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1965

V. FROM ORPHEUS TO EMPEDOCLES

THE INSTITUTION OF HEROIZATION, we have seen, provided a climate in which the memory of a holy teacher might receive reverent consideration; the attainment of recognition by certain deities who worked for the improvement of the human condition might have supplied a paradigm for the teacher's struggle; and belief in the inspiration of the poet's message had wide if not universal currency. All of these factors may well have contributed to the image of Socrates, but it is of interest to inquire whether they may have been brought together to some degree before Plato to adumbrate that image.

Socrates marks an epoch in the history of philosophy as his image does in the history of aretology; there were philosophers before Socrates, and some of them are reported to have behaved in ways at least as odd. The actual Socrates, therefore, however strange his conduct or novel his doctrine, belonged in a tradition, and a contrived image of Socrates would be likely to exploit that tradition, choosing traits from one source or another to produce the effect desired. The predecessors of Socrates are grouped together under the designation of pre-Socratics, which includes teachers of quite different outlook. The principal ones are the so-called Ionian physicists like Anaximander and Anaximenes and the atomists like Democritus and Leucippus, all definitely rationalist; but the term is also applied to mystics like Pythagoras and to men like Empedocles who were at once mystic and rationalist. With the physicists and their congeners we shall have little concern, for the Platonic Socrates deliberately turned away from them. The others have left a perceptible precipitate in the

writings of Plato. In the background of all of them and of Plato himself looms the figure of Orpheus and the institutions and beliefs of Orphism, and it is to these matters that we must now direct our attention.

Enthusiastic appreciation of Orphism a generation ago made of it a full-blown religion with a founder, scriptures, creed, ritual, and something like an ecclesiastical organization. The enthusiasm was promoted, if not generated, by admirers of the classics who were made uncomfortable by crudities in other manifestations of religion in Greece and therefore eager to discover a structure into which ideas more acceptable to modern norms could be projected. So firmly entrenched was the conception of Orphism as an established religion that men like Arnold Toynbee (in Vol. 5 of his *A Study of History*) could speak of the "historic Orphic Church." Excess in one direction was answered by excess in the other; a series of critical scholars, including the great Wilamowitz, complained that the elaborate structure was founded mainly on dubious hypotheses.

There was, to be sure, no Orphic Church; to posit one is anachronism. That some features of the creed ascribed to the Orphics are in apparent contradiction to others is no great matter, for recognized religions exhibit similar inconsistencies; more significant, perhaps, is the circumstance that no individual is ever spoken of as an Orphic. But the allusions collected in Otto Kern's *Orphicorum Fragmenta* (1922), even after they are subjected to the searching criticism of Ivan Linforth's *The Arts of Orpheus* (1941), do indicate that a reasonably consistent attitude distinguishable from other attitudes prevalent in Greece is specifically associated with Orphism in a number of passages and may reasonably be associated with Orphism in other passages where the connection is not made explicit.

If we may not speak of an Orphic religion, therefore, in our sense of "a religion," we may speak of it as a movement, as Martin Nilsson, our most eminent authority on Greek religion, speaks of it. If our extant Orphic literature is late and spurious, if the lost Orphic books listed by Clement of Alexandria are mainly pseudepigraphical, they yet point to a very strong likeli-

hood that a genuine Orphic literature did exist. There can be little doubt that the cosmogony by which the chorus justifies the primacy of birds in Aristophanes (*Birds* 685ff.) is a parody of Orphic doctrine. The Hippolytus of Euripides' play may not be an Orphic, as has often been alleged, because it is hard to reconcile a devoted huntsman with vegetarianism, but his father Theseus thought he had grounds for reviling him as one (lines 952ff.):

"You are temperate and uncontaminated by evil? Your high claims will never convince me; I won't be such a fool as to attribute to the gods such a lack of discernment. Go then and brag, cry up your vegetarian diet like a quack. Hold Orpheus your master, rant away, revere the vaporings of your many screeds."

What a rationalist knew of devotees of Orphism, then, was that they pretended to special purity, followed a vegetarian diet, paid special reverence to Orpheus as their master, and regarded his writings as sacred.

