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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This is not a book about ‘mythical thinking’, although it is about both myth and thought. Treatments of mythical thinking try to specify some system of thought as ‘other’, as primitive, mystical, childish, or irrational. The difficulties of identifying and explaining purported different mentalities are by now well known, and the explanatory utility of such a procedure is limited.¹ Nor do I wish to attempt a rehabilitation of ‘myth’ in the face of ‘philosophy’. It has been suggested, for instance, that myth is a ‘pre-philosophical “mirror” of existential thought’, a liberation from excessive abstraction and objectivism, a primal, original, and essential form of truth.² The validity of these assertions I am unable to gauge, for the myth with which this book is concerned is post-philosophical. It is myth seen through a philosophical lens and incorporated into philosophical discourse. As a form of truth it is neither primal nor original. From the standpoint of the philosophers we shall meet in the following pages, non-philosophical myth is a story about truth that is often pernicious and misleading. The myth they incorporate serves their own ends. These ends are: the reformulation of people’s ideas about literary and cultural authority, the problematisation of the different modes of linguistic representation, and the creation of a self-reflective philosophical sensibility.

The story of philosophy’s relationship with and transformation of myth is the story of its relationship with convention, both literary and societal. The intellectuals studied in this book wanted to change the way people conceived the world about them. This project involved reconfiguring the authority of a poetic and mythological tradition that had long served as the inescapable framework for thought. At the same time, however, these thinkers had to work with existing linguistic and literary resources. There was no option to make a fresh start, free from the

¹ Lloyd 1990. ² Hatab 1990: 3.

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constraints of previous language, since language itself is a creature of convention. I contend that any study of the rise of philosophy from the sixth to the fourth centuries BC must be, at least in part, a study of literary/rhetorical expression, since philosophical insight must be communicated through a medium that is, from the philosophical point of view, always potentially tainted. The philosophical authors studied here simultaneously contend with a non-philosophical literary past and forge a new philosophical literary awareness. Philosophical writing constructs an image for an intellectual endeavour with the same rhetorical tools employed by generations of poets. Myth is one of these tools, and it is an important one. More than that, I argue, it can be seen as representative (in the cases studied here) of philosophy's relationship with the literary and linguistic past. The self-consciousness with which myth is deployed signals a pervasive concern with philosophy's self image: its troubled connection with the poetic past and its desire to present insight persuasively. It also encapsulates uncertainties about the nature and function of language. Language is not a transparent medium, then, but is itself an object of philosophical scrutiny; myth stands for and exaggerates the problematic aspects of language.

We can distinguish two broad areas where the study of myth in philosophy is likely to yield fruitful results. First, in the scrutiny of philosophical self-presentation. Second, in the examination of the dynamic interpenetration of myth and philosophy, which is more extensive and more programmatic than has previously been recognised. These two areas are, of course, related, and it will be useful to sketch briefly here the various ramifications of myth's philosophical presence. The conceptual exclusion of the mythological world of the poets serves as a powerful form of philosophical self identification. A challenge to the privileged relationship between poet and Muse goes hand in hand with rejection of poets' lying tales. Thus Xenophanes divests poetry of its roots in divine revelation through his scepticism and his moral reserve. Parmenides replaces the Muse with an anonymous goddess of uncertain status. She too can tell both the truth, and false things like true things, but we are left wondering how 'seriously' we should take her. Plato's Sokrates proliferates (ironically) the sources of authority he cites for the myths and ideas that he marks as not his own, and this proliferation undermines rather than strengthens the traditional role of the Muses. Indeed, the structural equivalent to the Muses is Sokrates' 'divine sign', the *daimonion*. Its role is restricted, and reinforces the notion that, where access to wisdom is concerned, we are more or less on our own. Only

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Empedokles resorts to the traditional Muse, and this is a sign of compromise and cultural conservatism. Rigorous analysis is to replace careless attributions to tradition (whether that of previous poets or of the Muses).

