Retheorizing Myth[1]

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I

LET ME BEGIN by observing that although I have offered some harsh criticisms of Georges Dumézil, and have come to reject that part of his *opus* that is caught up in the discourse of 'Indo-Europeans,' there is still much in his writings I find worthwhile.[2] In particular, I would emphasize his rigor, his sense of system and structure, his respect for the rationality of the materials he studied, and his explication of a complex classificatory logic encoded in mythic narratives. In all these regards his work closely resembles that of Lévi-Strauss, which I take to be the best theoretical discussion of myth to date, notwithstanding its own familiar limitations.[3] Taking cognizance of these similarities, there were those who sought to treat Dumézil as a harbinger of structuralism, a somewhat tendentious oversimplification to which Dumézil took sharp exception.[4] Still, the similarities are real enough and their explanation probably lies less in any direct influence of one man on the other than in the Parisian milieux they shared and the influences to which they were both exposed as students. In particular, I think one can point to a single, extraor-

1   Excerpted from Bruce Lincoln 1999a.

2   I have discussed Dumézil's work on several occasions, including Lincoln 1991: 231-68, Lincoln 1998, and Lincoln 1999b, all with citation of the previous literature.

3   As I see it, Lévi-Strauss's existentialist, marxist, and post-structuralist critics all charged him with the same failings, although each voiced this in their own particular idioms. Thus, all took exception to his disengaged formalism and primarily synchronic orientation, both of which drain mythic narratives of their historic context and political agency. See, *inter alia*, Goldmann 1966, Abel 1966, Godelier 1971, Diamond 1971, Lefebvre 1971, Jameson 1972, Bourdieu 1977, and Scholte 1979.

4   The most famous attempt along these lines was made by two of Lévi-Strauss's students, Smith and Sperber 1971, which provoked a stinging rebuque, Dumézil 1973:14-15. Relations between Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss themselves, who had been colleagues at the École pratique des hautes études in 1948-49, never became directly antagonistic and overcame whatever strain they had experienced when Lévi-Strauss formally received Dumézil upon his entry into the Académie Française (1979). Their remarks on that occasion bear close reading, Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss 1979. See further, Dumézil, 1987: 118-21 and Littleton 1982: 267-75.

dinary sentence in the writings of Mauss and Durkheim, which I take to have been particularly influential on both Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss. This is found toward the end of the essay on *Primitive Classification* coauthored by the masters of the *école sociologique*, where they introduced, but failed to develop the idea that myth may be understood as taxonomy in narrative form.[5]

While I would hardly insist that this formulation accounts for all myths, let alone all aspects of myth, I find it terribly suggestive, and I suspect that pursuing its implications led to all that is best in Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss alike. What is more, I think it can lead us further still. Like all Durkheimian formulations, it is singularly unattuned to issues of politics and history. To give it a sharper critical edge, I would introduce an orientation more associated with cultural theorists from Antonio Gramsci to Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu.[6] Toward that end, I would begin by noting that taxonomy is hardly a neutral process, since the order established among all that is classified (including items treated only by allusion or implication, and above all human groupings) is hierarchic as well as categoric.[7] When a taxonomy is encoded in mythic form, the narrative packages a specific, contingent system of discrimination in a particularly attractive and memorable form and, more importantly, it naturalizes and legitimates it. Myth, then, is not just taxonomy, but *ideology* in narrative form.

II

As an example, let me consider the way gender relations are thematized in the Old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúalnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley').[8] The story begins when Ailill and Medb, the king and queen of Connacht, argue over which one of them is nobler and wealthier than the other. Their bantering competition takes place against the fact, well-known to the text's native audience, that Medb is the most powerful of all queens who appear in Irish literature, while Ailill is only one of the many men whom she takes sequentially as her husband. Lying in bed, they compare their lineages, which add to the complexity of the problem. Medb, it turns out, is the eldest and most excellent of six children, all daughters, born to the high king of Ireland, while Ailill is the youngest of three sons. His father bequeathed the kingdoms of Leinster and Tara to his two elder sons, leaving Ailill to acquire royal

5   Durkheim and Mauss 1963:77-78: 'Every mythology is fundamentally a classification, but one which borrows its principles from religious beliefs, not from scientific ideas.' The French original dates to 1902: *Chaque mythologie est, au fond, une classification, mais qui emprunte ses principes à des croyances religieuses, et non pas à des notions scientifiques.* Mauss 1974:79.

6   The kinds of work I have in mind are Gramsci 1992-, Barthes 1972, and Bourdieu 1991.

7   I have argued this point more fully in an essay on 'The tyranny of taxonomy,' Lincoln 1989:131-141. For an elegant demonstration of the arguments advanced in that essay, see Smith 1994.

