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The Eleusinian Themes in Plato's *Phaedrus*

Abstract: Plato's *Phaedrus* can be considered on two levels. First is literal and the second is mystical. The construction of dialogue is based on Eleusinian Mysteries. Each part of *Phaedrus* suits each part of this mystery, including *visio beatifica*. It could be noticed from the very first beginning of the dialogue: place where Socrates is taken by Phaedrus is the same where the Little Eleusinian usually starts — in Agrai. We can notice the similarities during the whole dialogue. But Platon didn't say a word which can suggest the relation between *Phaedrus* and Mysteries. It is easy to explain. Nobody can talk about Mysteries during 5th/4th century BC. It was kind of *arreton*. But this similarities are obvious and prove how important religion was to Plato.

Key words: Plato, *Phaedrus*, religion, Eleusinian Mystery, philosophy

Phaedrus, along with *Symposium*, is one of those dialogues where Diotima, a priestess, while explaining to Socrates the nature of love, differentiates between physical and spiritual sphere, comparing them to the lesser (*myesis*) and greater (*epoptika*) mysteries, in which Eleusinian Mysteries play an important part. Although Plato does not say it directly in any of these texts, for the ancient Greeks it was obvious, as indicated not only by the structure of the dialogue (reflecting the structure of the ceremony) but also by the place of the conversation as well as its unusual teaching about the soul. The aim of this study is to show this parallelity, the duality of the fields of dialogue, the parallel way of developing the mystical thread by Plato and the philosophical one by Socrates, who is the main, though not the eponymous, character of the dialogue — and, in the end, the specific counterpoint of both these fields as shown in the culminating point of the dialogue, namely in Socrates' Great Speech, being an equivalent of mystical *visio beatifica*.

Place

The place of the dialogue itself is connected with the cult of the divine Diad — Demeter and Persephone. Socrates, in the company of Phaedrus, is walking along the bank of Ilissos, near the Agrae sanctuary, which was the scene of the Lesser Mysteries serving as a preparation to the Greater Mysteries in Eleusis. This preparation played a role of an initial teaching concerning what was supposed to happen later in Eleusis. The ritual passage from Agrae to Eleusis took the form of strict religious law. The holy shrine in Agrae was situated on the bank of Ilissos. Up till now, its name is associated with blossoming *lygos* and the shadow of planetrees. The name itself relates to the hunting grounds of Artemis the Huntress — Artemis Agrotera. However, the traditional name, official and sacral, was *en Agras* — “within the territory of the goddess called Agra” (“hunting trophy”). In classical times the Agrae cult was perceived as Lesser Mysteries of Demeter and Mysteries of Persephone. These are Eleusinian names. What is also interesting, according to another tradition, these mysteries may also have been connected with Dionysus. A small reference, which may easily pass unnoticed to the modern reader, can also be found even in *Phaedrus*. It concerns the name of Oreithyia, the daughter of the king of Athens, abducted by the north wind — Boreas. “Oreithyia” means “Mountain-Rager”, and this is exactly what the women did during their Dionysian festivals. Her history calls to mind not only Dionysia but also the abduction of a virgin.

It seems that the choice of an ultimate place for repose of both the thinkers is not accidental. Socrates chooses a quiet place in the shadow of a branchy plane-tree, the tree traditionally attributed to Dionysus, though Apollo was also called *Platanistios*. In later part of the dialogue one of the four kinds of mania, namely prophetic inspiration, is ascribed to this god. Dionysus, whose connection with the plane-tree is obvious, is the author of the other, mystical, inspiration. Also the Muses, the originators of the third, poetical, kind of inspiration, are appealed to by Socrates. The thinker, when sitting under the plane-tree, hears cicadae, whose sounds he compares to the singing of Sirens, asserting, to the surprise of Phaedrus, that if they do not let themselves be seduced by these sweet sounds they will receive the gift from them, like from the Muses. Socrates explains to his companion that when there were no Muses yet, cicadae were human beings. When the Muses came, some people were so much entranced with their singing that they sang with them, neglecting worldly affairs, and in the end died, not realizing it. Now, even in the shape of cicadae, they report to the Muses everything that they hear from the people (*Phaedrus* 259A—E). It is worth noticing that Phaedrus made an oath (*horkos*) even on the plane-tree, causing Socrates to retort Lysias’ speech. Socrates’ interlocutor makes a quick choice, asking himself: “I say, or rather swear — but what god will be witness of my oath?” (*ibidem*).