The philosophical rejection of the poets, however, goes beyond the reconfiguration of the Muses. Philosophers like Xenophanes, Herakleitos, Parmenides, and Plato construct their intellectual world as one opposed to the content and presentation of poetic tales. Poetic production of the Archaic period implied the use of myth. The tales of the epic poets, their *mythoi*, are filled with mythological matter. Public lyric performance (take Alkman, Stesikhoros, or Simonides) either narrated myths or relied on mythological exempla. Myth was not recognised as a universal narrative genre, but the world of the poets was a world of myth. When they were criticised, it was for their myths. Philosophers like Xenophanes and even Plato clearly realised that not all myths were harmful and might contain ethical truths. But they did think that most poets did not have the intellectual expertise to understand the true nature of the world; their productions could not, therefore, be trusted without their own philosophical supervision. The poets inhabited a different world from the philosophers, one that operated by different criteria. Their uncritical use of mythological material was taken as a sign of that dangerous difference. The story the philosophers tell implies no common ground between myth and philosophy, and stigmatises myth as irrational. Myth becomes the 'other', and the opposition that we know as *mythos* versus *logos*, or myth versus science and rationality is born. The opposition has been influential in the entire western reception of ancient Greek philosophy. This influence, however, risks blinding us to the important role played by myth in Greek philosophy, not just as a foil but as a mode of philosophical thought and presentation.

The interaction of myth and philosophy is, therefore, the second area that needs a more nuanced appreciation than has so far been the case. One might have expected that after expressing disapproval of poetic models of inspiration and of the content of poetic works, philosophers would reject myth entirely. They do not do so, however. The presence of mythological elements such as Parmenides' goddess, or Plato's soul charioteer demands explanation. Explanation often tends towards one of two extremes. One might call the first approach the honeyed cup. On this reading, myth adds colour to dry, technical, and forbidding material. It softens the unforgiving contours of philosophy, but is essentially separable from the content of philosophical discourse. One could remove the mythological (and other troublesome literary) colour and be

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left with pure and unmediated argument. Readings of this type often assume that any philosopher, given the chance, would prefer to speak only in strictly analytic terms. The addition of context, narrative, and features of style is seen either as slumming or as a regrettable lapse. The potential for myth or other literary features to have philosophical significance is ignored. A variant of this scenario might suppose that early philosophers felt compelled to adopt some of the practices of the poets in order to produce something that could be assimilated by audiences used to Homer and Simonides, and to appropriate the cultural authority of the poets. There is an important element of truth here, as we shall discover in Chapter 2, but it is not the whole truth. We must remember that the incompatibility of myth and philosophy is a reflection of the polemic self-representation of some early philosophers. There is every reason not to think in such stark oppositions, especially when one notes that there is a discontinuity between polemic rhetoric and less explicitly theorised literary practice. To explore this discontinuity is the task of this book.

A second approach is to concede that philosophical myth is not merely a reflex of literary ornamentation or audience expectation, but does have a philosophical role to play. Myth expresses what rational and scientific language cannot, and takes over where philosophy proper leaves off. This approach has elements of the mystical in it, and is attractive when applied to philosophers such as Parmenides and Plato, who believe in a transcendent world. Thus myth would communicate to an audience the transcendental character of the revelation granted to Parmenides, and would hint at the nature of the world inhabited by the Platonic forms and the disembodied soul. Of the two approaches, I find this the more congenial. It has the merit of acknowledging that mythological elements in philosophical works of philosophers cannot merely be stripped away to reveal an analytic core. Nevertheless, it does not go far enough. First, mysticism in its own terms is not enough for a philosopher. Unless mysticism can be grounded in an intellectual project, it cannot bear philosophical fruit. The rational grounding of mysticism is an important aspect of Plato's portrayal of Sokrates in the middle dialogues, as we shall see in Chapter 7. Second, the notion that philosophical myth begins where philosophy proper ends implies that myth and philosophy are two separable entities, but the chapters to follow will reveal that the boundary between myth and philosophy must continually be redrawn. We must deal not merely with a series of levels of linguistic truth, but with the imposition of one level upon another,

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and the permeation of one level by material from another. Myth and philosophy are dynamic, not static categories. What does myth express that analytic language cannot, and why, and how? Where, precisely, does the problem lie? If we conclude that philosophy (a *rational* enterprise) ends where myth begins, we return to a view of myth as irrational and non-scientific; up rises the spectre of mythical thinking. Separable myth is not far from ornamental myth.

