world, the birth of man, and the means by which man will be able to return to the divine place. Their teaching is related to that of the other Gnostics : a large number of eternal entities (the eons) populate the perfect world which represents plenitude (the Pleroma). One of these eternal entities, Wisdom (Sophia), leaves the Pleroma and produces the

¹⁵ On this subject, see J. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic tradition*, Québec / Louvain (P. Univ. Laval / Peeters) 2001 ; R. Dufour, in Plotin, *Traité 30-37*, Paris (Flammarion) 2006.

demiurge who, assisted by creative angels (the archonts) and demons, fashions the world and men. Among men, some are “Gnostics”, because they come from the seed of Seth; these perfect men will be able to recognize their genuine nature, and through rituals and spiritual exercises, they will be able to return to the Pleroma when their soul leaves their body.

In general, the Sethian treatises distinguish four levels of reality, which derive from one another :

1) At the summit resides the Invisible Spirit, unknowable and beyond being, who can be reached either through negative theology or through an interpretation of the One of the first “hypothesis” of Plato's *Parmenides*. This One generally possesses the three powers of Being-Life-Thought.

2) Then comes Barbelo, an intellect that corresponds to the intelligible and intemporal world. It is divided into three sub-eons : a) Kaluptos (he who remains hidden) contains the beings that truly exist : he is an intellect containing within himself the modes of all things ; b) Protophanes (he who appears first) gathers together in his unity the multiplicity of the intellects that think their objects constantly and simultaneously ; c) Autogenes (he who engenders himself) seems to be a kind of Intellect endowed with discursive thought, who acts on the material world.

3) We then come to the level of disincarnate souls. According to their nature, the souls inhabit various places baptized Repentance, Sojourn, and Imprints of the eons. Repentance (*Metánoia*) includes six levels of disincarnate souls. These souls differ from another according to whether they have or have not sinned, and, if they have sinned, according to the gravity of their sins and the degree of their repentance. Although they are liable to sin, these souls turn away from material concerns and try to acquire immortality. Sojourn (*Paroíkēsis*) represents the place where the disincarnate souls assemble before they depart for a new incarnation. This place might be located at the level of the fixed stars. It contains souls which, although they intuit the truth and avoid evil, lack the moral strength necessary to resist external influences. The Imprints (*Antítupoι*) are the copies of genuine eons, for instance of Sojourn, Repentance, and Autogenes. These copies serve as training places for the souls before they rise back up to the genuine eons, moving from the copy of Sojourn to the genuine Sojourn, from the copy of Repentance to genuine Repentance, and so on. These Imprints seem to correspond to the seven planets.

4) Last to be born is the realm of nature, or the sensible world, in which souls are united to bodies. The realm of nature and the sensible world includes the atmospheric region (the aerial earth) and the earth.

The chosen person can, by a spiritual ascent, rise from one level of reality to another. Zostrianus, who is the addressee of a revelation that was also known in the School of Plotinus, leaves the sensible world with the help of an angel, successively traversing the atmospheric region, the copies of the eons, Sojourn and Repentance. He reaches the eon Barbelo, but cannot get past the level of Protophanes. In contrast, Allogenes has the privilege of reaching the summit where the Invisible Spirit dwells. If a man receives the right teaching and practices spiritual exercises, he may climb to each ontological degree, until he contemplates the ultimate principle.

Let us briefly conclude. Plato was the first author to have used the term *mýthos* in the sense we continue to give it. He described the role of myth in the Athens where he lived, in order to oppose it in the name of an argumentative philosophical discourse that sought to establish the truth. Despite this opposition, however, he resolved to have recourse to this unverifiable story not only in a practical intention, in order to persuade the citizen to obey moral norms and political laws, but also in a theoretical context, to evoke the premises from which philosophical discourse was to develop, and to evoke realities - such as the soul - in particular, that could not be grasped either by the senses or by the intellect. With the disappearance of the city-state and the constitution of Kingdoms and Empires, the social and political aspect of myth tended to disappear in the Mediterranean world, leaving the stage open for the character known as the soul. Theogony, cosmogony, and anthropogony persisted, but only to provide a framework for a vast drama, that of the salvation of the human soul, as we can observe when we read the *Chaldaean Oracles* and the treatises of the Sethian Gnostics.

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