The connection between Dionysian and Eleusinian mysteries existed not only in the mythological but also in the phraseological area, in the ceremony itself and in the formal aspect. The myth of the descent to the underworld is common here. Demeter goes there to seek her daughter — Persephone, whilst Dionysus wants to find there his mother — Semele. This correspondence has its reflection also in the rite. When the wife of the king Archon (whose presence at the ceremony, like the presence of her husband during Eleusinian Mysteries, emphasized official character of the festival) set out to marry Dionysus, the Keryx from Eleusis went at her side. Also during the Lenaia the invocation to Dionysus was undertaken by the man who carried the torch from Eleusis. In a very discreet way Dionysus slipped into the festival of two goddesses, invisibly, because under the name of Iacchus. He stayed there for good in 5th century BC as a leader of the procession from Athens to Eleusis.

The reason of the discussion between Phaedrus and Socrates is the speech of Lysias. This character is also not free from connections with mysteries. One of the Demosthenes' speeches reveals Lysias' love for a young slave — Metanira. Her owner was a woman from Corinth who was taking away all the gifts which the girl received from her admirer — so Lysias decided to offer her a gift which would be costly and at the same time impossible to take away. Initiation was this gift, as it is known that it included animal offering.

The mystical *mysis* appearing in the Lesser Mysteries which took place in Agrae may be rendered by the Latin *initia*, “the beginnings” or its derivative *initiatio* — “initiation”, which means introduction to the secret. It is similar in the dialogue. Firstly, the place, and then, the first speech of Socrates suggest introduction to what will take place later — the second speech, which can be compared to the Greater Mysteries in Eleusis. After giving his first speech Socrates says that he committed a sin (*hamartema*) because he offended Eros, the son of Aphrodite, and now he needs purification. Also the ritual bath in nearby Ilissos served the purpose of this purification. To propitiate Eros, a mighty deity, Socrates will have to give another speech.

The Teaching About the Soul

A substantial part of the second — propitiatory — speech is the teaching about the soul, both human and divine. The thinker gives its definition and describes its substance: “The soul through all her being is immortal, for that which is ever in motion is immortal; but that which moves another and is moved by another, in ceasing to move ceases also to live. Only the self-moving, never leaving self, never ceases to move, and is the fountain and beginning of motion to all that moves besides. Now, the beginning is unbegotten, for that which is begotten has

a beginning; but the beginning is begotten of nothing, [...] But if unbegotten, it must also be indestructible; [...] But if the self-moving is proved to be immortal, he who affirms that self-motion is the very idea and essence of the soul will not be put to confusion". Later, he adds: "[...] when perfect and fully winged [...] losing her wings and drooping in her flight at last settles on the solid ground — there, finding a home, she receives an earthly frame [...] and this composition of soul and body is called a living and mortal creature. For immortal no such union can be reasonably believed to be; although fancy, not having seen nor surely known the nature of God, may imagine an immortal creature [...]". The wings raising the soul are the divine element consisting of beauty, goodness and wisdom. These are also the nourishment which causes the wings of soul to grow. They wither and waste because of evil and "foulness" (245D — 246E). Philosophical *visio beatifica* takes place in the later part of the speech: "Zeus, the mighty lord, holding the reins of a winged chariot, leads the way in heaven, ordering all and taking care of all; and there follows him the array of gods and demigods, marshalled in eleven bands [...] of the rest they who are reckoned among the princely twelve march in their appointed order. They see many blessed sights in the inner heaven, and there are many ways to and from along which the blessed gods are passing, every one doing his own work; he may follow who will and can, for jealousy has no place in the celestial choir. But when they go to banquet [...] then they move up the steep to the top of the vault of heaven. The chariots of the gods in even poise, obeying the rein, glide rapidly; but the others labour, for the vicious steed goes heavily [...] and this is the hour of agony and most extreme conflict for the soul. For the immortals, when they are at the end of their course, go forth and stand upon the outside of heaven, and the revolution of the spheres carries them round, and they behold the things beyond. But of the heaven which is above the heavens, what earthly poet ever did or ever will sing worthily? [...]:

There abides the very being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colourless, formless, intangible essence, visible only to mind, the pilot of the soul. The divine intelligence, nurtured upon mind and pure knowledge, and the intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving the food proper to it, rejoices at beholding reality, and once more gazing upon truth, is replenished and made glad, until the revolution of the worlds brings her round again to the same place. In the revolution she beholds justice, and temperance, and knowledge absolute, not in the form of generation or of relation, which men call existence, but knowledge absolute in existence absolute; and beholding the other true existences in like manner, and feasting upon them, she passes down into the interior of the heavens and returns home; and there the charioteer putting up his horses at the stall, gives them ambrosia to eat and nectar to drink" (ibidem).

