
Opening a book by Algis Uždavinys (hereafter U.) is perhaps best compared with watching a fireworks display where the organizer has decided that his strategy will be to throw a lighted match into the box that contains his entire stock of fireworks: the effect is spectacular and exhilarating—concepts spark together in wonderfully unexpected ways, while others take slightly worrying trajectories. But in both cases one hardly has time to consider the rights and wrongs of the arguments before another incandescence catches the eye.

*Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism* was the last work of U. before his death in 2010: its hundred pages represents the swan song of a career which challenged the orthodoxy of modern ‘expertism’: that anti-Platonic view in which truth is considered to be an object entirely separable from the self—something which can be grasped without changing the knower. For U., with his wide-ranging appreciation of so many different religio-philosophical cultures, it is our own viewpoint that stands out as a heterodoxy, isolated from the mainstream through its rejection of the affirmation that what one knows, one becomes, and what one becomes, one enacts.

This monograph is divided into twenty-four short sections: in the first three, questions of divine madness are raised, especially its complex relationships with philosophy, reason and the written word. Other complexities involving the perceived tensions between Orpheus (and Orphism), Socrates, Plato, late Platonic interpretations, and modern revisions, are given an initial airing. Given that these sections cover 16 pages, it is not surprising that the questions raised heavily outnumber the answers given. The late Platonic position is, however, stated simply: “The divine-like souls of true philosophers… are ‘companions of the gods’, like the idealized and mythologized Socrates of Syrianus and Proclus. In short, Socrates is understood as an instrument of divine will… and his philosophy is no less than a divinely inspired and beneficial madness.”

Sections four to eight deal with prophecy, philosophy and priesthood; they address the vexed issue of the spoken versus the written word. U. gives a brief survey of relevant concepts of prophecy in Egyptian, near Eastern, and both early and late Greek thought—a valuable exercise which widens our understanding of the subject beyond the limitations of our Judeo-Christian inheritance.

Sections nine to seventeen gradually move the reader towards the heart of Orphic redemptive myth-cult-mysticism. In particular they look at parallels, convergences and divergences with Platonic teachings concerning the (re-)divinisation of the soul through reminiscence and mania, especially that of Eros, as Orpheus’ ‘re-memberment’ becomes Plato’s remembering. In U.s’ words: “Plato's
main philosophical doctrine is based on that of Parmenides; and Parmenides himself, in fact, depends on the Orphic myth.” In these central sections U. draws upon a wide range of ancient teachings, from Greek to Indian, in order to disclose a singularity of intention, and, in so doing, to produce, in microcosm, an image of the great trial at the heart of philosophy, a trial that asks us whether we can come to terms with the one-many-ness of reality. Here U. also touches upon the tensions between the public and the private spheres of human experience, and their shifting relationship caused, or at least signalled by, the introduction of the Orphic teachings into the traditional polis-oriented religious culture of Greece.

The remaining sections explore the initiatory nature of Orphically-oriented Platonism, as the destiny of the soul was understood to be tied to a series of experiences both on Earth and in Hades, eventually leading to a conscious immortality. If the soul is to rise to such a destiny—as opposed to repeating endlessly a cycle of mundane lives overwhelmed by forgetfulness—the philosopher-initiate must be consciously directed towards that end. U. briefly touches on Orphic, Eleusinian, Sufi, Egyptian, and many other initiatory cultures designed to bring about this transformation of consciousness. The profound change that the individual’s understanding of death undergoes as a result of these initiations is shown to be central to the Platonic Socrates’ unsettling message: philosophy is a practice for dying and being dead. As U. reminds us: “...even Socrates is portrayed by Plato as expecting after his death to meet Orpheus in Hades.”

So many themes emerge from this relatively short monograph that it may strike the reader as part mystical poem, part contour map of the world of wisdom which the soul must explore, and part gigantic ‘to do’ list of important issues worthy of scholarly attention in the coming years. Perhaps one should not ask more of hundred pages, but the work would have been stronger if some important recent advances in the study of Orphic matters had been included—Ritual Texts for the Afterlife from Graf and Johnston, for example, springs to mind, where reference to Plato’s writings outnumber any other named writer in its index to ancient texts. Clearly U.s’ intention was not to inspect the fragments of the torn-apart Dionysus at the centre of the Orphic myth, but to call the readers’ attention to the revivified whole sprung from the incantations of Athene, divine patron of philosophy. Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism paints in broad brush strokes. It contains neither a general index nor a bibliography.

For those of us fortunate enough to have known Algis, the twenty-fourth and final section provides a moving testimony to his powerful love of that which both leads to self-knowledge and yet dissolves us and that knowledge. The Egyptian text known as the Book of Thoth is, for the most part, a dialogue between Thoth (or He-of-Heseret) and a lover of wisdom. At the close of the book, Algis writes: “But I know that He-of-Heseret benefited my knowledge through madness, by