

MYSTIC LIGHT IN AESCHYLUS' *BASSARAI*

Of Aeschylus' *Bassarai* almost nothing survives. It referred to Mount Pangaion (fragment 23a Radt), and its plot is reflected in section 24 of the *Catasterismoi* associated with Eratosthenes. Of this passage Martin West¹ has produced a new 'working text', based on editorial work previously ignored by Aeschylean scholars. This new text can be found (with some slight differences) in the third volume (p. 138) of *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (ed. Radt). I translate it thus, with the words rescued by West in italics. Orpheus

*having descended to Hades because of his wife and seen how things were there, did not any longer honour Dionysos, by whom he had been made famous, but considered Helios (the sun) to be greatest of the gods, whom he addressed also as Apollo. Rousing himself at night before dawn he awaited the rising of the sun at the mountain Pangaion, in order to be the first to see the sun. And so Dionysos was angry with him and—as Aeschylus the tragic poet says—sent against him the Bassarai, who tore him apart and dispersed his limbs.*²

West points out that the rescued details are not arbitrary additions by a medieval copyist, as they are found also in the Latin versions of the tradition.³ And he argues cogently that everything in our passage derives from the *Bassarai*. One element in his case is that among various early Pythagorean *Orphica* we hear of a 'Descent to Hades' of the fifth century B.C. Further, he argues, there is some tenuous evidence for a pre-Aeschylean Orphic poem (attributed to a Pythagorean) in which Orpheus in the underworld obtains insight associated with Apollo, the god most associated with early Pythagoreanism.⁴

On the basis of West's conclusions, I will now try to illuminate the theme, dramatized by Aeschylus, of Orpheus rejecting Dionysus for the sun (identified with Apollo) after visiting Hades.

Orpheus was imagined as the pre-eminent author of mystic doctrine. Mystic initiation was a rehearsal for death, and might therefore involve experience of the underworld, in which the darkness was—at the culmination of the ritual—illuminated by a wonderful light.⁵ I suggest therefore that Orpheus descending to the darkness of Hades, and seeing something there that made him worship the sun, is—at least in part⁶—a mythical projection of this ritual.

¹ *Studies in Aeschylus* (Stuttgart, 1990), 26–50 ('The Lycurgus Trilogy', an updated version of *BICS* 30 (1983), 63–71 and 81–2).

² ... διὰ δὲ τὴν γυναῖκα εἰς Αἰδου καταβὰς καὶ ἰδὼν τὰ ἐκεῖ οἷα ἦν τὸν μὲν Διόνυσον οὐκέτι ἐτίμα, ὑφ' οὗ ἦν δεδοξασμένος, τὸν δὲ Ἥλιον μέγιστον τῶν θεῶν ἐνόμισεν, ὃν καὶ Ἀπόλλωνα προσηγόρευσεν. ἐπεγειρόμενός τε τὴν νύκτα ἔωθεν κατὰ τὸ ὄρος τὸ καλούμενον Πάγγαιον προσέμενε τὰς ἀνατολάς, ἵνα ἴδῃ τὸν Ἥλιον πρῶτος. ὅθεν ὁ Διόνυσος ὀργισθεὶς αὐτῷ ἔπεμψε τὰς Βασσάραις, ὡς φησὶν Αἰσχύλος ὁ τῶν τραγωιδιῶν ποιητής, αἱ διέσπασαν αὐτὸν καὶ τὰ μέλη ἔρριψαν χωρὶς ἕκαστον ...

³ Aratus Lat. p. 231. 14 Maass, Schol. German. p. 84. 6 Breysig.

⁴ Plutarch preserves a report that Orpheus in his descent to the underworld saw a chasm that he first took to be a *krater* (mixing bowl), and that 'from mistaken memory he published among men a false report that at Delphi there was an oracle common to Apollo and Night—false, because Apollo has no association with Night' (*Moralia* 566bc). West suggests that this may derive from the Orphic poem *Krater* attributed to the early Pythagorean Zopyrus (or an early Orphic-Pythagorean *Katabasis*), which was perhaps also a source for *Bassarai*. I would add that although Apollo (as sun) and Night may indeed seem to exclude each other (as obvious opposites), their conjunction is appropriate precisely as an expression of the appearance of light (identified with deity: see below) in the darkness of Hades in mystic ritual.