8   Text in O'Rahilly 1967.

status by marrying Medb, who had received Connacht from her father. The story thus juxtaposes a queen whose claim to rulership is of a characteristically 'male' type (*i.e.* based on patrilineal descent, primogeniture, and personal excellence) with a king whose claim is conversely 'female' (*i.e.* mediated through marriage). This contrast having been posed, Medb and Ailill make a competitive inventory of their possessions, starting with the least valuable among them (buckets, tubs, pots, and washpails) and building gradually to the most (jewels, gold, and livestock). Item by item, the fortunes of husband and wife match one another precisely until, in the very last instance, Ailill gains a telling advantage that salvages and reasserts male privilege: 'But there was a matchless bull among Ailill's cattle. As a calf it abided among Medb's cattle, and its name was Findbennach. But it would not have been an honor for him to have been the property of a woman, so it left and was now among the cattle of the king.'[9]

Dismayed, but not yet defeated, Medb thus set out to capture a bull equal or superior to her husband's. This is the magnificent Donn Cúalnge ('the Dark Bull of Cooley'), and the epic follows her attempt. Countless battles and deeds of heroism fill the *Táin* as Medb's forces try to wrest this beast from the men of Ulster, led by their champion, Cú Chulainn. Finally, warriors by the thousands confront one another in a see-saw battle of unspeakable ferocity, and tension runs high as Medb, having seized the great bull, attempts to make off with it as the furious Cú Chulainn bears down upon her. At this critical moment in the action, the text reports: 'It is then that a foul flow of blood came over Medb.'[10] Her menstrual period forces her to withdraw from battle, submit to Cú Chulainn (who declines to kill her, not being a 'slayer of women'), and lose the bull. Fergus, Medb's lover and leader of her troops, then pronounces judgment on the disaster: 'Fitting were the events of this day for those who followed a woman.'[11]

The episode of Medb's menses thus resolves the quarrel with which the story began, establishing—once and for all—that Queen Medb is not the equal of King Ailill, and the female is not the equal of the male. Where Freud backed his pronouncement 'biology is destiny' with a discourse that claimed the authority of science, the *Táin* makes the same point in narrative fashion. Its story is organized with fiendish care such that Medb's claims to parity are first made plausible, then thoroughly undone by the gendered nature of her body. End discussion and Q.E.D.

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9   Táin Bó Cúalnge 71-74: *Acht boí tarb sainemail ar búaib Ailella ocus ba lóeg bó do Meidb atacomnaic ocus Findbennach ainm. Acht nírbo miad leis beith for bantinchur, acht dochuaid co mboi for búaib in ríg.*

10   Ibid. 4824-25: *Is and drecgais a fúal fola for Meidb.*

11   Ibid. 4847: *Rapa chomadas in lá sa indiu ám i ndiad mná.*

To accomplish its ends, the *Táin* does not just differentiate the categories of male and female, or the others with which these are brought into association (Ulster and Connacht, Donn Cúalnge and Finnbenach Ai, *etc.*). It also ranks these, and misrepresents the ranking it offers as the product of nature and necessity, rather than a contingent set of human preferences advanced by interested actors, some of whom are responsible for the text. This misrepresentation of culture as nature is an ideological move characteristic of myth, as is the projection of the narrator's ideals, desires, and favored ranking of categories into a fictive prehistory that purportedly establishes how things are and must be. Other ideological moves frequent in myth include the misrepresentation of a part of some group for the whole, the homologization of unrelated categories (men outrank women, just as Ulster outranks Connacht and the Donn Cúalnge outranks Finnbenach Ai), and the fictive reconciliation of oppositions and conflicts that are frankly unresolvable in lived experience.[12]

III

Although it seems reasonable to assume that those responsible for this version of the *Táin* were males connected to the province of Ulster, no surviving text announces its author by name. In this, the *Táin* is like most mythic texts. Indeed, myth is often treated as an anonymous and collective product, in which questions of authorship are irrelevant. Lévi-Strauss has done this in a most sophisticated and challenging fashion, treating myth as a logical structure that essentially writes itself, variants being the product of an impersonal process whereby that structure explores its own variables until reaching exhaustion of the available possibilities. Such a view alleviates the frustration of those who seek authors for mythical texts, but the price for this is unacceptably high, since it drains all agency from the act of narration. But if we are to treat myth as an ideological, and not simply a taxonomic discourse, we will need a more dialectic, dynamic, and eminently political theory of narration: one that recognizes the capacity of narrators to modify details of the stories that pass through them, introducing changes in the classificatory order as they do so, most often in ways that reflect their subject position and advance their interests.

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12   This last operation—the fictive reconciliation of tensions and contradictions unresolvable in practice—may be observed in the *Táin's* last scene, where the two bulls duel until the Donn Cúalnge kills the Finnbenach Ai. Here, once again hierarchy is firmly established, for the white bull is not the equal of the dark. Directly that is done, however the victorious bull dies, utterly confounding the categories of equity and hierarchy. Not only are the two unequal bulls now equal in death, but the originally unequal fortunes of Medb and Ailill have become equal in quite unexpected fashion: while Medb has not gained the bull she desired, Ailill has lost the champion that initially gave him his one-bull advantage.

