1 | Introduction

THE START OF THE JOURNEY

So the journey is not as Aeschylus' Telephus describes it: he says it is a simple path that leads to Hades, but to me it seems to be neither simple nor single. For then there would be no need of guides; since no one, surely, could lose the way anywhere, if there were only a single road. But in fact it probably has many forkings and branchings; I speak from the evidence of the rites and observances followed here. [1]

In this passage from Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates is making a mythological and philosophical argument, arguing for the immortality of the soul by referring to traditional myths well known to his interlocutors as he prepares to tell his own myth of life after death, the *Phaedo's* fantastic vision of the many levels of the earth. But Socrates is not merely mentioning a myth well known to his audience; he is contesting it. In place of Aeschylus' myth of a journey to the underworld, Socrates proposes his own different version of the tale and unfolds the details to his interlocutors. Socrates, moreover, with the self-conscious precision characteristic of a Platonic persona, even explains his reasons for contradicting the famous Aeschylus, countering the authority of the great tragedian with his references to the evidence of the rites. I find this passage fascinating because of what it reveals about the way the Greeks handled myth – not as canonical formulations of religious dogma but as a contest of competing authorities vying to provide an explanation.

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[1] ἔστι δὲ ἄρα ἡ πορεία οὐχ ὡς ὁ Αἰσχύλου Τήλεφος λέγει· ἐκεῖνος μὲν γὰρ ἁπλῆν οἶμόν φησιν εἰς Ἅιδου φέρειν. ἡ δ' οὔτε ἁπλῆ οὔτε μία φαίνεταί μοι εἶναι. οὐδὲ γὰρ ἂν ἡγεμόνων ἔδει· οὐ γάρ πού τις ἂν διαμάρτοι οὐδαμόσε μιᾶς ὁδοῦ οὔσης. νῦν δὲ ἔοικε σχίσεις τε καὶ τριόδους πολλὰς ἔχειν· ἀπὸ τῶν θυσιῶν τε καὶ νομίμων τῶν ἐνθάδε τεκμαιρόμενος λέγω. (*Phaedo*, 107e4–108a6; translation from Gallop 1975.)

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This passage also reveals the enormous gaps that modern scholars face as we try to understand the Greeks and their mythic tradition. The *Telephus* to which Socrates refers without even bothering to quote is completely lost, as are the versions of the other major tragedians, and none of the evidence that survives about the story of Telephus provides any clues as to the context of the reference. Not only do modern readers lack the myth Socrates is arguing against, they do not know to what rites and customs he is referring as evidence for his own position. His reference to the guides, blithely accepted by his interlocutors, leaves us puzzled. What sort of background lies behind this mythic argument?

The questions that this passage raises are not only methodological – how are myths used? – but also historical – what kinds of stories *did* the Greeks tell about life after death? And why did these people tell these particular stories? Every human culture has stories about death and what happens after it; the experience of death intrudes into every human life, demanding explanation. The question of what happens after the moment of death fascinates humanity: at one moment there is a person, the next only a thing; where did the person go?[2] The answers to these questions are as varied as the people who ask them, but that other world where the dead are, "that undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns," always presents a contrast to the here and now, the everyday world of the living. It "puzzles the will," as Hamlet says, prompting speculation and imagination about the difference between life and death. The contrast may be slight or enormous; the other world may be better or worse than the present one, but it is always different.

In any description of the other world, therefore, lurks an implicit contrast with this world; for the strange, the unfamiliar, the other can only be explained in terms that are familiar, even if only by a negation of those terms – not to be grasped by the senses but invisible, not present but far away, not now but hereafter.[3] The idea of a journey to the realm of the dead

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[2] As Redfield notes, "The survival of the dead is in some sense a culture universal, since it is undeniable; they survive in our memories of them, in the consequences of their acts, in their judgement of us which we carry with us internalized as an ethical standard." (Redfield 1991, p. 105.)