⁵ E.g. Plutarch *fr.* 178; W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Harvard, 1987), Chapter 4.

⁶ I.e. my interpretation does not exclude other conceivable contributory factors, such as e.g. Thracian cult of the sun: cf. Soph. *fr.* 582, but also West (n. 1) at 39–40.

A striking parallel is provided by the initiation of Lucius into the mysteries of Isis in Apuleius (*Met.* 11.23): he reaches the boundary of death and sees the sun shining brightly in the middle of the night. But this is a late account of mystic ritual of (at least in part) Egyptian provenance. Returning to the time of Aeschylus, we find that Pindar, in a passage full of mystic allusions, claims that after death the 'good' have the sun by night as much as by day.⁷ Similarly the chorus of Eleusinian initiates in the underworld in Aristophanes' *Frogs* sings that 'we alone', who have been initiated and have acted piously to others, have sun and holy light (*φέγγος ἱερὸν*) (454–6). Now eight lines earlier they have used *φέγγος ἱερὸν* of the torches they are carrying in the nocturnal festival (446–7, cf. 313–4, 340, 350): the nocturnal festival once celebrated at Eleusis is now repeated as (and may at Eleusis have been envisaged as pre-enacting) their celebration in the darkness of the underworld, where only they, the initiated, have sun and *φέγγος ἱερὸν*. Earlier Dionysus, when he was still upon the earth, was told what the underworld will be like (154–5): 'a kind of breath of pipes (*αὔλων πνοή*) will float around you, and you will see a most beautiful light, as here'. The light is generally taken to be sunlight, but the conjunction with *αὔλων πνοή* suggests torchlight—for it is torchlight that is conjoined precisely with *αὔλων πνοή* also at the first appearance of the chorus (312–4).⁸ The solution to this dilemma may be that, as is strongly suggested by the repetition of *φέγγος ἱερὸν*, the torchlight was associated with sunlight. The same association appears in the claim of the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes (331–232 B.C.) that the gods are mystic forms (*μυστικά σχήματα*) and sacred names, *the sun a torchbearer* (my emphasis, *δαδούχον ἔφασκεν εἶναι τὸν ἥλιον*), and the cosmos a mystery (*μυστήριον*).⁹

We may infer that as early as the classical period fire (of torches) in mystic ritual might be imagined as sunlight. But what of Orpheus' identification of the sun with a god, Apollo?

The *Homeric Questions* (of 'Heraclitus', probably first or second century A.D.) state that 'it is clear to us from the mystic discourses, the theology of the secret mystic rituals, that Apollo and the sun are two names for the same god' (6.6). And Macrobius (fifth century A.D.), in his *Saturnalia* (1.18), reports that there is in ritual a secret doctrine that the sun while above, in the daytime hemisphere, is called Apollo, but while in the nocturnal one below is called Dionysus.

Although they no doubt preserve earlier doctrine, these are late texts. But the identification of the sun with Apollo occurred already in the fifth century B.C., in Parmenides and Empedocles (DK 28A20, 31A23). Also it seems implied elsewhere in Aeschylus,¹⁰ and is ascribed by Proclus to Orpheus and to Plato.¹¹ The interpretation of Olympian deities as riddlingly equivalent to cosmological elements occurred in the discourse associated with mystic ritual, for instance in the Derveni papyrus of the fourth century B.C.¹² In the remains of Euripides' *Phaethon* the sun is addressed thus: 'You are among mortals rightly called Apollo by whoever knows the silent

⁷ *Ol.* 2. 61–3; similar is fr. 129 Snell.

⁸ For torches in the mysteries see I. Lada Richards, *Initiating Dionysus* (Oxford, 1999), 106–8; N. J. Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford, 1974), 165.

⁹ *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (SVF) 1. 538 (ed. von Arnim).

¹⁰ *Septem* 859 and perhaps *Suppl.* 213–4.