It is clear that the Orphics possessed a characteristic cosmogony and anthropogony, adapted from elsewhere, it may be, but associated in the popular mind with their movement. It is also clear that they avoided the use of meat and of wool; when Herodotus (2.81) says that the Egyptians allowed no wool to be taken into their temples or buried with them, he notes that "here their practice resembles the rites called Orphic and Bacchic." But the salient teachings of Orphism have to do with ethics and eschatology. These rest upon the dualism of body and soul, with the notion that the one is good and enduring and the other transitory and evil, and that one should be suppressed in the interest of the other. Perhaps it was because physical bodies are unclean that Orphics avoided slaughter and eating of flesh; more likely it was because of a belief in transmigration of souls. The corollary of the dichotomy between soul and body is a system of rewards and punishments in an after life. The motivation for proper conduct, including ritual purifications, was to ensure a desirable lot in a future existence. The system was capable of high spirituality, but it also involved elements of crudeness, and it was susceptible of abuse in the hands of self-seeking priests and charlatans.

Of more concern in our present context is the individual regarded as the founder of Orphism and believed to have promulgated its doctrines in poems that he sang. Whether Orpheus was a real personage or mythical or merely the projection of the Orphic sect—all of these views have been maintained—is of no real consequence, as it is of no real consequence whether the Lycurgus who established the Spartan system was historical or an invention; whether real or imagined, our sources speak of him as a man. His date would be two generations before the Trojan War, for he is regularly represented as participating in the Argonautic expedition, and his place of origin is Thrace. Always, among the Argonauts and elsewhere, he is represented as a singer, with lyre in hand; Aeschylus and Euripides say that he could attract trees and beasts and even stones by his music and could charm whomever he would. He is said to have descended to the underworld to recover his wife Eurydice, who had been bitten to death by a snake. His power survived his death; he was killed and dismembered by a band of Thracian maenads, but his severed head floated on to Lesbos, singing as it went.

An hypothesis which fits all the traits ascribed to Orpheus, suggested by the Swiss scholar K. Meuli and elaborated in E. R. Dodds's *The Greeks and the Irrational*, is that Orpheus was a shaman. Shamanism was prevalent in Thrace, and other mysterious Thracian figures known to the Greeks, Abaris and Aristaeus, were clearly shamans. Dodds summarizes his arguments as follows (p. 147):

Orpheus' home is in Thrace, and in Thrace he is the worshipper or companion of a god whom the Greeks identified with Apollo. He combines the professions of poet, magician, religious teacher, and oracle-giver. Like certain legendary shamans in Siberia, he can by his music summon birds and beasts to listen to him. Like shamans everywhere, he pays a visit to the underworld, and his motive is one very common among shamans—to recover a stolen soul. Finally, his magical self lives on as a singing head, which continues to give oracles for many years after his death. That too suggests the North: such mantic heads appear in Norse mythology and in Irish tradition. I conclude that Orpheus is a Thracian figure of much the same character as Zalmoxis—a mythical shaman or prototype of shamans.

Some of these traits Orpheus shares with other figures, and it is therefore pertinent to ask why he in particular became the central figure in a religious movement. The Thracian Abaris, Herodotus (4.36) tells us, "is said to have gone with his arrow all round the world without once eating"; in Siberia souls are still said to ride on arrows. Later writers preserve the tradition that he banished pestilences, predicted earthquakes, and composed religious poems. Of Aristeas, Herodotus (4.13-15) tells even more wonderful stories: he travelled through the north in a trance; he was seen dead in a fuller's shop in Proconnesus, was simultaneously seen on the road to Cyzicus, and seven years later reappeared in Proconnesus, where he wrote a poem and again disappeared; and many years later he appeared to the Metapontines in Italy and bade them set up an altar to Apollo, saying that Apollo had once visited their country, with himself in attendance in the shape of a crow. Hermotimus of Clazomenae was similarly able to travel and observe far-off events while his apparently dead body remained at home. Stories like these were familiar enough in fifth-century Athens for Sophocles to allude to them without citing names: when Orestes in the *Electra* (62ff.) is troubled by the possible omen in feigning his own death, he consoles himself with the reflection, "Often before now have I seen wise men die in vain report, and then, when they return home, they are held in more abiding honor."