The following chapters will illustrate the dynamic interpenetration of myth and philosophy. As I suggested above, myth is an important medium for philosophers to think through problems of literary, social, and linguistic convention. What use are poetic production and technique in the philosophical world? What authority should we grant to societal beliefs, such as the democratic belief in the universal capacity for political decision-making? Questioning the status and applicability of mythological exempla plays a part in the fifth-century debate over nature and culture or convention. Thinking about the *place* of convention alerts us to the importance of context. The mythological world of the poets is the larger cultural context inside which early philosophy operated. Yet by appropriating myth for philosophical purposes, the philosophers considered here demand that we examine the interaction of embedded myth in a larger philosophical context. Indeed, one might say that this book is about the implications, for both philosophy and myth, of contextualising myth in a philosophical medium. The full meaning of the texts I shall examine becomes accessible when we appreciate the importance of the literary context in which argumentation is set. Details of style and narrative framing carry philosophical weight. When we focus on the specific problem of setting myth in a philosophical medium, it is even more important to consider how myth is framed. I argue that mythological elements often act as an embedded counterpoint to stricter forms of analysis. This counterpoint creates a tension, sometimes an incongruity, between the implications of the argument and the myth. Thus the implications of Parmenidean monism jar with the mythological frame in which his philosophy is set. The mythological display pieces of the sophists vaunt the power of rhetoric and the efficacy of sophistic moral education, although they speak about, or take on the persona of problematic mythological figures. Plato, too, sets his myths in contexts where their reception is problematic and where they highlight questions of the possibility of human knowledge and its expression. My approach here is in line with recent work on Plato, which has stressed the importance of details of setting

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(and this must include the mythological as part of the literary) for understanding the message of the dialogues.³

Yet if tension and the potential for incongruity are all there is to the philosophical appropriation of myth, one might argue that an analytic approach, one which sees myth as ornament, is valid. The philosophical meaning of myth might be reduced to the incongruity. If we see elaborate jewellery on a nun, we are inclined to think it should not be there. We thus reinforce our preconceptions about what a nun should be. I think, however, that the significance of myth lies deeper. First, movement in and out of mythological material makes us aware of changes in perspective, as in Plato we move beyond the confines of one human lifetime and an earthbound body. It makes us look at our lives and our intellectual task differently, and it is precisely the disjunctive effect of myth that produces the vertigo necessary for converting earthly and prudential rationality into something more. Second, we shall repeatedly run across the problem that it is often quite difficult to identify where myth ends and philosophy ‘proper’ begins. Is Platonic recollection a myth? Do Parmenides’ strictures about negation apply to the goddess who grants him his revelation? Whether ‘mythologising’ acts as a frame (as it does in Parmenides and perhaps in the *Republic*), or whether it is embedded in argument (like the transmigration of souls in the *Phaedo*), we find that it tends to spill over into places where we do not expect it. The space between myth and argument is slippery, and that is the point. Not that we cannot tell a proof from a Pegasus, but that discourse which takes us beyond our immediate bodily sensations must be carefully watched. If we are not conscious of what we are doing discursively, we have little chance of any lasting intellectual achievement.

The presence of mythological elements in philosophical works gives an author an opportunity to create a series of ‘nests’. This nesting is at its most complex in Platonic material: we shall see how the *Timaeus* and *Critias* thematise the status of and the transition between myth, history, argument, history as myth, and myth as theory. That case is extreme, but less extreme instances of the intentional juxtaposition of different levels of discourse abound. At every point, the reader must investigate at what point on the continuum from myth to analysis she stands, and this investigation is philosophical. Its outcome matters because it affects the authority attributed to any given part of a philosophical text. The

³ So, e.g. Ferrari 1987; Nightingale 1996. For the importance of the character of the Platonic interlocutor, see Blundell 1992; Blank 1993.