¹¹ *Orphicorum Fragmenta* (Kern), fr. 172; cf. 62, 297; *Orphic Hymns* 8 and 34 note also Callimachus fr. 103, with Hollis ad loc. (*Callimachus Hekale* [Oxford, 1990], 291).

¹² E.g. D. Obbink, 'Cosmology as initiation', in A. Laks and G. Most (edd.), *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus* (Oxford, 1997), 39–54, at 42; R. Seaford, 'Immortality, salvation, and the elements', *HSCP* 90 (1986), 1–26.

names (σιγῶντ' ὀνόματα) of gods' (225–6). Diggle in his commentary reasonably argues that the point of 'silent names' is that 'Apollo' is associated with the Greek for 'destroy' (as also at e.g. Aesch. *Ag.* 1080–2)—Phaethon has been destroyed by the sun. But Diggle allows that 'the sequence of thought is a little curious, and so is the use of the participle σιγῶντα'. The difficulty is that σιγῶντ' ὀνόματα refers to *concealed* meaning. Perhaps therefore there is also an allusion to mystic initiation (NB 'whoever knows . . .') into secret knowledge in which 'Apollo' is riddlingly equivalent to the sun. This identification is not (until perhaps much later) a general feature of cult.

But what of Dionysus? Might he also be also associated with heavenly firelight in mystic ritual? Cleanthes, who—we saw—identified the sun with mystic torchlight, also identified it with Apollo and with Dionysus.¹³ Much later (and so of less significance) Dionysus is identified with the sun in Orphic texts,¹⁴ and we have already seen that Macrobius reports the secret ritual doctrine identifying Dionysus with the underworld sun. In Aristophanes' *Frogs* Iacchus (identified with Dionysus) is called the 'light-bearing star of the night-time mystic ritual. The meadow is lit with fire' (343–4). In Sophocles the Eleusinian Dionysus-Iacchus is called 'chorus-leader of the stars, master of night-time voices',¹⁵ on which the scholiast comments that 'it is according to a mystic formula (μυστικὸν λόγον) that he is called chorus-leader of the stars'. The torchlight in the nocturnal mystic procession at Eleusis was imagined as starlight, which is identified with Dionysus-Iacchus.¹⁶

In the *Bacchae*, in a passage that—I have demonstrated in my commentary—reflects numerous details of mystic initiation, Dionysus is addressed by his initiates as 'greatest light' (608), and when Dionysus creates an actual light it is attacked by the obstinate Pentheus (630–1), who *thinks that the light is Dionysus*.¹⁷ The miraculous light that in mystic ritual signifies salvation (e. g. Plutarch fr. 178) is here identified with the deity, rather as at Eleusis it seems¹⁸ to have been identified with the divine child. In the same passage of *Bacchae* Dionysus creates thunder and lightning, which—numerous texts suggest¹⁹—were represented in mystic initiation. Such representations may underly some of the very few words remaining from Aeschylus' *Bassarai* (fr. 23a): τὸ τῆς ἀστραπῆς πευκᾶεν σέλας, 'the pine flame of the lightning'. Although this passage is corrupt, it seems clear that torchlight is imagined as lightning.

¹³ SVF 1.540, 541, 546.

¹⁴ M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford, 1983), 206.

¹⁵ *Ant.* 1147–8; cf. Eur. *Ion* 1074ff.

¹⁶ Diodorus Siculus (1.11.3) attributes to Eumolpus (the first priest of the Eleusinian mysteries) the line ἀστροφαῖ Διόνυσσον ἐν ἀκτίνεσσι πυρῶπὸν ('shining like a star, Dionysus fiery in rays').

¹⁷ 631 'as if slaughtering me'. We must certainly retain the manuscript φῶς (see my commentary). In the next line φαεινὸν may evoke starlight (cf. e.g. Eur. *Cyc.* 353 and *El.* 727), especially if supplemented (to restore metre) by Gigante's <εἶδος> (cf. Sappho fr. 34. 2 φαεινὸν εἶδος of starlight). Pentheus is throughout the play the mythological projection of the resistance of the initiate. Similarly in Sophocles Dionysus' persecutor Lycurgus is said have to put a stop to Bacchic torchlight (*Ant.* 963–4). Pentheus later in the drama puts on funerary dress, sees the sun (doubled), and (as hostile to Dionysus) is torn apart by the maenads. This sequence (and much else about Pentheus) is a projection of mystic initiation, and so may be the similar sequence in *Bassarai*. Cf. n. 34 below.