The term *visio beatifica* (Beatific Vision) was coined to designate the supreme goal, the *telos*, of Christian life. In medieval usage it signifies the immediate sight

of God, *videre Deum*; those who obtain this vision are transported into the state of eternal beatitude. The medieval concept of the *visio beatifica* forms the highest conceivable stage in a series of historical religious experiences, and the historical examples, such as the Eleusinian mode of religious experience, may be interpreted as approximations to this limit.

The nature of the vision is determined not only by its function but also by the actual quality of the seeing. A vision may be seen with closed or with open eyes. Seeing and "having seen" are sufficiently stressed by the words employed to designate the source of the beatitude obtained at Eleusis (as will be seen below). The tone of these words in Greek does not suggest "seeing" in the figurative sense, with closed eyes. But it does not necessarily exclude it. However, seeing with open eyes may be inferred from the explicit references to closing one's eyes, or to letting them close, in the first phase of initiation, the *myesis*. The term *deiknymena*, "things shown", has gained popularity in scientific literature on the Eleusinian Mysteries along with two others, the *legomena* and the *dromena*; it has come to designate a part of the secrets. The opening of the eyes was taken so literally as to form the basis of assertion that on at least one occasion Demeter had given sight to a blind man, although Demeter is not a deity of healing. Persephone, on the other hand, was the object of the vision. This cure of a blind man may be shown by the marble votive relief of the 5th century BC with the inscription "To Demeter Eucrates". Over the inscription are two eyes wide open, along with the nose. Over them there is the head of a goddess surrounded by red rays which suggest the light accompanying the appearance of the goddess. When an initiate contemplated the head, he was probably reminded of the epiphany of Persephone, although the inscription under the head expressed gratitude only to her mother. Although no sources giving the description of Eleusinian *visio beatifica* have survived to our times, the relief mentioned above and the vision in Plato's *Phaedrus* confirm its existence.

It is worth considering what was hidden under the above term *visio beatifica* — "beatifying, blessing vision". Sophocles partially reveals the secret in his *Triptolemos*, where the eponymous hero says: "Thrice blessed are those among men who, after beholding these rites [the Eleusinian Mysteries], go down to Hades. Only for them is there life; all the rest will suffer an evil lot". Pindar also mentions the "seeing": "Blessed is who will see / before his descending under the earth; / he has already known the end of life, / he knows the beginning which the gods have given us".

An initiate possessed the knowledge which gave blessing, not only in the underworld. Cicero too, in *On the laws* directs the reader's attention to the light brought by Eleusis to human life: "[...] by them we especially learn [...] not only the art of living agreeably, but of dying with a better hope", and later: "there is nothing better than the mysteries by which we are polished and softened into politeness, from the rude austerities of barbarism. Justly indeed are what they called initiations, for by them we especially learn the grand principles of philosophic

life". Also Isocrates, an accomplished Attic orator, so as not to reveal the essence of the mysteries, described three hundred years before the hopes originating from the participation in the mysteries for a single man as well as for the whole human-kind, skilfully using equivocal expressions. In his eulogy on Athens (IV 28) he writes about two gifts of Demeter: corn and Eleusinian ceremonies. Regarding the latter, he distinguishes two blessings: "[...] sweeter hopes regarding both the end of life and all eternity". The equivocal *aion* may have meant the term of a single life or the time of existence of all the universe. Isocrates probably had in mind the latter sense, which is attested by other fragments containing that term.

The analogy of *visio beatifica* as presented by Socrates to the Eleusinian vision is confirmed also by his own words: "[...] and then we beheld the beatific vision and were initiated into a mystery which may be truly called most blessed, celebrated by us in our state of innocence, before we had any experience of evils to come, when we were admitted to the sight of apparitions innocent and simple and calm and happy, which we beheld shining impure light, pure ourselves and not yet enshrined in that living tomb which we carry about, now that we are imprisoned in the body".

