

The Lyre of the Orphics

When Orpheus played his lyre, the rocks and trees crept closer, the birds settled on the branches of nearby bushes and trees, the fish swam to the shore, the animals of the forest and the naiad Eurydice drew near. All of them came close to hear the sweet strains of his lyre. So beguiling was the sound that it moved all things animate and inanimate, lulling them into a trance.

Following the example of their mythological father, the Orphics, too, strummed a kind of lyre. As unlike Orpheus' instrument as it may have been, its sound was hypnotic enough to put people into a trance many do not want to wake up from even now, almost three thousand years later.

Who were the Orphics? And what was the epistemic blunder they committed? The Orphics were followers of a Greek mystery cult that probably originated in the seventh century B.C. Their lyre played a mythological explanation of the world and thereby established the theory that has left us with pairs of so-called opposites - body and soul, matter and mind - and all the nonsense these alleged distinctions tend to generate.

But before we go into the ideas of the Orphics in greater detail, it might be well to explain what a myth really is.

A myth is a pre-scientific, pictorial description of the origin, existence and end of the world. For example, according to the Hopi Indians of Arizona,¹⁰ one of North America's oldest tribes, our world has already begun and ended three times, and we are now living in the age of the fourth world.

A myth is an attempt to explain the inexplicable. It addresses the pious heart rather than the critical head. It appeals primarily to thanhe people who have created it and not to members of a different culture.

The indigenous Australians, for example, believe that their whole country is covered with the "footsteps of the ancestors" or the "way of the how."¹¹ (Europeans call them "song lines.") The Aboriginal myth of creation tells of the legendary totem beings) that wandered the continent during the "age of dreams," singing the world into existence by giving names to the rocks, waterholes, plants, birds, beasts of the earth and human beings with their songs.

Despite their many dissimilarities, the myths produced by the peoples of the earth share a number of basic building blocks. Anthropologists and specialists in comparative religion and mythology (like Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell)¹² stress that, though the names and details may be different, the same themes or archetypes - God, the hero, the victim, the sage, the villain, the earth mother, death, etc. - occur in all myths. Mythology is the "cante jondo," the song that rises from the depths. The depths from which the songs rise is equally profound the world over, but the text that is sung varies from culture to culture.

Here is the Orphic¹³ myth of the origins of man:

The Titans belonged to the second generation of the gods. They were the children of Uranus, god of the stellar heavens, and Gaia, goddess of the earth. One day the Titans rose up against Zeus, supreme god in the Olympian pantheon. Zeus punished them by banishing them to Tartarus, an underworld below Hades.

From that day forward, the Titans symbolized the negative principle, the chaotic forces that opposed the principle of the cosmos, the principle of the harmonious order of the universe.

The humiliated Titans sought revenge. Ultimately escaping from Tartarus, they climbed back to earth, where they met Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. As the son of Zeus and the goddess Semele, Dionysus belonged to the first generation of gods.

The Titans attacked young Dionysus, slew him, tore him to pieces and devoured him. Enraged by this horrific act, Zeus hurled his lightning bolts from the sky and turned the Titans into ashes.

Out of the Titans' ashes, which were still wet with Dionysus' blood, Zeus created man.

That is the mythological soap bubble of the Orphics. And it bears a more than passing resemblance to the fall of Lucifer and Adam and Eve's Original Sin.

But what has become of this soap bubble? A dogma, an ossified doctrine that a great many people still firmly believe in today.

The dogma began with the simple presumption of an original sin that never took place in the described form. This first speculative claim culminated in an implicit statement about the origins of the human race; it had allegedly been created with an innate defect, for the human structure united the heavenly Dionysian principle (the soul) and the diabolical Titanic principle (the body) inimical to it.

The petrification of this mythological soap bubble took its relentless course. The ancient Greeks, who had already cultivated dominant-hemisphere thinking, loved puns. They devised one on the words soma (body) and sema (tomb): "He psyché en to sóma en to séma" - the soul (psyche) lives in the body as if in a tomb. A clever formulation - if only in Greek.