¹⁸ At Pi. *Ol.* 2. 53–6, in a mystic context, πλούτος (or Πλούτος?) is called ἀστὴρ ἀρίζηλος, ἐτυμώτατον ἀνδρὶ φέγγος: see further N. J. Richardson. (n. 8) at 28, 318.

¹⁹ R. Seaford, *Euripides Bacchae* (Warminster, 1996), 196–7.

It seems then that the mystic light appearing in the darkness might be identified with heavenly light, and with deity, as early as the classical period. But why did such identifications occur specifically in mystic ritual? Mystic initiation was a rehearsal of death. Moreover, it has numerous points of similarity with the modern near-death experiences (NDEs) that have been so exhaustively recorded and investigated over the last two decades.²⁰ The NDE displays a fair degree of similarity across different cultures, and I suggest that the mystic ritual of the Greeks was in part a dramatization of their experience of NDEs.²¹ I do not intend here to set out all the points of similarity, but confine myself to a single, central feature of the NDE, the emergence in the darkness of the so-called Being of Light, a bright light that is also somehow a personal being which induces a profound sense of well-being and may be identified with a divine figure (e.g. Christ, by Christians). The light, though not dazzling, is 'often compared to the brightness of the sun'.²² It is this, I suggest, that gives rise to a common feature of Greek mystic ritual, the appearance in the darkness of a bright light that may signify salvation, that is called 'most beautiful', 'greatest', 'truest', or 'wonderful', and that is sometimes identified with a god. Those who experience NDEs often remark on their certainty that the light is also—strange though it may seem—a person. The benign attitude of this 'Being of Light' is central to the life-changing effect of the NDE, to its power to remove the fear of death. Mystic initiation had the same effect.²³ Orpheus in the *Bassarai*, after his descent to Hades, desired to go on seeing (what he may well have called) the brightest and most beautiful light—the sun, Apollo—dispelling the darkness.

The *Bassarai* was preceded in its tetralogy by *Edonians*, and followed by the *Neanskoi* and the satyr-play *Lycurgus*. The theme of *Edonians*—the punishment of king Lycurgus for resisting the new cult of Dionysus²⁴—is very similar to that of *Bacchae*, and there are remarkable similarities also in some of the few surviving fragments. From this I would tentatively infer that the action of *Edonians*, like that of *Bacchae* or of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, reflected in detail the mystery-cult of which it was the aetiological myth. The theme of the *Bassarai* was a temporary setback for Dionysus, the apostasy of Orpheus, who was however consequently destroyed by Dionysus. What is the significance of this opposition between Dionysus and Apollo?

We must, of course, forget the long subsequent history of the opposition (notably in Plutarch and Nietzsche). The fifth-century B.C. narration of the descent of Orpheus to the underworld, to which we referred earlier, was *Pythagorean*, as were various other early *Orphica*. This interest that early Pythagoreanism had in Orpheus belonged to its participation in the doctrine (and perhaps ritual) of mystery cult.²⁵ But Orpheus was early associated with the mystery-cult also of Dionysus,²⁶ who seems to have had no place in early Pythagoreanism. The deity most honoured by the early Pythagoreans

²⁰ Pioneering was R. A. Moody, *Life After Life* (Atlanta Georgia, 1975). An intelligent guide to the controversies is S. Blackmore, *Dying to Live* (New York, 1993).

²¹ Moody (n. 19) indicated the possibility of comparing texts from other cultures. J. Bremmer, in his *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife* (London, 2002), 90–6, compares NDEs to some ancient texts (e.g. the myth of Er in Plato's *Republic*) but overlooks the richest material (mystery cult).

²² M. B. Sabom, *Recollections of Death* (New York, 1982), 43.

