

THE DANCING STATE

THE MYTHOLOGICAL SOURCES OF PLATO'S TEACHINGS ON DANCE

Summary

The summary is a distinctive literary genre. On the one hand, it would like to be strict and capacious enough to include all that it summarizes; on the other, it would like to show the obviousness of its incompleteness. It seeks to be complete, and yet at the same time, it does not want this. One might say that these are the fears of this genre summary, which especially overwhelm those authors who write works longer than they should be. It may transpire that the summary can successfully replace the work, and therefore, the summary itself could be published. What can one do? Even gods have to bend to necessity. Therefore, in this awkwardly short and, as far as its assumptions of genre are concerned, suspicious statement, I should point out two things. First, I try to provide a summary, and second, I admit to certain methodological choices. I shall begin with the latter, for I fear that a summary devoid of this information might be unclear.

Plato is usually regarded as the enemy of poets. This presumed hostility (imputed, and not found in Plato's texts) is the reason why we rarely notice that Plato's dialogues are full of poets. He might expel them from his state (although, let us admit, this term is somewhat exaggerated), but he does not expel them from his dialogues. There are passages that appear regularly in Plato's works, such as F 260 Poltera of Simonides. Here, Plato is not alone in his views; poets stand on an equal footing with philosophers and become party to the dispute, in which they are not always indicated as those with whom discussions should be broken off for the sake of philosophy. In short, through the claims of the discipline we call the history of philosophy, we have distilled elements of history that we have recognised as philosophical, while those we have recognised as poetic, or more broadly, literary, have been thrown into other fields, such as the history of literature. These disciplines like, to treat their field of activity as if it were the only existing one, and this is particularly the case in an age of ever-increasing specialisation. The result is that we are dealing here with a series of alternative

histories. Should we wish to pose a simple question: ‘What did the Greeks think about such and such a subject, let us say, what did they think about dance?’ we find ourselves in a situation where we must seek the opinion of various specialists who are unaware of each other’s existence. At best, we find out philosophy has exercised marked restraint towards poetry and, in short, we are still stuck in a research paradigm that sees the right movement for philosophy in its moving away from myth (no matter how fervently it denies it. This can be seen, for example, in the sources cited). If any myths were to appear in philosophy, they would already be myths of a different kind, usually defined as philosophical myths. We interpret these differently: as an expression of compromise, be it cognitive or, more often, educational: seeing the resistant social fabric still entangled in mythology, philosophers, in particular Plato, decide to create a radically different mythology, which will be placed in the fabric of philosophy, and will thus be subordinated to philosophy. We might also find this approach to myth in Plato, but we will also find a different approach in Plato. Many tropes appearing in myths, especially myths told by poets, find acceptance and their continuation in Plato, even on the grounds of denial, although this denial is, after all, part of the mythological tradition: I will tell you a story that you all know well, but I will tell it as it should be told. The line between myth and philosophy is therefore not broken, but myth within philosophy goes on. The discussion with the poets therefore sometimes looks as if it were taking place among the poets, criticism therefore often resembles, let us not forget, that here too the disputes were sometimes heated ones between poets. It is Euripides versus Sophocles rather than logos versus myth.

To sum up, I felt it necessary, in asking Plato’s opinion, to allow the poets to speak, not because I did not discern the tension present in this relationship in Plato, but because I felt that the tension proves this closeness. Therefore, what we are dealing with is not so much a separation but a shared reflection around principles. The separation that I think is certainly occurring today is not so much due to the nature of philosophy as to purely technical and, in actual fact, arbitrary research decisions. Thus, the separation is not thought through but assumed. In the case of Plato, however, we are at a different point, for he tries to halt the divergence, which can be seen, for example, in his references to the good old days. Though we would be inclined to place these references in myth rather than in history, they are sometimes, not to say usually, historically located by Plato.