[3] Lincoln comments on the prevalence of descriptions of paradise in terms of a negative of familiar worldly woes. "The intent of this negative definition is to emphasize the radical otherness of the Otherworld. In truth, nothing positive is said of paradise for the reason that it is so totally unlike our own mortal sphere that our very language and normal set of images are thoroughly inadequate for the task of describing it. Of the other world, all that can be said is that things there are totally *other*, completely opposed to all of this earth. The logic which supports the negative definition is thus much like that which undergirds

brings out this contrast between the worlds as the traveler moves from one realm to the other. The stories people tell about the journey to the other world, the realm of the dead, thus reveal their implicit assumptions about the world in which they, as the living, dwell. These stories act as a kind of mirror that reflects the picture of their world. This vision "through a glass darkly" comes at times through a comically distorted mirror that reflects a carnival image of the quotidian world; at other times it comes through a magic mirror in which all the evils and uglinesses of life are removed, leaving a fresh and beautiful idealized reflection. Whether a projection of desires unrealized in this world or a nightmare image of one's worst fears, the description of the realm of the dead reflects a conception of the realm of the living, locating the narrator within this world as he or she sees it.

This kind of self-definition – locating oneself and one's society in relation to the rest of the world, both natural and supernatural – not only occurs in eschatological stories of the life after death but also forms an important part of the religion of any culture. Scholars of religion in the modern era, however, operating with Christian paradigms of religion that centrally involve faith and salvation, have perhaps unduly privileged eschatology as one of the primary concerns that distinguishes a 'real' religion from the so-called 'primitive' religions that define identity in relation to the cosmos in other ways.[4] The Greek eschatological myths provide a particularly interesting object of study in this regard, of course, because they set the terms for so much of the later discourse about the afterlife in Western civilization. Not only Hellenistic and Roman societies but also later Christian empires debated the immortality of the soul and its fate after death largely in terms of images and names borrowed from Greek mythology. Scholars have been very concerned to discover the impact of these ideas on later religious concepts, but often the interest in the later ideas overshadows the reading of the Greek myths themselves. This focus on the chain of influences neglects the contexts that shaped these myths and creates distortions in the understanding of the texts themselves as well as of the way the Greeks used their myths. Read carefully in their own contexts, however, the tales of the journey to the land of the dead

the view of the next world as a topsy-turvy kingdom, where people walk on their hands, trees chop down woodsmen, and the like." (Lincoln 1991, p. 28.)

[4] As Smith notes, "In the hands of many scholars, both past and present, it is primarily soteriological notions which supply an evolutionary scale that ranks religions, with Protestant Christianity often serving as the implicit or explicit norm or the culmination of the exercise." (Smith 1990, p. 119.)

can not only reveal much about those who produced these myths but also bring a better understanding of their impact on the later recipients of the tradition.

The questions raised by the above passage from the *Phaedo* – what sort of stories did the Greeks tell and why did they tell these particular stories – thus provide the starting point for my research, from both the methodological and the religious historical standpoints. In this study, I explore the ways in which different authors make use of myth, the way they manipulate a common set of traditional elements in various ways to achieve different ends. To this end, I examine a set of Classical Greek texts, all of which concern a journey from the land of the living to the realm of the dead: the so-called Orphic gold tablets, Aristophanes' *Frogs*, and the eschatological myth in Plato's *Phaedo*. None of these texts is telling exactly the same story, but they all narrate some sort of journey to the other world, the realm of the dead. In Levi-Strauss's metaphor,[5] the authors of these texts are all doing *bricolage* with the same pieces of tradition, but the pieces they use and the narratives they come up with are different. Each of these texts employs elements from a pool of traditional motifs, the limited ragbag of the *bricoleur*, in a narrative of the journey to the realm of the dead; and the tale that each author produces reflects, through its image of the other world, the author's perspective on the world in which he or she is living. Not only can an exploration of the various ways in which authors use a common set of elements uncover the different agendas of these authors and provide a deeper understanding of the individual texts, but it can also shed light on the ways in which myth was used by the Greeks in the late fifth and fourth centuries BCE – not as sacred scripture, not purely as entertainment, but as a device for communication, a mode of speaking in which they could convey meaning densely through the manipulation of mythic motifs and patterns that each had its own resonance for the audience.