²³ E. g. *IG II/III*² 3661.6.

²⁴ Cogently argued by West (n. 1).

²⁵ R. Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind* (Cambridge, 2004), 186.

²⁶ E.g. Hdt. 2. 81; Eur. *Hipp.* 952–4; the Olbian bone plates; West (n. 14).

was Apollo, who was, it has been argued, identified with the sun in early Pythagoreanism.²⁷ That Apollo could preside over Orphic mystery-cult influenced by Pythagoreanism is shown by inscriptions on a bone tablet of the late sixth century B.C. from Berezan in the Black Sea, near Olbia.²⁸ But other evidence of his association with mystery-cult is rare. Indeed, some scholars have seen a contradiction within Pythagoreanism between Apollo and Orpheus.²⁹ Burkert is sceptical of such contradiction, and suggests rather a productive complementarity: Pythagoras' 'unique success had a quite individual kind of background, which combined the piety of chthonic mysteries with worship of Apollo the "purifier"'.³⁰ The outlook of Zeller, who claimed that Pythagoras 'transformed the Dionysiac mysteries in the spirit of a more advanced moral teaching', has recently been tentatively revived by Riedweg.³¹ A similar older view was to regard the achievement of Pythagoras as *Apollinizzare l' orfismo*.³² Conversely, it may have been a distinctive feature of Pythagoreanism that Apollo was present in its esoteric rituals. It has even been argued that Plato was influenced by the Apolline mysticism of the Pythagoreans, and that the use he makes of the image of sun and cave in the *Republic* is influenced by the mystic identification of the sun with Apollo.³³

In conclusion, Orpheus as author of mystic discourse was claimed by groups who were (or were imagined as) in opposition: adherents of Dionysus and Pythagorean adherents of Apollo.³⁴ If the third play of the trilogy, the *Neaniskoi*, concerned the reconciliation of Apollo by the establishment of cult, as argued by West, then the trilogy resembled the *Oresteia* in moving from victory to vengeance and finally to reconciliation. Aeschylus, apart from his absorption in the mysteries of his birthplace Eleusis, was as a tragic poet closely associated with Dionysus.³⁵ He was also said to have been a Pythagorean, and the *Oresteia* exhibits patterns of thought very similar to, if not influenced by, Pythagoreanism.³⁶ He was therefore well qualified to dramatize the opposition and reconciliation of Dionysiac and Pythagorean ideas of the next world.

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²⁷ P. Boyancé, 'L' Apollon solaire', in *Mélanges J. Carcopino* (1966), 149–70 (esp. 155–8), argues that the identification of the sun with Apollo made by Oenopides of Chios (late fifth century B.C.) is Pythagorean.

²⁸ L. Dubois, *Inscriptions grecques dialectales d' Olbia du Pont* (Geneva, 1996), 146–54; P. Lévêque, 'Apollon et L' Orphisme à Olbia du Pont', in M. T. Ghidini (et al.) (edd.), *Tra Orfeo e Pitagora* (Naples, 2000), 81–90.

²⁹ W. Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* (Harvard, 1972), 131–2.

³⁰ Burkert (n. 29) at 131–2, 114.

³¹ *Pythagoras* (Munich, 2002), 88.

³² E. Ciaceri, quoted by Burkert (n. 29) at 132 n. 167.

³³ C. Schefer, *Platon und Apollon. Vom Logos zurück zum Mythos* (St Augustin, 1996); *Platon's unsagbare Erfahrung. Ein anderer Zugang zu Platon* (Basel, 2001).

³⁴ This is consistent with Orpheus' rejection of Dionysus *originating as* (as did Pentheus' in *Bacchae*) a projection of the resistance of the mystic initiate to the mystic transition: NB other similarities between Orpheus in *Bassarai* and Pentheus (n. 17).

³⁵ For the Dionysiac inspiration of Aeschylus see esp. Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1259, Pausan. 1.21.2, and Lada-Richards (n. 8) at 234–47.

³⁶ Cic. *Tusc.* 3.23; R. Seaford, 'Aeschylus and the Unity of Opposites', *JHS* 123 (2003), 141–63, at 158–61.