Myths are not snapshot representations of stable taxonomies and hierarchies: perfectly reflective, thoroughly derivative, and absolutely immutable. The relation between social order and the stories told about it is much looser and—as a result—considerably more dynamic, for this loose fit creates possibilities for rival narrators, who modify aspects of the established order as depicted in prior variants, with consequences that can be farreaching if and when audiences come to perceive their innovative representations as reality.[13] Skilled narrators can do this subtly or bluntly, in play or dead earnest, and everything in between. In so doing, they use instruments that most often assist in the reproduction of the socio-taxonomic order to recalibrate that order by introducing new categories, eliminating old ones, or revising both categories and the hierarchic orders in which they are organized.

Narrators are not the sole agents in such projects of recalibration: one must also take account of reception. Audiences (and fractions of same) can resist narrative and classificatory innovations; moreover, they are perfectly capable of introducing innovations of their own by selective hearing and reinterpretation. Anticipation of hostile audience responses can also work as a preemptive brake on narrators' willingness to introduce modifications. Ultimately, what come to be accepted as standard, proper, or hegemonic versions of myths are collective products that have been negotiated between narrators and audiences over time. These form the background against which future narrators craft their interventions and future audiences judge them.

Ideally, one would like to study each variant not only in its relation to all other variants, but also with attention to the social and historic situation in which each variant made its appearance and found its reception, so that one can get a sense of how interplay between narrators and audiences produced narrative innovations, taxonomic modifications, and consequent shifts in the distribution of advantages over the course of time. To put it differently, our task is not finished until we have considered texts, contexts, intertexts, pretexts, subtexts, and consequences. A very tall order, but one that can be rendered operational through a fairly straightforward protocol, designed for students of myth. Although these steps may not be appropriate for all mythic texts, given variations in the availability of evidence, e.g., they are useful and revealing in enough cases that I think it worthwhile to spell them out.

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13 The capacity of representations to modify social reality depends on two factors: a) the gap between signifier and signified (which permits representations to resemble their referents only imperfectly in their initial moment); b) the fact that audiences whose consciousness is shaped (in part) by their consumption of representations are also the people who constitute the social order (which permits them to reconstitute reality in attempts to make it conform with the representations to which they have given credence).

1) Establish the categories at issue in the mythic text on which the inquiry is focused. Note also the relations among these categories (including the ways different categorical sets and subsets are brought into alignment), as well as their ranking relative to one another and the logic used to justify that ranking.

2) Note whether there are any changes in the ranking of categories between the beginning of the narrative and its conclusion. Ascertain the logic used to justify any such shifts.

3) Assemble a set of related materials from the same culture area: other variants of the same story, other closely related stories (on the basis of characters, actions, themes, *etc.*), and other texts in which the same categories are at issue. Establish any differences that exist between the categories and rankings that appear in the focal text and those in these other materials.

4) Establish any connections that exist between the categories that figure in these texts and those which condition the relations of the social groups among whom the texts circulate.

5) Establish the date and authorship of all texts considered and the circumstances of their appearance, circulation, and reception.

6) Try to draw reasonable inferences about the interests that are advanced, defended, or negotiated through each act of narration. Pay particular attention to the way the categories constituting the social order are redefined and recalibrated, such that certain groups move up and others move down within the extant hierarchy.

7) Remember that to treat pointed issues, even in the most manipulative form, is to acknowledge them and to open up possibilities for those with other interests to advance alternate interpretations and thematizations. The enunciation of any mythic variant opens up an arena of struggle and maneuver that can be pursued by those who produce other variants of the myth and other interpretations of the variant.

IV

As an example of what one gains by treating myth in this fashion, let me consider Plato's account of the soul's ascent that is found in the *Phaedrus* (246a-249d, with some continuity through 257d).[14] This text has the advantage of being reasonably familiar and of being connected to some fundamental transformations in the history of western thought, but it also makes for a clear and compelling example of the kinds of processes I take to be characteristic of the mythic genre. It is generally

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14 For earlier discussions of this passage, see Bett 1986, de Romilly 1982, Nicolai 1981, Lebeck 1972, Schmalzkriedt 1966, McGibbon 1964, and Bluck 1958.

understood to have been written circa 370 BCE, before the *Timaeus* and after the *Republic*, for it pursues several issues and makes use of several constructs introduced in the latter text, including aspects of eschatology and the model of the tripartite soul.[15] As we shall see, it also continues the central project of the *Republic*: the call for rule by philosopher-kings.

Within this passage, Plato offers a quasi-allegorical account of the soul as a winged chariot, whose driver represents the rational portion that struggles to control its irrational aspects. These he depicts as a team of horses, one strong and noble, but aggressive or 'spirited;' the other dangerous and unruly, driven by sexual and other appetites.[16] When all is in order, the soul-chariot's wings are able to carry it into the highest heavens, but any failings of rational control damage the wings and impede the vehicle's ascent. The degree to which the chariot rises is thus an index of the soul's perfection, and the gods themselves show the way to the top of the skies, driving in a ranked martial order with Zeus in the lead.[17]

The zenith is not the end of their journey, however, only its crucial point of transition. After passing through the top, they pass to the outerside of the celestial vault: the realm of the hyperuranian. Here, on a grassy meadow (*leimôn*, 248b), which is also referred to as the plain of truth (*alêtheias ... pedion*, 248b), they behold the ideal forms that stand at the core of Platonic philosophy. From this site—and more immediately, from this sight—the rational part of the divine souls takes nourishment as if from a pasture, while their irrational portions feed more conventionally on nectar and ambrosia.[18]

Humans also aspire to reach the hyperuranian, but for them the passage is much more difficult.