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blurring of the boundaries between myth and argument means that we can never be absolutely certain of the validity of our argument. Even if it works in one context, it must, as Sokrates suggests in the *Phaedo*, be repeated again and again in different ones. Only then will we be as certain as humans can be. And that is not absolutely certain: Plato thinks that pure knowledge is extremely hard to obtain, both because of the nature of the human animal, and because language itself is an imperfect tool. The juxtaposition of *mythos* and *logos* keeps us aware of our human and linguistic weakness, as we struggle between one and the other. The Presocratics and sophists considered in this book are intensely conscious of this weakness, and negotiate it through the same studied juxtaposition. Certainly, myth in Plato is fully integrated with philosophical argument. Argument calls for myth not just as a foil, but as a means of reflecting on the truth status and possibility of philosophical analysis.

Philosophical myth, then, is rational, is deployed as a result of methodological reflection, and is a manifestation of philosophical concerns. I have suggested that these concerns focus on the nature and function of language, and the authority we give to an argument. Philosophical self-presentation builds upon a foundation of attacks on poets and their myths. These attacks are related to speculations about the accessibility of truth and the extent to which this is or can be expressed in language. The convergence of these two sets of concerns was inevitable; the poetic misuse of language was paradigmatic of a wider failure. The philosophers whom I will investigate want to succeed where their predecessors and contemporaries have failed. Yet they have reservations about whether success is possible. When we reject the mythological excesses of the poets, we bring up, at least implicitly, the question 'how can we tell what is true?'. Our criteria may be internal consistency in an argument, or consistency of an argument with observed facts, but what if we come up with a coherent picture that is nonetheless inaccurate? When the poets do this, we call their stories myths. Might not a philosophical theory be a myth in that sense? What absolute guarantee of validity can we bring to bear on a theory that would banish doubt? For most of the authors treated in this book, there is no absolute principle of authority within the world in which we live (although the sophists may assign relative authority to different cultural practices). There may, however, be a guarantor of truth outside the everyday world. If we can reach it (difficult though that may be), we may be in a position to have real knowledge. But how, then, would we communicate this knowledge? Language is a tool of this world, and is tied to its

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incapacities. It cannot be taken for granted. The works studied in this book are themselves witnesses that it is difficult to tell whether we are producing a myth or an analysis. In this sense, myth is paradigmatic of the incapacities of language.

To juxtapose different types of discourse with differing levels of authority is, then, to problematise them, especially when the boundaries between the levels are uncertain. My method throughout this study will therefore be to map out these uncertain boundaries. This entails an important corollary for my treatment: I shall not examine philosophical argumentation for its own sake. My approach is literary rather than analytic (by analytic I mean a method that breaks down a philosophical text into a series of logical arguments), and will therefore treat argumentation as it is embedded in its literary matrix. Others are better suited than I to produce analytic readings, and there is no lack of scholarship along those lines. It is, however, the interaction of argument, myth and style of presentation that is of interest for my present purposes. By the same token, I shall not always explore every resonance of the myths I discuss. The mythological content of Empedokles' conception of the cosmos and its implications will receive short shrift. This will be even more obvious in the case of Plato, where the reader will find little discussion of the myths of the *Timaeus* and *Statesman* (for example) as cosmologies or theodicies. A full interpretation of Platonic myth would involve a detailed reading of each of the dialogues in which myth occurs. Only in the case of the *Phaedrus* have I attempted anything like this. Elsewhere I have tried to strike a balance between the necessity of a contextual reading and of following the mythological thread from dialogue to dialogue, and indeed, from author to author. Once again, this is because I am more interested in how an author, implicitly or explicitly, frames and comments on the myths he employs. This method should not be taken to imply that questions of content, whether philosophical, or mythical, or both, are unimportant, only that I have a different quarry in mind.

The authors with whom I will be concerned in the following chapters are: among the Presocratics, Xenophanes, Herakleitos, Parmenides (and to a lesser extent Empedokles); the sophists, in particular Gorgias and Protagoras; and Plato. In assigning to these thinkers a common perception of a set of problems and of the value of myth, I do not assert that these were the only problems of interest, to them or anyone else. This book is not an attempt to reissue early Greek philosophy or to give a complete interpretation of any Greek thinker. It is a partial account,

