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**Alberto Bernabé, *Platón y el orfismo: diálogos entre religión y filosofía. Referencias de religión.* Madrid: Abada Editores, 2011. Pp. 397. ISBN 9788415289104. €25.00 (pb).**

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Scholars' attitudes towards the relations between Plato and Orphism have usually fallen under two opposite poles: some identify massive traces of Orphic doctrines in Plato's works and regard them as evidence for a deep influence of Orphism on Plato; others, on the contrary, though they do not deny the many echoes of Orphism in Plato, do not interpret them as determinant for the philosopher, but minimize Orphic influence to the point of almost annulling it.

There is, however, a more nuanced approach, offered eminently by Auguste Diès in 1927, and since early followed by scholars as Percival Frutiger and Pierre-Maxime Schuhl, which accepts the strong presence of Orphic elements in Plato, but also affirms the vigorous originality of Plato. The philosopher, accordingly, would not have been simply influenced by Orphism, but would have practiced a complex and creative "transposition" (Diès' term) of the mysticism of his times, giving to it more than what he takes from it. In doing so, Plato replaces the religious initiation that consisted of undergoing ritual trials with the pursuit of philosophical life's perfection; the banal divinization presented by Orphic tablets gives place to the human struggle to acquire moral resemblance with divinity, and Orphic divinization to the Platonic contemplation of intelligible reality.

Such is the line taken by Bernabé, an outstanding name in Orphic studies, author of numerous works, including the Teubner edition of Orphic fragments. In this superb book, a brilliant example of scholarship, the author develops, with incomparable rigor and documentation, the extensive and detailed comparison between Plato and Orphism required by Diès in order to illuminate how Plato has substituted religious initiation and ritual for philosophical initiation and morality as the prime conditions for achieving eternal beatitude. [1](#)

Bernabé examines Platonic testimonies regarding the set of myths, literary works, and rituals that the Greeks associated with Orpheus and his followers, collating them with other texts addressing the same Orphic questions, so that their liability can be fairly evaluated. Then, having presented a clearer idea of what the Orphic situation was in Plato's times, he evaluates the influence of Orphic literature, ritual practice, and

imaginary on Plato, relying on the concept of “transposition” to define the way Plato quotes, alludes to or modifies Orphic doctrines in order to adapt them to his own.

Bernabé dedicates the first of the four parts of his book to Platonic testimonies on Orpheus’ persona and his followers. The author’s conclusions are that, despite a few exceptions (e.g. *Apology* 41a), Plato’s opinion on Orpheus is very negative; in sum, a cowardly singer whom people thought to be son of a Muse and who was capable only of deceitful enchantment. Orpheus as poet was also distasteful to the philosopher, since his poems presented a spurious *paideía* and unserious *teletai*. This is the reason why, in spite of being attracted to the antiquity and to the sacred status attributed to Orphic works, Plato avoids mentioning Orpheus in connection with ideas that were of great importance for the construction of his own system (such as the immortality of soul), but rather presents them as ancient or sacred tales.

As to the followers of Orpheus, Bernabé shows that Plato distinguishes four kinds of Orphics, as did others of his contemporaries; there were poets who followed poetic models of Orphic productions, such as those related to the *teletai* or the oracles; there were those who lived according to the teachings of a so-called Orphic life, which prescribed, for instance, abstention from eating meat and from bloody sacrifices; a third kind were professional celebrators of rites, diviners, and initiators; finally, there were interpreters of Orphic texts who applied either etymological or allegorical methods to convey the texts’ religious and philosophical doctrines. Plato regards favorably those who lived the Orphic life in an ancient, idealized past; among his contemporaries, the philosopher tolerated rightfully inspired literary followers and interpreters able to properly communicate the poetic meaning of the texts, on the grounds that the first, inspired by divinity, were venerable, and the second had discovered a working method for filtering out useful and positive traits of Orphic texts and rites. Plato could next use such “clean” message either for arguing against unbelievers (as *Gorgias*’ Calicles) or for assimilating ancient ideas to his own doctrines.

In the second part, the longest of the book, Bernabé evaluates to what extent Orphic beliefs can be detected in several themes alluded, analyzed or transmuted by Plato: the cosmogonic and theogonic myths, the patterns of the cosmos, the immortality of soul, soul’s relation to body (the notorious *soma/sêma* formula), the myth of Dionysius and the Titans, the images of the Netherworld, justice and retribution, the image of Zeus, and Orphic rites and philosophical initiation. Since it would be impossible to give here an account of Bernabé’s analyses of each one of these topics, I will present his general conclusions and, then, his specific conclusions on the topic of soul’s immortality, for this is the Orphic doctrine that most influenced Plato.