> 'Such is the life of the gods. Regarding the other souls, that which best follows its god and most resembles him lifts the charioteer's head up to the place beyond. Carried around in the circuit and confused by the horses' clamor, it hardly beholds the realities. It rises and it sinks, and being overpowered by the horses, it sees some things and others not. All the others follow, striving for what is on high, but being unable to reach it they are carried around beneath the surface, striking one another and jostling each other as each tries to achieve its goal. A great clamor arises, along with com-

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15 Thus, *inter alia*, Hackforth 1952: 3-7, Brisson 1989: 33-34. Compare the description of the hyper- uranian in Pl. *Phdr.* 247c to Pl. *Resp.* vi 514a-517a, vii 517b or the analysis of the tripartite soul in Pl. *Phdr.* 246ab to that inPl. *Resp.* iv. Dusanic 1980 attempts to situate the dialogue in the events of 366-65, but this seems a bit late and the arguments advanced are less than compelling. Preferable is the discussion of Morgan 1990.

16 Pl. *Phdr.* 246ab, with further development of the image at 253d-254e.

17 Pl. *Phdr.* 246e-247a.

18 Pl. *Phdr.* 247be.

petition and sweat. Many are lamed and many wings are broken by the bad nature of the charioteers .... But this is the law of Retribution (*thesmos* ... *Adrasteias*): any soul that follows its god and beholds any of the truths will be without sorrow through another circuit and if it is always able to do this, it will forever be unharmed. But in the event that it is unable to be drawn along [by a god] and does not see [any of the forms], then it will suffer forgetfulness and evil. It will become heavy, and having become heavy, the feathers of its wings will molt and it will fall to earth.'[19]

This loss of wings and fall to earth results in the soul's incarnation within a human body. Different kinds of souls, however, find their ways into different human forms, dependent on how long they have remained within the hyperuranian, how much they have seen, and how much they are able to remember, all of which condition their intellectual and moral quality. The *Phaedrus* myth, as has been long recognized, fuses cosmology, eschatology, epistemology, and psychology to theorize the structure of the universe, the relation of life and death, the origins of knowledge, and the nature of souls able to know. On this last point, however, it is important to recognize the discriminatory nature of Plato's account, which begins with the observation that people possess different capacities for knowledge, then treats these as inborn, being a function of hyperuranian experiences that precede the soul's incarnation. A hierarchic ranking of souls and incarnations is possible on this basis and Plato works it out with evident pleasure.

That soul which has seen most [in the hyperuranian] will come into birth as a man who is philosophical [lit., 'wisdom-loving'] or beauty-loving (*philokalos*), or someone musical and erotic. Second, as a lawful king or warlike ruler; third, as a statesman, or some financier or businessman; fourth, as a gymnast, who delights in his toil, or someone who practices healing of the body; fifth, someone who leads a mantic life or has authority over mystery rites. In the sixth birth, it will be a poet or some other cobbler of imitations;

19 Pl. *Phdr.* 248ac: Καὶ οὗτος μὲν θεῶν βίος· αἱ δὲ ἄλλαι ψυχαί, ἡ μὲν ἄριστα θεῷ ἑπομένη καὶ εἰκασμένη ὑπερῆρεν εἰς τὸν ἔξω τόπον τὴν τοῦ ἡνιόχου κεφαλήν, καὶ συμπεριηνέχθη τὴν περιφοράν, θορυβουμένη ὑπὸ τῶν ἵππων καὶ μόγις καθορῶσα τὰ ὄντα· ἡ δὲ τοτὲ μὲν ἦρεν, τοτὲ δ' ἔδυ. βιαζομένων δὲ τῶν ἵππων τὰ μὲν εἶδεν, τὰ δ' οὔ. αἱ δὲ δὴ ἄλλαι γλιχόμεναι μὲν ἅπασαι τοῦ ἄνω ἕπονται, ἀδυνατοῦσαι δέ, ὑποβρύχιαι συμπεριφέρονται, πατοῦσαι ἀλλήλας καὶ ἐπιβάλλουσαι, ἑτέρα πρὸ τῆς ἑτέρας πειρωμένη γενέσθαι. Θόρυβος οὖν καὶ ἅμιλλα καὶ ἱδρὼς ἔσχατος γίγνεται, οὗ δὴ κακίᾳ ἡνιόχων πολλαὶ μὲν χωλεύονται, πολλαὶ δὲ πολλὰ πτερὰ θραύονται .... θεσμός τε 'Αδραστείας ὅδε. ἥτις ἂν ψυχὴ θεῷ συνοπαδὸς γενομένη κατίδῃ τι τῶν ἀληθῶν, μέχρι τε τῆς ἑτέρας περιόδου εἶναι ἀπήμονα, κἂν ἀεὶ τοῦτο δύνηται ποιεῖν, ἀεὶ ἀβλαβῆ εἶναι· ὅταν δὲ ἀδυνατήσασα ἐπισπέσθαι μὴ ἴδῃ, καί τινι συντυχίᾳ χρησαμένη λήθης τε καὶ κακίας πλησθεῖσα βαρυνθῇ, βαρυνθεῖσα δὲ πτερορρυήσῃ τε καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν πέσῃ, ...

