

Myth, Movement, and Reversal in Plato's *Phaedo*

Scholarship on Plato has long devoted attention to mythological examples. Recently, Morgan and Edmonds have independently considered Plato's use of *mythos* in the *Phaedo*, while Kuperus has dealt with the implications of the Cretan labyrinth and Theseus, whose ship temporarily stays Socrates' execution. This paper will focus on how mythological exemplars can be viewed particularly vis-à-vis movement or travel in the *Phaedo*. Socrates stands at the brink of departure from this life, poised to undertake a katabasis that will surpass that of Orpheus, for Socrates' journey involves a surprising reversal.

The opening reference to Theseus' ship befits this idea of reversal, for that vessel's return once tragically brought death to Aegeus, as it does now again to Socrates. Nevertheless, Theseus' ship also brought life, *Phaedo* tells Echecrates, for Theseus "saved both the fourteen youths and was himself saved," a feat commemorated by the festival to Apollo. Socrates acknowledges this fact by composing poetry, an act that reverses Socrates' normal practice of oral dialogue.

Socrates' first words concern movement, for he quips on the pleasure of having his legs freed from shackles. The movement permitted by his legs' release contrasts with the description of Socrates' final moments, where the journey to Hades (58e5) is enabled by the poison restricting his capacity to use his legs at death's onset. His imminent spiritual adventure is paradoxically engendered by his immobility (66e3-6).

This journey is enabled not merely by the numbing of his legs but also suggested by his composition of poetry, to which Cebes calls attention (60d). Socrates explains his decision to write poetry in honor of Apollo, connecting his composition with the festival to that healing god. Like an inspired poet, Socrates is responding to a dreamt command to compose *mousike* (60e6; 61a7-9), which not surprisingly, given his penchant for irony (Vlastos, 20-25), Socrates labels "philosophy" (61a2; cp. *Resp.* 376e-377a).

As the dialogue unfolds, numerous Orphic references prepare the reader for the poem's conclusion: lurking in Socrates' "poetic" background is Orpheus himself, who is not only the poet par excellence but the singer who by his song gained access to Hades, a feat to which Socrates alludes positively (68a4). The dialogue is laden with further Orphic references, such as judgment after death and the eternity of the soul (Edmonds, 162f.). Some of the other Orphic references in the dialogue (e.g., 61e; 62b; 66e; 69c; 70c; and 82b) are elucidated by Rowe in his 1993 Cambridge commentary.

Admittedly, Orpheus does not always come off so well in Plato. At *Symposium* 179d, Phaedrus describes Orpheus as "weak," and there he is sent away from Hades empty-handed. In the *Republic* (364e) he is just another corrupting poet, though he is portrayed more favorably at *Apology* 41a. Yet despite Orpheus' mixed reputation in Plato, ideas associated with him (poetry, katabasis and Orphic themes) are presented positively in the *Phaedo*, a dialogue in which *musike* is brought into harmony with *philosophia*, a combination parallel to the "interpenetration"—to use Morgan's term (p. 193)—of *mythos* and *logos*. Socrates' account of the power of a story as having the effect of a magical incantation (78a) suits well the notion of the power of song that can defy death and once nearly saved Eurydice. Socrates' final glance (116d) toward his friends may possibly even echo Orpheus' fateful glance, for Socrates must part with them, as Orpheus had parted with Eurydice.

In death, Socrates leaves this world's gloom behind (62a2-7). Such "positive" movement squares with his explanation to Simmias that the earth, where human beings live, is not in fact

“real” (109d) but more like the shadowy cave of *Republic* 7; Socrates’ katabasis, therefore, enabled by poison, provides escape. His conviction in the face of death about the journey’s outcome is not merely inspirational but inspired, even as the greatest singer, Orpheus, was musically inspired. Unlike Daedalus, whose escape from Crete was tainted by the loss of Icarus, and unlike Theseus’ return from Crete, which brought about Aegeus’ death, Socrates’ journey has a surprising, even ironic reversal (Edmonds, 226f.): the katabasis of the *Phaedo*’s “Orphic” Socrates turns out to be not merely a descent to Hades but a philosophical and spiritual anabasis that leads to a new and better life (68a7).

References

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