According to Bernabé, Plato maintains a relationship of both esteem and rejection with Orphic literature and doctrines. He admires some teachings that he values as profound and that agree with his own religiosity (soul’s immortality is again the best example), but he despises traits of Orphism which he considers vulgar and unwashed, and which do not fit his philosophical, aristocratic sensibility (maybe the best example for this is the Orphic belief that ritual purification could free a person from his guilt without any further moral effort; Plato substitutes ritual and occasional purification for a lifelong practice of philosophy). For this reason Plato sometimes adapts the Orphic doctrines

that he uses either by expurgating undesirable elements from them or by interpreting them symbolically; at other times he simply mocks the coarseness and triviality of Orphic “priests”. Elsewhere he simply quotes certain Orphic verses as unproblematic literary material.

The Orphic doctrines on the soul’s destiny, as Bernabé shows, are the ones that have left the deepest marks on Plato’s thought, even though he must submit them to a radical process of transposition in order to accept them. What the philosopher knew about the theme probably was that soul is eternal and carried an original guilt, almost certainly for the assassination of Dionysius by the Titans, a guilt for which soul ought to suffer the punishment of being subjected to many reincarnations in this world of ours. Here the soul is in body, dead as if in a grave; by means of certain rites and prescriptions, the soul may reach a better destiny in the Netherworld, a banquet of righteous souls in the company of gods, and even divinization; if soul fails, it will be punished in the Netherworld and will reincarnate. The soul’s reward or punishment depends on its ability, after the separation from the body, to produce the right answers, learned in Orphic initiation, when questioned by Persephone or other guards of the Netherworld. Plato takes from this that soul is eternal, subjected to metempsychosis, and rewarded or punished after leaving the body; but he suppresses the soul’s original guilt, replacing it with the Charioteer myth in the *Phaedrus*. For Plato, the soul in this world is in body, not dead and inside a grave, but in a prison, bound by desire. The soul’s salvation does not depend anymore on rites of initiation, but on moral behavior and on the practice of philosophy; after overcoming a series of reincarnations, a soul can reach the higher levels and stay with the gods, although it does not become a god itself. So the Orphic doctrine, now far from its original form, is thus transposed so that it fits Plato’s moral and civic ideas.

In the third part, Bernabé examines Plato’s methods of transposition of Orphic doctrines. The author describes seven methods – besides the manner of quoting, already mentioned, when Plato does not name Orpheus, but refers to the Orphic material as an ancient or sacred tale –: i. Omission: Plato omits elements from his Orphic quotations that are present in its original form but do not agree with his purposes (e.g. in *Timaeus* 40d, Plato relies on Orpheus’ theogony, but omits the primal Night because the night occupies a different position in the dialogue); ii. Addition (e.g. *Laws* 715e, where Plato speaks of Zeus as the god who has “the principle, the end, and the center of all beings”, “the end” being a Platonic addition); iii. Modification: Plato sometimes changes one or more terms when quoting his Orphic source, thus profoundly modifying the original meaning (e.g. in *Cratylus* 400c, Plato interprets the *soma/sêma* formula, not as “body/grave”, but as “body/prison”); iv. Recontextualization: Plato puts the Orphic reference in a new context, thus suggesting that it is implied or contained by other doctrine (e.g. in *Meno* 81a, the context of the Orphic transmigration theory is the argumentation for the Platonic theory of knowledge as recollection, thus suggesting that *anamnesis* was implied by the Orphic doctrine); v. Interpretation of enigmas: the literary exegesis that attributes to certain texts the status of *ainigma*, so that they do mean what they seem to mean, but possess a second, symbolic, deliberately obscure meaning accessible only to those who hold the keys of its interpretation (e.g. *Phaedo* 62d); vi. Etymology: the interpretation of words that seeks in them a convenient meaning for those who are quoting them (e.g. *Republic* 364e); and vii. Mythology: Plato’s most radical method of transposition, that consists

in elaborating myths that contain elements acknowledged as Orphic but that are freely manipulated in order to be made to fit Plato's philosophical system and his moral requirements (e.g. *Phaedrus* 246a).

The book's fourth part is a recapitulation of the first three parts with the addition of very brief sections dedicated to the reception of Orphism by authors before Plato (Pindar, Empedocles, and Euripides) and after him (here only a few suggestions are given for further readings of the Stoics, the Middle Platonists, and the Neoplatonists). A thematically clustered appendix with the Greek text and Spanish translation of all Orphic and Platonic quotations in the book, an index locorum, and an index rerum close the book.

Bernabé's book, despite the impression this review may give, is very readable for non-specialists too, because of its clarity and organization. Bernabé is in full command not just of the ancient texts but also of the modern scholarly literature, and he deals with his literature in an exemplary and impartial manner, thus providing the reader with an inestimable instrument of research.

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### Notes:

1. A. Diès, *Autour de Platon*, II, Paris, 1927, p. 444 quoted by Bernabé, p. 228, n. 91.

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