in the seventh, a craftsman or farmer; in the eighth, a sophist or democrat; in the ninth, a tyrant.[20]

Several points are worth noting. First and most obvious, there is the location of philosophers in the paramount position and their identification with true appreciation of love, beauty, and music. Second, there is is the rough treatment accorded to poets (sixth position), consistent with Plato's attacks on poetry in Books II and X of the *Republic*. Third, the way religious authority is handled (in the fifth position), to exclude priests and include only seers and those presiding over mystery initiations. Finally, there is the shocking degradation of democrats, who are placed in eighth position, just a notch above tyrants. Whereas most Athenians would understand democracy as the antithesis to tyranny (a system they found particularly threatenting in the 370s), Plato assigns that role to philosophy, with which both tyranny and democracy stand in a polar contrast.

Returning to the theme of the soul's fate, once it has fallen into a human body, it turns to the task of regaining its wings. This involves a series of rebirths, in which one should live justly (*dikaiôs*, 248a) and, if necessary, paying penalties through punishments under the earth. The process is long and difficult for all, but not equally so. Those souls who consistently choose the life of 'guileless philosophers or philosophical lovers'[21] need only three thousand years to accomplish what takes everyone else ten thousand. This is because the growth of wings depends on the soul's recollection (*anamnêsis*, 249c) of the ideal forms it beheld in the hyperuranian, and philosophers are those who have such memory (*mnêmês*, 249c), while others are more subject to forgetfulness (*lêthê*, 248c).[22] The various arguments embedded in Plato's extravagant mythic narrative constitute the following set of associations and oppositions: (Table 1)

20 Pl. *Phdr.* 248de: τότε νόμος ταύτην μὴ φυτεῦσαι εἰς μηδεμίαν θήρειον φύσιν ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ γενέσει, ἀλλὰ τὴν μὲν πλεῖστα ἰδοῦσαν εἰς γονὴν ἀνδρὸς γενησομένου φιλοσόφου ἢ φιλοκά-λου ἢ μουσικοῦ τινος καὶ ἐρωτικοῦ, τὴν δὲ δευτέραν εἰς βασιλέως ἐννόμου ἢ πολεμικοῦ καὶ ἀρχικοῦ, τρίτην εἰς πολιτικοῦ ἤ τινος οἰκονομικοῦ ἢ χρηματιστικοῦ, τετάρτην εἰς φιλο-πόνου <ἢ> γυμναστικοῦ ἢ περὶ σώματος ἰασίν τινος ἐσομένου, πέμπτην μαντικὸν βίον ἢ τινα τελεστικὸν ἕξουσαν· ἕκτῃ ποιητικὸς ἢ τῶν περὶ μίμησίν τις ἄλλος ἁρμόσει, ἑβδόμῃ δημιουργικὸς ἢ γεωργικός, ὀγδόῃ σοφιστικὸς ἢ δημοκοπικός, ἐνάτῃ τυραννικός.

21 Pl. *Phdr.* 249a: ἡ τοῦ φιλοσοφήσαντος ἀδόλως ἢ παιδεραστήσαντος μετὰ φιλοσοφίας,

22 Pl. *Phdr.* 248e-249d, especially 249c. Also relevant are pieces of the discussion at 246de, 248cd, and 250ac.

Philosophers	:	Non-philosophers
Ideal forms	:	Mere appearances
Truth (*alêtheia*, 249b)	:	Opinion (*trophê doxatê*, 248b)
Memory	:	Forgetfulness
Closer to heaven	:	Closer to earth
Closer to gods	:	Closer to animals
3,000 year cycle	:	10,000 year cycle
Elite minority (*oligai*, 250a)	:	The rest

Table 1: Binary contrasts in Plato's account of ascent to the hyperuranian (Pl. *Phdr.* 246a-249d).

Plato adds another set of associations when he correlates the different sorts of souls to the deities they follow, explaining that people model themselves after their favored gods and also choose their lovers for resemblance to them (252d). He does not carry this discussion to completion, however, but treats three deities only, who are sufficient to mark the limits of the system and to establish the points he cares about most.[23] Thus, the souls who follow Zeus—the 'great sovereign in heaven' (*megas hêgemôn en ouranôi*, 246e)'—take lovers who are 'philosophic and sovereign' (*philosophos te kai hêgemonikos*, 252e), while followers of Hera prefer those of a kingly type (*basilikon*, 253b). Philosophers thus are associated with sovereignty, and outrank kings by as much as Zeus outranks Hera, *i.e.* as much as husbands outrank wives. Followers of Ares—the brutish god of war, who seems associated with the tyrants—are jealous, violent, and even suicidal in their dealings with those unfortunate enough to be the objects of their affections (252c). The hierarchic series of souls and that of the gods are thus brought into alignment, as shown in Table 2.