DEFINITION OF MYTH

One of the first projects of any scholar discussing myth should be to provide a working definition of the term. I propose, therefore, to use my analysis of the specific authors' manipulations of myth to provide a

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[5] cp. Levi-Strauss 1966, pp. 16–36.

model of myth as an agonistic form of cultural discourse, a traditional language for the communication of ideas from the author to his audience, in which the competing versions vie for authority.[6] To a certain extent, as Detienne has pointed out in his *Creation of Mythology*, myth is a modern construct.[7] Moreover, the category of myth is often constructed in opposition to another modern category, such as religion, history, or science, creating distinctions alien to the ancient Greeks.[8] In order to understand the ways in which the Greeks handled their myths, it is necessary to employ a definition of myth that is consonant with, rather than contradictory to, their usage. As Fritz Graf puts it, "It is still difficult to define myth satisfactorily, for all the intense scholarly attention that the problem of definition has received in the course of two and a half centuries. Many solutions have been proposed, only to be rejected. The most banal and least controversial of these may serve as a starting point: myths are traditional tales."[9] Yet even this definition contains the seeds of a number of problems. What is the tradition and what is the relation of each individual telling to the tradition? Some use the term 'myth' to refer to the tradition behind any given telling; others use it to refer to a specific telling of the tale. Many, unfortunately, use the term indiscriminately to mean both. The Greeks themselves had no term to designate all of the things that modern scholars group under the heading of myth, but they used a variety of terms to refer to their traditional tales. I use the term 'myth' to refer to a specific telling, in an attempt to remain close to its etymological sense from the Greek word, μῦθος, meaning something told. To designate the story, variously told and retold in the tradition throughout the ages, of which any given myth is a specific version, I use the term 'traditional tale'.

A traditional tale obviously requires a tradition; it is the product of a specific culture. A traditional tale derives its meaning and authority from its relation to the ideas of the culture as they are handed down from

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[6] cp. Barthes' description of myth as a form of second-order language (Barthes 1972, pp. 109–159). See also Calame 1990, p. 48, and Calame 2000, pp. 47–50. For the competition to provide what Calame terms 'vraisemblance', cp. Calame 1996, p. 6.

[7] Detienne 1986.

[8] The ancient Greeks had their own set of categories and oppositions, but these do not coincide precisely with the modern categories. For discussion of the indigenous categories, see Calame 1996, pp. 25–44; cp. the histories of the modern constructions with regard to myth in Most 1999 and Lincoln 1999.

[9] Graf 1993b, p. 1.

generation to generation.[10] The traditional element of a myth is essential in distinguishing myth from what might be termed 'fiction', a tale invented by the teller without necessarily incorporating elements that have been passed down in the tradition. As Sourvinou-Inwood notes, myths are "not wholly 'individual' constructs independent of cultural constraints; they are shaped by the parameters created by the social realities, collective representations, and beliefs of the society that generated them. They are articulated by, and thus express, those realities and idealities."[11] In the terminology of Geertz, the Greek poetic and mythic tradition provides the *models of* and *models for* the society, models which are given authoritative status as a description of the way the cosmos is constituted and of the proper modes of behavior within it.[12] Thus, these constructs, the traditional tales, have a paradigmatic function; their elements are symbols that enunciate a model with a general application.

However, each myth, each telling of a traditional tale, presents a different variation of the model, as the teller shapes the narrative according to his perceptions of the cultural models. As Segal argues, the symbolic elements within the tradition are manipulated by the teller. "Myth comprises a system of symbols, verbal, visual, and religious. Each myth is built up of already existing symbols and forms and, like all narrative, reforms and reorganizes those symbols in its own structures."[13] This symbolic system provides a language by which the myth-teller may communicate with his audience. As a result, every myth is shaped by its context and the motivations of its narrator. As J. Z. Smith cautions, myths

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[10] Brisson defines it as follows: "Le mythe apparaît alors comme ce discours par lequel est communiqué tout ce qu'une collectivité donneé conserve en mémoire de son passé et transmet oralement d'une génération à l'autre, que ce discours ait été élaboré par un technicien de la communication comme le poète, ou non." (Brisson 1982, p. 12.) Some connection to a tradition is part of other definitions of myth proposed, e.g., by Burkert, Edmonds, and Graf, all of which mention the importance of tradition, but do not sufficiently develop the ramifications. (Burkert 1979, pp. 1–2; Edmonds 1990, p. 15; Graf 1993b, pp. 1–9.)

[11] Sourvinou-Inwood 1991, p. 20.

[12] "Culture patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves." (Geertz 1973, p. 93.) cp. Lincoln 1999, p. 17, "*Mythos* is an assertive discourse of power and authority that represents itself as something to be believed and obeyed." Lincoln here applies the arguments of Martin 1989.