That the soul was trapped in the body, as the Orphic myth maintained, was the punishment for the ancient Greek version of original sin, in other words, for the Titans' murder of Dionysus.

This idea was later taken over by followers of the great mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras of Samos (c. 580 - 500 B.C.). Thus one of the Pythagoreans wrote: "... because of certain punishments, the soul has been subjected to the yoke of the body and is buried in it as if in a tomb."¹⁴

As an interesting sidelight: the Orphics also believed in the transmigration of souls, the concept of Samsara, which appeared in Hinduism during about the same period and probably reached the West by way of the famous Silk Road. According to this view, the transmigration of souls is guided by Karma, the principle of retributive justice: every living creature goes through a cycle of reincarnations; depending on the way a person lives in a specific reincarnation, he or she will be reborn on a higher or lower plane of existence in the next reincarnation.

Belief in the transmigration of souls had very practical moral and tactical consequences. In order to be reincarnated on a higher plane next time around, man had to chastise his devilish Titanic body and do everything in his power to separate body and soul as often and as much as possible.

This trick was achieved at regularly celebrated rites during which ecstatic trances were induced with the help of wine, symbol of the god Dionysus. Ritual intoxication lent wings to the human soul and released it, at least temporarily, from the prison of the body.

Every theory has its opponents. The Orphics and Pythagoreans were no exception. They, too, were challenged by some of their own contemporaries. The Orphics' most important critic was the philosopher Heraclitus (540-480 B.C.), who denounced them as confused "...night owls, magicians, bacchae, maenads and mystics."¹⁵

He himself was a dynamic monist and saw the world as a perpetual, unified process. His maxim was: "Panta rhei," everything is in constant flux. To him wisdom was the ability to grasp interconnected, ceaselessly changing structures forever in the process of becoming. With that he intuitively anticipated the concept of unbroken wholeness, which was introduced into rational scientific discourse by David Bohm,¹⁶ a student of Einstein's, and is of central significance to General Systems Theory, as well.¹⁷

But Heraclitus, who still favored the non-dominant brain hemisphere and was thus primarily an intuitive, analogic thinker, came to a sad end. His very death offers a perfect illustration of the limits of intuitive, analogic thinking.

In old age he suffered from dropsy, retaining water in his legs, stomach and lungs. Observing that fresh dunghills dried out in the heat of the sun, he concluded, by fatal analogy, that he could cure his edemas by the same mechanism. He buried himself up to his neck in steaming dung - and died a wretched death.

Heraclitus' indignation proved too weak to displace the Orphics' destructive body-mind dichotomy and the purportedly irreconcilable contradiction between the two basic structural elements of every human organism. And the details of his death were such that he was dismissed as a pathetic oddball. How seriously could one take a philosopher who had died in a dunghill?

Besides, the concept of body and soul was simply too convenient to relinquish. It imposed order on the world of appearances. It produced meaning and appeared to offer a fairly good explanation of what had previously been inexplicable. It unhesitatingly did away with the irreversibility of individual death. And it legitimated and cemented the congenial, fear-dispelling, transcendental hope of eternal existence.

Human beings have an emotional brain given to rigid, absolute, egocentric thinking. Since it tends to find the doubts that arise in the neocortex repulsive, it fights them with the full-blown powers of blind faith. The idea that human beings must die and that individual death is the unequivocal end is anathema to the active survival instinct of the instinctive portion of the brain and to the comfort offered by the emotional brain. This is where the suggestive force of the Orphic Lyre came, and continues to come, into play: it was capable of producing the specific sound that put the neocortex into a deep trance, anesthetizing its doubts and allaying the fears triggered off in the emotional brain by the notion of mortality.

Now the concept of the body-mind dichotomy needed rational underpinnings. And precisely these attempts to furnish logical arguments for it set off the cycle of metamorphoses that ultimately caused the Orphic soap bubble to petrify into generally accepted dogma in our Western culture.