23 Pl. *Phdr.* 252c-253b. On this passage and its points of disjuncture from other parts of the dialogue, see Dyson 1982.

Rank	Soul	Deity
1	Philosophers	Zeus
2	Kings	Hera
3	Men of Affairs (statesman and businessman)	
4	Specialists of the body (athletes and healers)	
5	Religious experts (mantic and telestic)	
6	Poets	
7	Producers (artisans and farmers)	
8	Sophists and Democrats	
9	Tyrants	Ares

Table 2: Rank ordering of souls as given in Pl. *Phdr.* 248de and their correlation to the deities they follow into the hyperuranian (252c-253b).

It is difficult not to perceive the self interest when a philosopher articulates a model of social hierarchy that has philosophers at its apex. Moreover, we need to recall that in Plato's lifetime the term 'philosopher' was not the accepted designator for practitioners of a well-established discipline or profession, but a new and idiosyncratic term, quite possibly a neologism, through which Plato distinguished himself and his circle from their numerous rivals.[24] Michael Morgan's remarks are particularly appropriate.

> 'The Platonic dialogues are sufficient testimony by themselves that in the fourth century the terminology for verbal crafts (*tekhnai*) was not yet firmly fixed. Not only confusion but also appropriation was possible. Sophists, rhapsodes, orators, poets, rhetoricians, philosophers—all these and more claimed territorial rights, but the boundaries shift and slide. Individuals moved from one domain to another, clinging to or changing titles as they or others saw fit .... The Platonic dialogues written during the 380s and 370s plot some of these movements and expose some of these conflicts, always reflecting on Plato's developing conception of philosophical inquiry

24 Note the way the term *philosophos* is introduced at *Phaedrus* 278d, in pointed contrast to the older *sophos*. For the fullest historical study of the lexemes *philosophos* and *philosophiê*, with insistence on the radical novelty and formative import of Plato's usage see Dixsaut 1985.

and his need to carve out a special domain, strategy, and enterprise for that title to denominate.'[25]

One can go further still. The dialogues did not just 'plot' the movements or 'expose' the conflicts: they were among the most potent weapons with which those conflicts were fought. The discourse through which Plato constituted the entity thereafter known as 'philosophy' was simultaneously a prescription of method, a claim of paramount privilege, and a sustained polemic against a host of rivals, old and new.

V

Let us now compare Plato's account with two earlier texts with which he and his audience were quite familiar. The first is a fragment from Pindar that Plato himself quoted as the starting point for his earliest discussion of metempsychosis.[26] The poem can probably be dated around 476 BCE and set in a Sicilian milieu.[27]

> Those from whom Persephone receives compensation for ancient sorrow
> She gives their souls back to the sun
> In their ninth year. From them arise noble kings,
> Those men swift in strength and those greatest in wisdom,
> And for the rest of time they are called undefiled heroes in the presence of men.[28]

Here Pindar identifies three types of persons who receive particularly favorable rebirths, constituting them as the set of 'undefiled heroes' (*heroes hagnoi*) who stand above the rest of humanity. These are listed in what appears to be rank order: kings first, then men of strength (*i.e.* the athletes Pindar celebrated in his poetry), and last men of wisdom, presumably poets and sages. It is also possible, however, to consider the list in inverse order, with the wise first and kings last, and the most

25 *Morgan* 1990:158.

26 Pindar, fr. 133 (Snell [127 Bowra]), quoted by Plato at *Meno* 81bc. Empedocles is also discussed in the same dialogue, although on a different topic (76cd).

27 This follows from its strong thematic similarities to *Olympian* 2, which Pindar composed for Theron, tyrant of Acragas, to honor his Olympic victory in 476. Given the Sicilian, and more specifically Acragantine locus for Pindar's and Empedocles' writings, several authors have speculated that Plato became familiar with their ideas on reincarnation during his first Sicilian sojourn. See Long 1948, Zuntz 1971, and Demand 1975.

28 Pindar, fr. 133 (Snell):

οἶσι δὲ Φερσεφόνα ποινὰν παλαιοῦ πένθεος

δέξεται, ἐς τὸν ὕπερθεν ἅλιον κείνων ἐνάτῳ ἔτεϊ

ἀνδιδοῖ ψυχὰς πάλιν, ἐκ τᾶν βασιλῆες ἀγαυοὶ

καὶ σθένει κραιπνοὶ σοφίᾳ τε μέγιστοι

ἄνδρες αὔξοντ᾿ · ἐς δὲ τὸν λοιπὸν χρόνον ἥροες ἁ-

γνοὶ πρὸς ἀνθρώπων καλέονται.

interesting possibility of all is that the text contains intentional ambiguity, such that the poet could claim primacy for himself and his brethren, without offending their royal patrons, whom he permitted to imagine themselves in the position of honor.