Those who saw *visio beatifica* experienced the state called *epopteia*. It is worth noticing that according to Aristotle's analysis of the above mentioned Diotima's speech from *Symposium*, the highest stage of philosophy is analogical to *epopteia*. Though little is known about *visio beatifica* as such, definitely more can be said about *imitatio dei vel deae* enacted during *epopteia*. During the culminating point of the mysteries the participants proceeded to the Telesterion, which, however, did not fulfil the function of a theatre. Those who came there had been earlier properly prepared. Unlike in a theatre, the masks were not displayed and the initiated took part in their own drama — without the masks mentioned above, but "in disguise" of the ritual attires. The *imitatio* there enacted was an *imitatio Cereris*. Men and women alike appeared in the role of the goddess (for that there is historical evidence indicating that the initiate regarded himself as a goddess and not as a god: the coins of the Emperor Gallienus from the years 265/66) searching for her daughter, for a part of herself in her offspring.

Another difference between the *epopteia* and the *theama*, theatrical performance, lied in the fact that the former was closer to the visiting and beholding of divine images. The objects of that contemplation were *agalmata*, statues of gods. The visiting — *visitatio* — is equivalent to Greek *theoria*, as *theoriai* pleased the gods and brought about the perfect *visio beatifica*. It is necessary to mention that *agalmata* were created by artists, who were inspired and at the same time limited by a collective imagination along with their own, disciplined by a living tradition.

The Names of the Goddesses and Their duality

Taking into consideration the obvious references to Eleusinian Mysteries one should ask why Plato does not directly mention the name of Demeter or Persephone. The answer is simple: because he could not. It was forbidden to say these names aloud, especially Persephone's name in context of the mysteries.

Theos, which in Greek means "god", corresponds to a predicative concept. When used without an article it designates a god as an event, as the article removes the emphasis from the event and introduces a more personal view of the god. *Theos* with the masculine or feminine article points to a definite deity, whom the speaker does not wish to name, either because he may not or because he need not. Between the usage with article and that without one there usually lies the proper name, which the profane were not allowed to utter (see also *Phaedrus* 238). *Theos* could correspond at most to *arreton* ("ineffable"), the proper name belonged to the *aporrheta* ("kept secret under a law of silence"). In Eleusis, the deity of the mysteries was known to the public as "the two deities" in a dual form which can mean either "the two gods" or "the two goddesses". Long after classical period, exceptionally pious people still used this vague expression. Everyone knew that those deities were goddesses. In public, emphasis was on the two, however, when the initiated entered the sphere of the *aporrheta*, they actually encountered more deities. It is assumed that in *arreton* the Two became One. Poets preferred to call her Kore, the "Maiden".

The outward turned member of the Diad who was turned outward was Demeter. Her name means "Mother" and "De" (an older form "Da"). The same syllable, in the language already connected with *meter*, in the Mycenaean script probably meant a measure for grainfields. In that Demeter differed from Gaia or Ge, the Earth; Earth she was, too, but not in a sense of universal mother but as the mother of grain and of a mysterious daughter, whose name was not to be uttered.

No doubt, a dialogue constructed in such a way is a tribute to Eleusinian Mysteries. Even though for a modern reader this aspect may seem irrelevant, for an ancient Greek it was essential. The period when it may have been written was an especially turbulent time for the Greek religion. Traditional beliefs were criticized, but also the influence of former historical events (especially Persian wars) made the faith of the Athenians falter. Because of that the religious context of the dialogue is extremely important. It was a time of not only great religious changes, but also political and social ones, a time in which the sophists and their teachings played an important role, and a time when long existing values were undermined. When the Parmenidean One was supplanted by Heraclitean plurality, subjective opinions took place of one Truth. That tendency also influenced Plato, who based his teachings on the oscillation of the Cosmos between the One and the Many.

Nonetheless, *Phaedrus* is a dialogue in which the creator of the Academy is loyal not only to the Truth — the One, but also to the traditional mystery religion. Such an interpretation of Plato's makes it easier to understand the absurdity of the accusations brought against Socrates during his trial (impiety and "corruption" of the youth) and the dramatic form of his defense speech described in the "Apology".