[13] Segal 1986, p. 49.

must be understood primarily as texts in context, specific acts of communication between specified individuals, at specific points in time and space, about specifiable subjects. Kenneth Burke's definition of a proverb as a "strategy for dealing with a situation" provides an important insight when extended to these materials.[14]

The significant variations among myths arise from the intent of the teller with regard to his audience. A myth expresses the teller's perspective on the 'realities and idealities' of the world, or rather on those 'realities and idealities' that are pertinent to the specific issue around which that myth is centered. Different tellings present conflicting perspectives and messages, and these tellings compete for acceptance as authoritative by their audiences.[15] The tellings that are accepted as authoritative reshape the tradition from which later myth-tellers draw traditional elements to create their own new models.

A myth, then, is a telling of a traditional tale, in which the teller shapes the traditional material in response to his context and audience, and in which aspects of the culture's models of the world are selected or rejected by the teller in his crafting of the story according to his view of the significant tensions and issues involved with the narrative. A myth is the specific example of the general form of discourse that is often termed 'myth' (without an article), but which, to avoid undue confusion, I shall refer to by the somewhat cumbrous 'mythic discourse'. Mythic discourse is thus the mode of communication that involves the telling of particular myths. Mythic discourse, as such, is distinct from any genre – epic, tragedy, comedy, philosophical dialogue, etc. Different tellers made use of mythic discourse to relate the traditional tale of Oedipus and his family relations in myths that took the form of epic, choral lyric poetry, and tragedy. To be sure, the genre exerts certain constraints on the telling of any myth, and, in this way, the choice of genre is one of the means by which the teller shapes the traditional elements in a myth.

These traditional elements are the features of the narrative that are familiar to the audience for whom that myth is composed. Two types of elements may be distinguished: motifs and patterns of action. Traditional

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[14] Smith 1982, p. xiii. cp. Nagy's argument about Homeric use of myth: "For the poets of ancient Greece, I shall argue, creativity is a matter of applying, to the present occasion, myths that already exist." (Nagy 1992, p. 312.)

[15] cp. Griffith 1990 on the agonistic nature of Greek poetic discourse, esp. pp. 188–189.

motifs are the people, places, and things familiar from other stories that have been passed down in the culture. These motifs may range from broad types (e.g., the hubristic tyrant, a strange and far-off land, or a magic gift that aids the hero) to specific names like Zeus or Herakles, Athens or the Isles of the Blessed, the winged sandals of Hermes or the waters of Lethe. The traditional patterns of action are familiar actions or sequences of actions that are recognizable from one story to another.[16] Traditional patterns include such actions as slaying a monster or the failed infanticide of the hero as well as the journey to the underworld or the quest to found a city.

Again, these elements range from the general to the specific. The more specific the pattern, the more focused is the set of resonances it evokes when recognized by the audience. Any audience, for example, will expect that the plague that disrupts the normal order of things in Thebes at the beginning of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* will be followed by a restoration of order by the end of the play. An audience, however, that is familiar with the traditional pattern of a supernatural plague being resolved by the uncovering of an offense and the expulsion of the criminal will have the resonances of this pattern in mind as they follow the tale of Oedipus's self-discovery and exile. The narrative of a myth, then, weaves together not only traditional motifs but also traditional patterns of action, plot elements and sequences that are familiar from previous stories, to shape the story and evoke recognition from the audience.

Like myth, ritual is an expression of ideas by means of traditional symbols passed down through the generations. A ritual, however, is not a narrative, not a traditional *tale*, but a sequence of performed *actions* that are familiar from the cultural tradition.[17] Like the motifs and patterns of action in the mythic narratives, the actions and the arrangements of the sequences of actions in a ritual are traditional elements that create their

[16] The functions or motifemes described by Propp are a selection of fairly specific patterns of action, e.g., 'the hero receives a helper' or 'the marriage of the hero'. (Propp 1990, pp. 25–65.) Scholars such as Greimas have revised Propp's specific set of 31 motifemes into a smaller set of more general patterns, e.g., a bipartite pattern of the rupture of the order followed by a restoration of order. cp. Greimas 1986, pp. 199ff., and Adam 1984 for a general overview of scholarly adaptations of Proppian structures.