But Orpheus was held in higher and more abiding honor than the others. Even in the sixth century the epithet "of renowned name" (*onomaklyton*: Ibycus, frg. 17) was applied to him. The several references to him in Plato (e.g., *Symposium* 179D; *Republic* 10, 620A) sound as if a real person, not a mythological figure, were spoken of. When Isocrates (*Busiris* 11.38) objects to blasphemous things said of the gods by the poets, he says that Orpheus was particularly liable to the charge and so died by being pulled to pieces. Others of his class, as we noticed, also composed poems, but none attained such high fame as a singer as Orpheus. Many passages praise his singing for its specifically magic power, but sometimes it is the quality of the singing, rather than wizardry, that seems to receive the greater emphasis. So

in the *Alcestis* (357ff.) Admetus wishes he possessed "the tongue and tunefulness" of Orpheus so that he might charm Persephone and her husband and so bring Alcestis back. Here, of course, the object of the desired skill is still for a purpose like Orpheus' own, but in the *Medea* Jason says, "Let me not possess gold in my house nor the power of singing more beautifully than Orpheus unless it makes me famous." If Orpheus shared his wonder-working powers with others, then, it was as a singer that he was most eminent. Among Greeks of all periods, we must remember, a high reputation as a singer implied not virtuoso performance but superlative content. Connected with the gift of song, that others possessed, is one distinction that others did not, and that is the reputation for having introduced secret mysteries. This is alluded to as early as Herodotus but made most specific in Euripides' *Rhesus* 943f.

The reason that Orpheus, and not others of his class, was honored for his spiritual gifts and by critical minds may be the quite simple fact that his doctrine was spiritually superior, or lent itself to spiritual elaboration. The latter is the more probable alternative, and we may surmise that Orpheus' high reputation was further enhanced in order to give higher authority to the doctrine attributed to him. Whether he was historical or a myth quickened into life, it is clear that the personality of Orpheus was an object of esteem amounting to reverence, and that this esteem served to document the validity of teachings ascribed to him. It is highly probable that he was the first such figure in the western tradition, for the antecedent religious atmosphere, whether Cretan or Achaean, did not lend itself to such development; in any case he is the first such known to western tradition. Socrates, as we have observed, however extraordinary he may have been, was not so extraordinary as Plato portrayed him, and Plato enhanced Socrates' personality in order to give greater authority to the teachings ascribed to Socrates. Plato was as aware as any modern that well-intentioned people might manipulate religious sentiments for a desirable end, as the *Laws* amply shows, and he was as capable of analyzing the history of the Orpheus myth as any modern. To say that he consciously took

the Orpheus complex as his model for fashioning his own holy teacher is to indulge in fantasy, though it is not beyond the range of possibility.

But we need not insist that Plato had a single model for his enterprise. Between Orpheus and Socrates there were other teachers for whom special sanctity was claimed. Pythagoras, in particular, was a more tangible figure, was credited with a more sophisticated and better articulated doctrine, and so was nearer to Plato in outlook as well as in time. Indeed Pythagoras himself became the subject of a legend that both borrowed from and contributed to the Socratic legend and ultimately swallowed and sophisticated and better articulated doctrine, and so was nearer to the Pythagorean legend ultimately assumed will be presented in the latter part of this book. What concerns us at present are the aspects of Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism that may have helped shape Plato's portrait of Socrates.

Our extant biographies of Pythagoras date to the third and fourth centuries A.D. and are so heavily incrustated with legend that the historical Pythagoras is hard to isolate. Indeed, some extreme critics have thought him a syndicate rather than an individual, and some have regarded him as a newcomer from India and his name as a hellenization of the Sanskrit *pitṭa gurū*, or Father Teacher. But there is no sufficient reason to doubt the tradition that he was one man and a Greek, the son of Mnesarchus of Samos, and that about 531 B.C. he emigrated thence to Croton, in southern Italy. In regard to the doctrine attributed to Pythagoras, there is again great uncertainty. Many scholars are convinced that the mathematical and musical contributions attributed to him are not in fact his but for various reasons came to be associated with his name late in the fifth century.

But what concerns us is Pythagoras' ethical and spiritual teachings, and here there can be little doubt that they are his own. According to these teachings the soul is a fallen divinity incarcerated in the body as in a tomb and condemned to a cycle of reincarnation as man, animal, or plant. This explains Pythagorean abstention from animal food and even from certain vegetables. The soul can be released from the cycle by the cul-

tivation of purity, which may involve study of natural science; study thus becomes a religious duty. It is this aspect of Pythagorean teaching that opened the way for attributing mathematical and other sciences to him. As important as his doctrine is the society Pythagoras established to preserve and promulgate it. The society was a closed body, apparently graded into divisions of "auditors" and "students" and subject to a very strict communal discipline. The spiritual exercises were directed to the achievement of purity and entailed silence, constant self-scrutiny ("where did I go astray, what have I done, what that I should have done have I failed to do"), and the observance of certain ancient precepts that were given a symbolic meaning.