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and I have been unashamed in focusing on those authors who lend themselves most readily to this type of analysis. It is notable that many of the authors I have chosen share a degree of kinship with the Eleatic school of philosophy that we connect with Parmenides. Xenophanes is said to have been the teacher of Parmenides (Aristotle *Met.* A5 986b), and Empedokles his associate (DK 31A7).⁴ The relationship of the thought of Gorgias to that of Parmenides is well documented (Chapter 4). Even Plato can, to a degree, look to Parmenides as his philosophical father.⁵ Common to all of them is the perception of a radical disjunction between the world as we see it and the world as it really is. Gorgias, as a sophist and a relativist, dismisses the latter as an irrelevance, but it is the very separation between appearance and reality that gives his theory of rhetoric its power. All think that the world of appearance is unstable. This, in turn dictates a certain attitude to language, which is put under great stress since it expresses the world of appearance, but must also be the tool by which reality, or truth, is revealed. Their use of myth is a mirror of that stress.

The chronological range of this study stretches from the end of the sixth to the middle of the fourth century BC. At the end of the sixth century we see the first critiques of the poetry of Homer and Hesiod, critiques which start the process of demarcating a realm of poetic mythology. This process is more fully developed in the work of Plato, who marks the finishing point of my investigation. We possess none of the popular works of Aristotle in which he might have made use of myth, and his surviving technical treatises hardly lend themselves to the type of interpretation practised here. Later philosophical uses of myth are closely tied to allegorising and would be the subject of a different book.

This study is divided into seven main chapters on theoretical background, the Presocratics, the sophists, and Plato. Chapter 2 is a consideration of some of the background issues that bear on the relationship of myth and philosophy. How should we define myth? Was there a shift from *mythos* to *logos*, and might such a shift be connected with the rise of literacy? What model can we use to explain the way some early philosophers configured themselves with respect to the poets? What issues underlie the creation of a philosophical use of myth, and how are they similar or different from modern theoretical concerns? I begin with a survey of the semantic field of the word *mythos* in Homer and Hesiod and

⁴ On the relationship of Xenophanes and Elea, see Kirk et al. 1983: 165–6; Finkelberg 1990.

⁵ *Tht.* 183e5–184a2; *Soph.* 241d5, 242a2.

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then examine the status of traditional tales before the rise of philosophy in light of archaic notions of truth. There is little indication that *mythos* had any negative connotations before the emergence of philosophical polemic, nor was the 'truth' that characterised poetic tales objective or verifiable. This situation changes with the first philosophers. Modern analysis of this change often speaks of the move from *mythos* to *logos*, but the equation of *mythos* with irrationality is oversimplified. Such equations are made because critics take over the terms of an ancient polemic against the tellers of mythological tales. It is preferable to adopt a model in which polemic against the poets is a result of a struggle by some early philosophers to define themselves through dismissing the poets as potential purveyors of wisdom.

The increasing impact of literacy on philosophical thought patterns helped transform the way mythical tales were regarded. As the great mass of oral myths began to take on a textual form, they could more easily be objectified and identified as something other than philosophy. Moreover, objectifying language in a text may have spurred reflection on its representative capabilities. An awareness of 'text', then, is an important step on the road that leads to the incorporation of myth in a philosophical setting. I attempt to formulate a definition of philosophical myth as a negative image of poetic myth. Embedded within the master genre of philosophy, it provides a counterpoint to philosophy's authoritative discourse. This effect of counterpoint has some resonance in modern deconstructionist concerns about the signifying power of language. As the chapter ends, I explore briefly the comparison with deconstruction as a way of clarifying by contrast the purpose of employing philosophical myth.

Chapter 3 brings the analysis from abstract considerations of definition and theory to the examination of individual Presocratic philosophers. I evaluate the rejection of poetic mythological material by Xenophanes and Herakleitos and study the nature of philosophy's polemic self-placement with regard to myth. Xenophanes and Parmenides in particular attempt to appropriate traditional poetic authority by reconstructing and transforming the relationship between poet and Muse. I relate the polemic philosophical stance towards the poets with the concerns of Xenophanes, Herakleitos, and Empedokles that their language should be a true reflection of their ideas. Worries about linguistic correspondence have clear implications for the place of myth, since it is myth, where, most often, language fails to correspond. Two responses to philosophical rejection that seek to save some truth value