Slightly different was the system offered by Empedocles of Acragas (active between 477-432), who offered himself as an example of the process through which souls endure a lengthy cycle of rebirths to purify themselves for an act of primordial sin.[29] These lives unfold over some 'thirty thousand seasons' (=10,000 years)[30] and they traverse the cosmic spheres, birth as plants, fish, and birds being correlated with the elements of earth, water, and air respectively.[31] Within each category, different lives were ranked according to their dignity and purity, birth as a laurel (the plant sacred to Apollo) being highest among plants and as a lion highest among animals.[32]

A series of human births was expected to complete this process and to culminate in rebirth as a god, whereupon the soul would return to the fiery empyrean. Empedocles maintained that he himself was on the verge of such apotheosis, having completed the human lives he took to be noblest.

> Dear friends—you who dwell in the great town on the heights of the city
> Above golden Acragas, attending to good deeds,
> Respectful havens for strangers, unacquainted with evil—
> Greetings! I go about you as an immortal god,
> No longer mortal, honored by all, as is fitting,
> Crowned with fillets and festive garlands.
> I am worshipped by all those I encounter,
> Men and women, as I enter their flourishing towns. They follow me,
> Thousands of them all together, asking where is the advantageous path.
> Some have need of the divinatory arts, and some ask to hear
> The utterance of good healing for all sorts of diseases,
> Being pierced too long with grievous pains.[33]

On the verge of godhood, he is still sought for healing and prophecy and he also implicitly presents himself as a poet by writing in epic verse. A closely related fragment hammers the point home.

> Toward the end [of the rebirth cycle] souls become seers, poets, healers,
> And princes among earth-dwelling people.
> And from this state they shoot up [as] gods, best in honor.[34]

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29 On Empedocles and his text entitled *Katharmoi* ('Purifications'), see Chitwood 1986, Panagiotou 1983, Wright 1981, and Zuntz 1971:179-274.

30 τρίς ... μυρίας ὥρας. fr. 31B115.6 (Diels-Kranz).

31 Fr. 31B117.

32 Fr. 31B127.

Most interesting here is the way Empedocles downgrades royal authority, which he lists fourth and for which he uses a slightly unusual term (*promoi*, 'chiefs' or 'princes,' rather than *basileus*). Moreover it is the sole incarnation he does not claim for himself and the ancient biographic tradition tells that he rejected the kingship of Acragas when offered to him.[35] On this point, his ranking of human lives was markedly original, as was his unprecedented view of himself as divine, but in other ways he gives a fairly conventional list of those who would have been regarded as 'the masters of truth in archaic Greece,' when the technology of writing and the democratic *polis* had not yet undermined those whose position and authority depended on claims of inspired speech.[36] It thus becomes clear that Plato ratcheted all the categories most highly regarded by his predecessors down some notches to make room at the top for the new category of philosophers he wished to construct as a dominant elite (Figure 1).

33 Fr. 31B112:

ὦ φίλοι, οἳ μέγα ἄστυ κατὰ ξανθοῦ Ἀκράγαντος

ναίετ' ἀν' ἄκρα πόλεος, ἀγαθῶν μελεδήμονες ἔργων,

ξείνων αἰδοῖοι λιμένες, κακότητος ἄπειροι,

χαίρετ'· ἐγὼ δ' ὑμῖν θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός

πωλεῦμαι μετὰ πᾶσι τετιμένος, ὥσπερ ἔοικα,

ταινίαις τε περίστεπτος στέφεσίν τε θαλείοις.

<πᾶσι δὲ> τοῖς ἂν ἵκωμαι ἐς ἄστεα τηλεθάοντα,

ἀνδράσιν ἠδὲ γυναιξί, σεβίζομαι· οἱ δ' ἅμ' ἔπονται

μυρίοι ἐξερέοντες, ὅπη πρὸς κέρδος ἀταρπός,

οἱ μὲν μαντοσυνέων κεχρημένοι, οἱ δ' ἐπὶ νούσων

παντοίων ἐπύθοντο κλύειν εὐηκέα βάξιν,

δηρὸν δὴ χαλεπῆσι πεπαρμένοι <ἄμφ' ὀδύνῃσι>.

34 Fr. 31B146:

εἰς δὲ τέλος μάντεις τε καὶ ὑμνοπόλοι καὶ ἰητροί

καὶ πρόμοι ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπιχθονίοισι πέλονται,

ἔνθεν ἀναβλαστοῦσι θεοὶ τιμῆισι φέριστοι

35 Diog. Laert. 8.63, who cites Aristotle as his source for depicting Empedocles as an ardent democrat. The tradition is hardly trustworthy, but cannot be dismissed altogether. For a discussion of the political struggles in Acragas during Empedocles' life and his possible role in them, see Asheri 1990.

36 Detienne 1967. Poets and kings were already singled out by Hes. *Theog.* 81-104 (see also *Hom. Od.* 17.384-86). The status of seers and healers in the epic is also exceedingly high, as seen in such figures as Calchas, Teiresias, Melampus, Machaon, *etc.*, not to mention the Sibyl and Pythia. See further Grottanelli 1982.