[17] Calame sees myth and ritual as two types of cultural expression. "Ils sont tous deux des manifestations distinctes du même processus d'élaboration intellectuelle: construction et manipulation d'objets conceptuels par le moyen de la langue et de la narration dans un cas, travail conceptuel par l'intermédiaire du corps et des objects du monde naturel ou culturel dans l'autre." (Calame 1990, p. 29.)

effect through the familiarity the audience has with them.[18] Zuntz points
out the importance of ritual's connection to this familiar tradition. "Rit-
ual is a pattern of action redirected to serve for communication. . . . [The
symbols] are not chosen arbitrarily, but are taken from a continuous tra-
dition; they are neither independent nor self-evident, but bound to the
system in which they function. Their richness of meaning coincides with
the complex effects they produce in predetermined interactions."[19] The
transmission from one generation to the next of the familiar elements of
both myth and ritual is part of the same cultural tradition.

Although myths and rituals are different modes of communication,
the spheres of myth and ritual can overlap. A ritual, for instance, may
act out a narrative sequence or it may employ the recitation of a myth
in the ceremony; the performance of the traditional narrative is thus a
symbolic action that is itself traditional. In the same way, a myth can
employ a familiar ritual in its narrative action. Perhaps the best example
from the Greek myths of journeys to the realm of the dead is Homer's tale
of the shade of Patroklos, who begs Achilles to perform the burial ritual
for him so that he can cross the boundary river into the underworld.[20]
Here the idea that Patroklos needs this burial to enter the underworld is
meaningful to the audience because of its familiarity with the customary
funeral rituals designed to mark the transition of the deceased from the
world of the living to the world of the dead. The narrative description of a
ritual sequence of actions becomes a recognizable pattern of action within
a myth, one of the traditional elements from which that myth is crafted.
Rituals often serve as the solution to a problem within the narrative of a
myth, just as they can serve outside the narrative to prevent or forestall
potential problems within the society, whether they are, for example,
the problems attendant upon transition from one cultural category to
another or the problems involved in the relations of mortals and gods.

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[18] Tambiah defines ritual as follows: "Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic
communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts,
often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in
varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion),
and redundancy (repetition)." (Tambiah 1985, p. 128.)

[19] Zuntz 1971, p. 41. As Redfield puts it: "A ceremony is the enactment of a concept. Through
ceremonies persons are classified and placed in categories; their analogical unity with
similar persons is asserted. Persons are thus rescued from the flux of nature and purified
as they are given a definite standing in the cultural pattern." (Redfield 1994, pp. 162–163.)

[20] *Iliad* XXIII.65–107.

10 | **Myths of the Underworld Journey**

The fact, however, that a myth and a ritual contain similar elements and even sequences of actions does not imply that the myth derives from the ritual or the ritual from the myth. The relation of ritual to myth is rarely so direct; more often both simply draw upon elements from the same pool of ideas or images, which they express and deploy in different ways.

Whereas a myth or a ritual is a particular expression created from traditional material, a traditional tale may be defined as the whole set of stories centered around a certain traditional element, be it a character like Theseus, a plot structure like slaying a monster, or even a ritual like sacrifice. All tales that involve Theseus as a central character evoke in the audience a recollection of the other stories that have been told about the hero, and the associations connected with these other tales enhance the meaning of the individual tale. Likewise, tales that feature the hero slaying a monster recall other tales with this pattern of action, so that Theseus slaying the sow of Megara evokes Herakles' slaying of the Hydra and the Nemean Lion, not to mention the Erymanthian Boar. Thus, while a myth is shaped and defined by its teller, a traditional tale is a secondary classification, defined by the audience that makes the associations among different myths, grouping various tellings together.

Often, a sequence of actions becomes associated in the tradition with a single figure as, for example, the sequence of patricide and incest is attached to Oedipus or the journey to the underworld to bring back a loved one is linked to Orpheus. Scholars often refer to such traditional tales as 'the myth of Orpheus' or 'the Oedipus story' when discussing the varied appearances of these patterns of action within the tradition. However, the pattern of action is, strictly speaking, separable from the motif of the hero who is most often associated with it. Such connections between patterns and motifs nevertheless illustrate the complex of resonances that any traditional element builds up in the course of its transmission. The name of Oedipus evokes the ideas of patricide and incest, just as the name of Theseus evokes the Minotaur, Ariadne, the labyrinth, etc. The audience of the individual telling, be it an Athenian spectator at the performance of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex or a post-Freudian scholar reading a handbook of mythology, categorizes the myth as a telling of the traditional tale of Oedipus because of the familiarity of the traditional elements (patricide, incest, Jocasta, Oedipus, etc.) that make up the story.[21]

[21] Levi-Strauss would claim that all the tellings of the traditional tale from Sophocles to Freud count as variants of the myth: "We define the myth as consisting of all of its