Allowing the poets to speak is justified in the case of a subject in which poets are highly competent, namely, dance. Greek poetry was not only sung but was in the main accompanied by dance. Moreover, the poets were often themselves choreographers, as was apparently the case with Aeschylus. Here I owe the reader an explanation. The arts have divided into separate spheres, here music, there poetry, and somewhere else, dance; in a word, we have become accustomed to the fact that they all go in isolation, and even if they are fond of each other’s presence, and even if they desire it, we have learned to look for differences rather than similarities between them. Would-be dancers learn something different from those who would like to become musicians. In Plato’s case, this distinction can at most be technical in its scope, and let us note immediately that this is the scope of least interest to Plato; it is even the scope that evokes negative associations for him: technical language rather testifies to remoteness. It testifies to the fact that dance or music are dealt with by specialists, who somehow, taking up Plato’s warnings from *The Republic*, decided that since everyone should deal with one thing, a dancer should deal only with dance, and a musician only with music. Meanwhile, while denying neither dance nor music their technical competence, Plato seeks a place for both, where they can play a universal role. Therefore, they will not be able to fit into a rigid division of roles. Another explanation should appear at this juncture: I am talking about Plato, yet we are not so much dealing with Plato as with the texts he left behind, or possibly with texts written by his

pupils, who in their carelessness decided to write down the unwritable. After all, these many sources often conflict with each other, and Plato argued not only with other philosophers or poets but also with himself. Let us recall, for example, the dispute between Plato and Plato concerning the status of Eros. Which Plato are we going to listen to? And what kind of Plato talks about dance? He talks about it regularly, from *Ion* through to the *Laws*, and it seems that Plato is rather unchanging in his opinion on dance, at least this is the position I initially take. There are difficulties with this position here and there, and I will deal with these, but they are difficulties internal to the position rather than ones that might undermine it.

As far as the detailed assumptions are concerned, I took as my guide a passage from the *Laws* in which Plato divides dances into those of war and peace, serious and frivolous, and wild and civilised. The introductory moment is the image of oddballs suspended on a rope, which Plato also calls people in the *Laws*. This image is significant because, first of all, it refers directly to dance, both dance that can be attributed to movement, which belongs to such freaks as if by itself, and the movement that people experience thanks to the golden rope of divine reason. By the way, this is also an example which revives images familiar from traditional myths - the myth of the golden generation, the myth of Zeus' chain, but also the myth of Ariadne's thread, which on the one hand, allows Theseus to save his life, but also allows him to transform from boy into man, and thus helps him to move from the sphere of play to the sphere of seriousness.

I have devoted the next chapter to war dances and to the pyrrhiche, in particular. The common accusation levelled at Plato is that he erroneously links armed dances with war, pointing out firstly that a significant number of armed dances are not connected with war, and secondly, that learning military skills has no place in dancing. As far as the first issue is concerned, I have doubts as to whether the sharp division into vegetation dances and war dances is justified, because it assumes that war and vegetation, which, as I understand it, researchers associate rather with what are broadly defined as agricultural professions, are not only unrelated to each other, but are in fact mutually hostile; in other words, you either cultivate the land or you wage war. Such accusations can be challenged in two ways. Firstly, on the technical level: the mere use of a tool requires the acquisition of some competence regarding that tool, and even if we were to consider that the only competence is the ability to, say, carry a shield, this already constitutes a competence. Here, too, arguments can be drawn from outside Plato's writings – I mainly have in mind Xenophon's *Anabasis* fragment and Aristophanes' complaints. For here we learn that they saw in dance was the training for war, or at least a sign of such training, and it seems that they shared this vision with other Athenians, especially in Aristophanes. I would like to take the view that learning to dance can indeed serve war, and while there will be some strong arguments here, they will prove that such a possibility exists rather than that there is such a necessity. I am inclined towards necessity, but here one would need more comprehensive research. As for the second objection, namely, that war and vegetation have nothing to do with each other, this is usually based on the conviction that war boils down to some technical competence. The history of wars proves that this view is fuzzy in the least. Briefly put, more than once has a better trained and more numerous army succumbed to a less numerous and less well-trained one. Technical competence alone will make soldiers like the sophists, of whom Socrates says in *Timaeus* that they do not know where their home is or which side they are on. Not only will they be dangerous, because it is easy for them to mistake an enemy for a friend, but it will also be difficult for them to find a reason for fighting. We still do not understand war, as is evidenced by the fact that we cannot predict when it will break out. In fact, the very word 'outbreak of war' indicates that it is surprising. We cannot therefore assume that it is an element we have recognised.