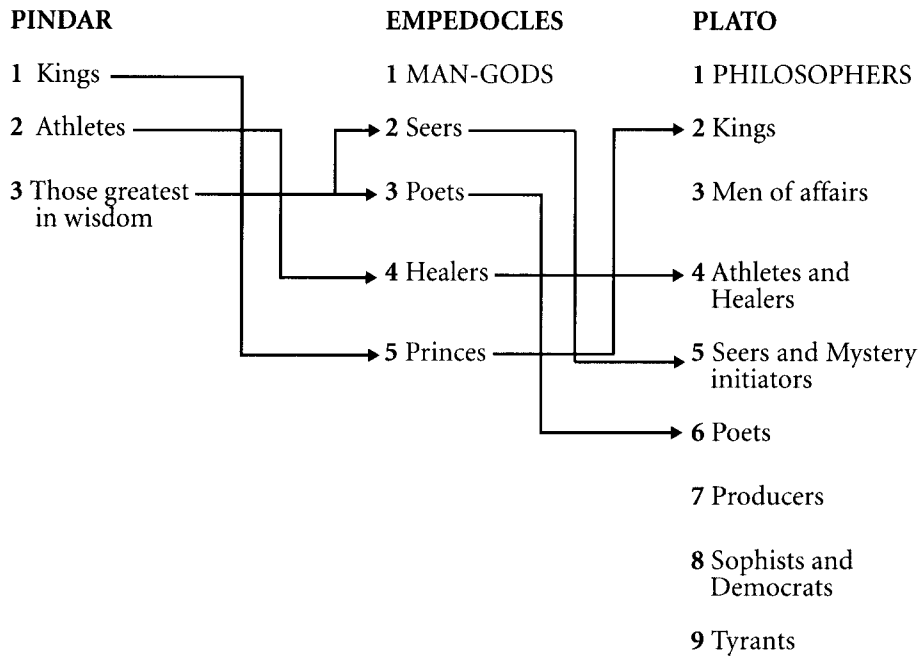| PINDAR	EMPEDOCLES	PLATO
1 Kings	1 MAN-GODS	1 PHILOSOPHERS
2 Athletes	2 Seers	2 Kings
3 Those greatest in wisdom	3 Poets	3 Men of affairs
	4 Healers	4 Athletes and Healers
	5 Princes	5 Seers and Mystery initiators
		6 Poets
		7 Producers
		8 Sophists and Democrats
		9 Tyrants

Figure 1: Hierarchies of birth in Pindar (c. 476 BCE), Empedocles (c. 432), and Plato (c. 370). With each recalibration of the system, the list becomes longer, a new category is introduced in the paramount position, and others are downgraded to make way for it.

Like Pindar, Empedocles, and probably others, Plato offered a mythic variant on the theme of metempsychosis that recalibrated the operative taxonomy of human excellence, hoping thereby to reorganize the social order. In its most audacious moment, his myth sought to establish a new elite, demoting older ones as necessary, while consigning newer rivals—sophists and democrats—to the bottom of the pile. Elsewhere, however, Plato seems much less daring, particularly in the incidental imagery he scattered through his narrative. Although he offered some innovative twists on each, winged chariots,[37] heavenly meadows,[38] three and ten thousand year cycles,[39] 'laws of Retribution,'[40] and contrasts of memory and forgetfulness[41] were familiar parts of earlier otherworld accounts. By including them,

37 Cf. Hom. Il. 5.837, 8.41, 13.23, 16.148; Parmenides, fr. 28B1.1-10, Empedocles, fr. 31B3.5. Note also the use of a similar comparison between the soul and a chariot in Katha Upanisad 1.3.3-9.

38 Regarding the leimôn and alêtheias pedion of 248b, cf. Hom. Od. 11.539 (asphodelos leimôn), Empedocles, fr. 31B121 (Atês ... leimôna), Pl. Resp. x 614e, 616b. See further Courcelle 1975.

39 On millennial cycles, cf. Empedocles fr. 31B115.6 (tris min myrias ôras), Hdt. 2.123, Aesch. PV 94, and see van der Waerden 1952.

Plato catered to the traditional expectations of his audience, while probing that tradition for strategic possibilities and advantage.

Within Plato's lifetime and primarily as the result of his initiatives, philosophers did displace poets, seers, and others within the hierarchized ranks of intellect and speech, although they never fulfilled his greatest ambitions by acceding to positions of paramount political power. Looking closely at his work helps us understand something about the instrumentality of myth, and also sharpens our sense of what happened in Greece during the 4th century. The mythic narrative we have considered marks a skirmish in the massive campaign Plato waged on behalf of himself, his circle, their practices and their values. Beyond this, I hope it affords an instructive example of how subtle, supple, and effective a discursive instrument myth can be.

40 To the *thesmos* ... *Adrasteias* 248c, *cf.* Pind. fr. 133 (Snell) (*poinan palaiou pentheos*), *Ol.* 2.60 (*logon ... anagkai*), Empedocles, fr. 31B115.1 (*Anagkês khrêma*).

41 On the mythology of Mnêmosynê and Lêthê, *cf.* the 'Orphic' tablets, such as that found at Petelia (fr. 32a, Kern) or the Oracle of Trophonius, described by Paus. 9.39.7-8. See further Lincoln 1991: 49-61, Vernant 1965, and Kerenyi 1945.

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