It is obvious that Pythagoras was a highly gifted personality who deserved the respect given him; but even if he had not been, it was inevitable that a religious society should endow its founder with special sanctity, and increasingly so as the foundation receded into the past. There were of course mockers, in comedy New and Old and among hard rationalists. Contemporaries of Plato who were not in sympathy with Platonism took a critical view of Pythagoreanism also. Here, for example, is a comment of Isocrates (*Busiris* 28) :

On a visit to Egypt Pythagoras became a student of the religion of the people, and was first to bring to the Greeks all philosophy, and more conspicuously than others he interested himself in sacrifices and in ceremonial purity, since he believed that even if he should gain thereby no greater reward from the gods, among men, at any rate, his reputation would be greatly enhanced. And this indeed happened to him. For so greatly did he surpass others in reputation that all the younger men desired to be his pupils, and their elders were more pleased to see their sons staying in his company than attending to their private affairs. And these reports we cannot disbelieve; for even now persons who profess to be followers of his teaching are more admired when silent than are those who have the greatest renown for eloquence.

The very tone of the pejorative remarks in this passage suggests a polemical attitude: Isocrates sets himself to belittle Pythagoras as a self-seeker because the generality of people tended to set too high a value upon him. Other and earlier authors speak of Pythagoras with varying degrees of respect; the

list includes such names as Xenophanes and Heraclitus, Herodotus and Ion of Chios, Empedocles, and in particular Plato. In a number of other authors who do not mention Pythagoras by name the influence of Pythagoreanism is perceptible. The most telling case is Pindar. His praises of *ponos* (toil) and his conception of "harmony" are plausibly thought to derive from Pythagoreanism, as does much of his religious posture generally. "It is not mine to wonder," he says (*Pythian* 10.48). "When the gods appoint it, nothing is too strange." But the largest and clearest precipitate of Pythagoreanism is in Plato, who is also the most effective agent for spreading aspects of the doctrine.

Plato's relationship to Pythagoras is different from his relationship to Orpheus. Citations of Orpheus are of an almost purely literary nature, which is to say mainly decorative. Pythagoras is cited as an authority whom the writer accepts, and often his doctrine is presented without his name being mentioned. Materials in dialogues as diverse as the *Republic* (especially in the vision of Er) and the *Timaeus* are clearly adaptations of Pythagoreanism. Perhaps there is some connection between the concern for mathematics attributed to Pythagoras and the large place that subject occupied in the teaching of the Academy, even if the direction of the movement is toward rather than from Pythagoreanism. Most striking, perhaps, is the very organization of the Academy and Plato's insistence (in the *Seventh Epistle*) that doctrine was to be assimilated not out of books but only by long-continued and intimate contact with the master. The later schools of philosophy were all organized as cults, with the teacher as the responsible leader; that apparently was the only means of effecting a corporate existence capable of transmitting property and placing it under the legal control of the head. Even the Museum at Alexandria was organized as a cult of the Muses. Even Epicurus received the honors appropriate to the head of a school; for example, his birthday continued to be celebrated. So far as we can see, the pre-Socratics (with the obvious exception of the Hippocratics) had no such organization. If the Academy was a pioneer in this respect, it may be that Plato was consciously adopting an admired Pythagorean institution. The position of

Pythagoras in the institution he could not well claim for himself (or for any contemporary) and so made Socrates his surrogate; that he thought a peculiar efficacy should inhere in the head of a school we can see from the autobiographical *Seventh Epistle*.

But any derivation of Platonic matter from Pythagorean is subject to the important qualification that the influence may actually have operated in the reverse direction, for the image of Pythagoras that prevailed at the turn of the fifth and fourth centuries was undoubtedly colored by contemporary philosophic (including Platonic) thought. It is not improbable that philosophers who attributed to Pythagoras doctrine that was not his were quite aware of what they were doing; surely thinkers interested in the progress of speculation, as Plato was, must have known that Pythagoras was used as a convenient vehicle for contriving, giving authority to, and propagating a particular complex of ideas. If the Platonic image of Socrates is a creation for a similar purpose, then no personality in antecedent history could have been so suggestive and so perfect a model. The fact that Pythagoras himself subsequently became the subject of the mass of hagiological writing—of which a specimen will be presented in the latter part of this book—shows how outstandingly appropriate for the purpose his image was. Plato did not adopt the model, as later writers did, but mastered and adapted it, and it is a mark of his own high originality and artistry that he did so. His own creation is more consistent and more credible, and therefore more edifying and inspiring.