What seems to Plato to be the most difficult element in a warrior, and what causes Plato the most difficulties, is the warrior's duality. On the one hand, he is wild, but should be gentle on the other, otherwise he becomes a mortal threat to the state. This brings us to an area to which Euripides paid great attention in *Herakles*: a warrior returning home sees his enemies in his householders. This duality, however, is what I have tried to see above all in Athena, specifically in the myth of the Gorgon. The starting point here is the scene from the *Iliad* in which Athena disguises herself and goes into battle. The most important element of this disguise is the aegis sporting the image of the Gorgon. Let us recall that such an aegis was worn by Athena Parthenos on the Acropolis. Therefore, Athena, like a Platonic warrior, has two faces, one of which is the face of civilisation, but there is also a second one, to which the myth of the Gorgon Medusa leads. To what extent was the Gorgon herself connected with dance? Here there is no unanimity, both the most characteristic arrangement of her legs, which researchers usually perceive as running (for example, on the tympanum of the temple of Artemis in Corfu) and look for echoes of the myth of Perseus and Medusa in this running, as well as in the image on the famous vase from Eleusis, which has been interpreted time and again in terms of dancing. To some extent we are condemned to imagine; on the one hand, we have to restrain our imagination within the scope of scientific research, while on the other, we have the feeling that it is often the only tool for thinking here. I would be inclined to look for dance in the Gorgon, but the main focus of this chapter is the question about Athena: on the one hand, the goddess of wisdom, Athena, the goddess of war and, consequently, what every Athenian knew, Athena, who was worshipped during the Panathenaic Games by dancing the pyrrhiche for her, one of whose figures was the Tritogeneia, which was supposed to bring to mind the myth of the Gorgon.

One of the armed dances is that of the Corybantes. It is difficult to say what armed elements were present in it; we may suppose that a Corybantes dance was also one in which weapons had already been replaced by percussion instruments, but it seems that in Plato's time at least, reference to armour and probably an armoured presence should not be called into question. Dancing in armour, but also dancing wildly in all sorts of theoretical juxtapositions, appeared regularly on the frontiers of the state. Moreover, the connection with an initiation that Plato ascribes to the dance of the Corybantes, particularly in the *Euthydemus*, could throw this extreme into a kind of interpretation in which what is extreme appears as an element of transition. One must die in order to be born again. The trouble is that in the *Laws* Plato deprives initiation dances, (at least those that we would define as wild, as I will not be able to present the problems of classification here, but in this work I do try to present them), not only of citizenship (he does so with regard to non-serious dances), but also of presence (non-serious dances will be present as deprived of citizenship, while wild dances will not be present in the state at all). Plato speaks rather positively about the dance of the Corybantes, (though let us exercise restraint). I look at all these passages about the dance of the Corybantes found in Plato, I hope, carefully. I pay particular attention to two: the reference to the Corybantes in *Crito* and the *Euthydemus* (a very funny situation, by the way, since on the one hand we have a text that for religious scholars plays the role of the main literary source in fact, and on the other hand, we have a situation where the presence of the Corybantes in the *Euthydemus* is usually marginalised. Usually, but not always, in a view that sees in the Corybantes a trope leading to an interpretation of *Euthydemus* I will be undoubtedly indebted to Levenson).

Another figure of the wild dancer to be found in Plato, although this time unrelated to war, is Marsyas. This figure is all the more interesting because in *Symposium* Socrates is called Marsyas by Alcibiades. To what extent is the voice of Alcibiades the voice of Plato? Let us just remind ourselves here that Plato uses a credibility trick with regard to Alcibiades' speech. Alcibiades asks Socrates

to interrupt him if any untrue words are said. Socrates does not do so, but only accuses Alcibiades that he is not drunk, as he claimed when he started his speech, but sober. Does Alcibiades' sobriety constitute additional credence, or does it undermine his words? Let us remember that it is always uttered by a sober Socrates.

The Marsyas myth consists of two parts, which doubtless originally functioned in isolation. Part one is the myth of the invention of the aulos. Let us recall, the aulos is invented by Athena, but for reasons that are not entirely clear, which are usually aesthetic issues here, although seeming to be more like a veil than an answer, she gets rid of her invention. She does so, but apparently the aulos remains her invention after all, that is, somehow Athena still admits to her invention. Thanks to the aulos, therefore, we can learn a lot about Athena herself. In other words, we can establish who the Athena is that invented the aulos. It should be added here that the invention of the aulos is connected with the myth of the Gorgon Medusa, at least Pindar links it with this (12th Pythian Ode). The second part of the myth is the duel between Marsyas and Apollo. What is the dispute about and how does it unfold? To what extent is it a dispute of order with disorder, of the civilised with the wild? In a word, we have some questions, and we are aware that we are tempted by structuralist answers. But the answers should not be given too hastily. First of all, there is no shortage of space for Marsyas at Delphi; there we find paintings depicting him. Secondly, such is the role of inventors that they come to a poor end, especially so in the field of music: Marsyas, Orpheus, Thamyras, in a word, the death of Marsyas fits in with a particular tradition. It cannot be otherwise. The question is whether Plato includes Socrates in this tradition, let's call it the tradition of heroes of inventors who die for their invention? I think he does, and Socrates will appear in this chapter as a wild dancer of philosophy: a wild dancer, but also a hero inventor.

