CHAPTER FOUR

WORLD SPINDLE AND CELESTIAL SPHERE

We did not mention Plato’s famous account, describing Necessity holding the spindle of the world,1 when we discussed Thales’s question concerning Necessity because this account leads indeed into another world. One has only to call it to mind to perceive at once the beginning of extraordinary developments, combinations and ramifications which the subject of the symbolic image of the universe had already produced with respect to the concept of fate. Plato allotted it the most supreme as well as the most complete affirmation, a classical compilation of all its motives, as will soon be demonstrated in the analysis. With regard to Thales’s riddle a strange wealth of imagery unfolds in this account. The riddle presupposes, as do other, basically equivalent, questions, completely abstracting the universal forces into the laws of mathematical categories. Its visual representation as a sphere could either be a real globe meaning the world or a simple hieroglyph standing for thought. Instead, the reader of Plato feels that he is being carried back from philosophical abstraction into the realm of pure mythological storytelling. The goddess of the universe, enthroned above all the spheres with her daughters, the Moirai, appears as a visible, mythical conception which seems almost incompatible with the quite differently formed and demonstrated idea of the riddle, if only because a divine personage would be meaningless outside the universe. If, however, we pose the art-historical question whether this image, which is built up in such an extraordinarily tangible, detailed,2 and comprehensive way in the poetic version of the description of a real vision, we would fail to find an answer. The image contains inconsistencies which are difficult to reconcile; however, what is even more noteworthy, it is also entirely absent from the pictorial

1 Republic 616 B ff.
2 K. Reinhardt, Platons Mythen 108 ff.
narrations of myth preserved to us, and a similar or even equivalent personification of Necessity is not to be found in Greek art to this day. This could be merely accidental, but it does reveal the solitude of Plato's thought which is in striking contrast to any genuine Greek myth. This relationship already hints at the strange intermediate position between abstraction and myth. Platonic thought does not really belong to either category since it is a grandiose fantasy created to interpret the universe and as such plays its role in Platonic philosophy. For this reason it includes figurative elements within the mythical ones, though the image was perhaps never represented as a whole. An inquiry after traces of these elements can indeed be undertaken in art and an iconographical commentary could begin there. One would have to establish how many single pieces of demonstrable artistic imagery this account contains or to what extent it generated pictorial representations. The ancient ideas about the universe and fate actually had their own history of images; of which the hieroglyphic means of expression of the picture of the Seven Sages was an exceptional case, motivated by the peculiar character of the represented story. Their image can be traced back to divine personalities to whom it perhaps belonged from the earliest time. Thus, a new world of meanings in art develops in the intermediate area between abstraction and myth which progressively encompasses forms of pictorial representation, even to the extreme freedom of speculative interpretation of myths and pure allegory.

The actual purpose of the strange journey of the souls is to describe Ananke; Plato has rendered it as an account of the man Er. It is introduced by a short description of what the world looks like from the outside. Although these few sentences seem to be closely connected with the following ones, we must discuss the two passages separately, as images seen from two entirely different points

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4 Physics as myth, as explained by E. Hoffmann, "Platonismus und Mystik," *SB Heidelberg* (1933), 2, 94.