There remains one other figure in the pre-Socratic group of whom it is possible to conceive that his traits contributed to the developed image of the holy teacher, and that is Empedocles of Agriguntum. In view of the sharp distinction rationalist ages draw between wonder-working and philosophy, Empedocles is a puzzling phenomenon; it is hard to believe that the acute, clear-headed, and original thinker who wrote the poem *On Nature* (of which about 350 lines are extant) should also have written *On Purifications* (of which only about a hundred lines are extant); but there can be no doubt that he did in fact write both

poems. If Orpheus is possibly merely a hypostatization, and Pythagoras dim and shadowy, there can be no doubt of the historicity of Empedocles and of the outlines of his career. He was born of an aristocratic family in Acragas in Sicily about 493 B.C. and lived for sixty years, so that Socrates was nearly forty when Empedocles died. As a young man he championed democracy at Acragas, was offered and refused the kingship, was subsequently exiled and went to the Peloponnesus, where he recited his *Purifications* at Olympia. He visited the panhellenic colony of Thurii in 443 B.C., shortly after it was founded by Pericles. There are various miraculous stories of his death, either by translation or in the crater of Etna.

Empedocles was philosopher, scientist, poet, orator, statesman, and at the same time mystagogue, miracle worker, healer, and claimant to divine honors. For his high attainments in philosophy we have the unimpeachable evidence of the best ancient critics as well as his own writings; much of his doctrine is incorporated in Aristotle. His eminence as a literary artist is suggested by the fact that his pupil Gorgias is reputed to be the founder of artistic Greek prose style. But stories of his preternatural capacities were also much publicized. He is said to have stayed the winds by his magic, to have restored a dead woman to life, to have vanished bodily from the mortal world and to have become a god. These specific tales may be later embroidery supplied by the credulous; what is of particular interest is that in this case we know that Empedocles himself fashioned his legend and started it on its way. He himself declared that he could teach his pupils to stay the winds and revive the dead, he himself declared that he was no longer mortal but an immortal god, and he himself described the throngs who came to him in search of occult knowledge and magical cures.

We cannot, as some have essayed to do, divide Empedocles into two and say that he started either as a magician or as a philosopher and was then converted to the other, for the claims to wonder-working are found not in *Purifications* but in *On Nature*. Nor can we say that his object was to synthesize the two, for there is only juxtaposition and no attempt at synthesis. The point is

that the functions which are differentiated amongst ourselves became so after the time of Empedocles; in his day there was no incongruity in a single preternaturally endowed individual practising various arts that were at one in requiring special spiritual endowment. Perhaps the apparent incongruities in the traditional career of Pythagoras or even of Orpheus are to be similarly explained (as E. R. Dodds believes they are); perhaps these personages too themselves designed the shape of the legend in which they are swathed.

In all three of the teachers we have glanced at here we can see that the element of the miraculous, though it persisted as such and was even elaborated, was at the same time allegorized or otherwise endowed with rich spiritual meaning. The process is surest in the case of Orpheus; the association of lofty spiritual doctrine with so shadowy a personality suggests a large degree of conscious manipulation. In the case of Pythagoras we know that he himself gave spiritual meaning to primitive tabus, as his devotees centuries later were to give spiritual meaning to neutral acts of his own. We can see the process at its clearest, in a later stage of thought, in Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris*, where rites essentially barbaric are given a purer (and quite alien) significance. Where there was no central authority to enforce continued observance of outworn ritual, and indeed no single set of observances exclusively binding, the next logical step would be to promote the spirituality at which the interpretation aimed without the tabus out of which they had been alleged to derive. What could give the spiritual doctrine a focus and authority was the personality and career of the teacher who promulgated it. Empedocles went beyond both Orpheus and Pythagoras in deliberately shaping his career to provide focus and authority and perhaps scope for allegorical expansion in a desirable direction. If his predecessors are considered in this light, we can see that Socrates is in a direct line of succession, with the miraculous elements suppressed, in keeping with the tastes of a sophisticated age, the spiritual emphasized, and enough of the preternatural gifts left to produce a figure that could serve as a focus and examples. But if it was natural for the image of a Socrates to appear

in succession to his predecessors, his coming into being required the services of a midwife, to use the figure Plato puts into Socrates' mouth, and the midwife, it would seem, was Plato.

IN: HEROES AND GODS V