In wild dances which Plato banishes from the state, disregarding compromising attempts at answers, however, scholars have tended to see not Marsyas, but the Bacchae. The next chapter is devoted to them, above all to their image in Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*. The most important problem here is whether Plato is not trying to play the role of Pentheus, who, as we may recall, forbids the mythical dances of the wild in Thebes. If Plato is playing the role of Pentheus, then to what end? Does he consider it a good role, would he like to take Pentheus' side and using his strength (Plato could have allies that Pentheus was not able to have, in short, let us say that they would be allies connected with philosophy or those who grew up on its foundations) win the battle with the Bacchae, or rather, when playing the role of Pentheus, does he assume that the main scene of this role, which in Euripides takes place at the Kithairon, is an indelible part of it, i.e. that in this battle one has to die for the good of the state? This is probably a question that goes too far, but it reveals a far more important question: How is the state to relate to what is banished, firstly, the real state and secondly, its theoretical construction? Even if we grant the exiled some kind of presence, we still do not know how we are to speak of the exiled. We can assume, and several passages in Plato lead to such an answer, that somehow the state must be interested in what is banished. Thus, something is brought to life that I shall call, using Plato's term, The Other Republic. We have to be consistent, we should not see in this Other State some kind of twin entity, let us say, merely with worse parameters. A reserve football team. Rather than this, the Other Republic is a different kind of creation, and so Plato speaks for all those who, for whatever reason, have not found a place for themselves in the state, but can and probably will perform various functions for its benefit. Technically speaking, therefore, excluding wild dances may simply mean a kind of suspension of citizenship; those who dance such things will not do so in the city, but outside it, and will then return to the state. Of course, there are several concepts for this, and I try to deal with them conscientiously in my work, all the time leaving the question open: Isn't the stage somehow a place of exile?

The final chapter is mixed in its nature. Regarding the division of the dances from the *Laws*, I wanted to include serious and peaceful dances at the same time, bearing in mind their variety, hence a more general approach was needed. This approach was made possible by the category ἕμερος, which I found in Homer's description of Ariadne's dance. Dances that are peaceful and serious at the same time are performed by citizens in their own company. As everyone dances in Plato's Second Republic, the difference between the audience and the stage is to all intents and purposes arbitrary. Today you, tomorrow us (today might mean in youth, tomorrow can mean in adult life). This arbitrary difference remains a difference and remains a distinct difference, but the relationship between the two places is different. If, looking at the stage, I see someone doing the same thing I was doing at another time, I then recall what I myself was thinking while on the stage. And whom I saw, and in that gaze gazing at me I see my own gaze. This moment, which is what Homer calls ἕμερος, and which I think we usually call 'being moved by something' (the phrases „to be moved by” or „to be overcome by emotion” have too broad a meaning, since in Polish we have a word that contains emotion together with the feeling of changing the place of identity), is a fundamental element for Plato's stage play. For when we are emotionally moved, we perceive in ourselves a closeness to those on stage, but we also perceive a proximity to ourselves, for the person who is moved knows that beautiful things have happened to him or her in life, and the emotion itself is beautiful, even though it is somehow attuned with sadness.

This reflective insight of which Homer speaks appears in Plato on yet another level and is also connected with dance. Hence, this chapter features the chariot dance from the *Phaedrus*, to which the soul looks, projecting its head above the celestial vault. At the highest risk, and therefore marked by a fall, it sees itself dancing with the gods. This moment of recollection, in which the radiance of ideas shines, does not refer so much back to bygone times as constitute a moment that gives time its rhythm. Rhythm, order and beauty. In this context, there is also a subsection on those dancing the Horae and the dancing nature of time. The whole work closes with an attempt to answer the question: Why Plato does call his Second State the truest tragedy?

The work is largely source-based, that is, I have been keen to present the circumstances as fully as possible. The circumstance to which I have given most attention is myth, in particular, the myth of Marsyas, Pentheus, Corybantes, Neoptolemos, Ariadne and, above all, Athena. I have also taken pains to point out common places, that is, those in which Plato takes up traditional myth.

Translated by Rob Pagett