SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE PRESENCE OF THE DERVENI ALLEGORY IN PLATO’S CRATYLUS

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In this paper I shall analyse some passages of the Cratylus commenting implicit or explicit references to the Orphic allegory contained in the Derveni Papyrus (PDerv), starting from the hints and allusions conveyed by the etymologies; I shall start my inquiry underlining that the dialogue and the Orphic allegory share some important features, both in form and content. Even at first sight, it is easy to conclude that, by analogy, the etymology of the Cratylus and the allegory in the PDerv are rhetorical methods to approach both the topics of onomatology – along with the revelation of the nature of the gods – and of physical explanation of phenomena. Moreover, in the Cratylus as well as in PDerv we find references to an onomatouric authority who creates or assigns the correct names to gods and things, according to nature, meaning, or even function. It is thus evident that there are important thematic and formal overlaps between the Platonic dialogue and PDerv. To this we should add that the two texts contain frequent allusions to the same Presocratic philosophers.

Let me also make clear already from the start that I shall not discuss the exegetical problem of the seriousness of the etymologies in the Cratylus in the present context. Furthermore, I proceed quoting the columns of PDerv without making any claims about the origin or the reconstruction of the Orphic poem; moreover, I assume that Plato could have had access to the text preserved in the papyrus and, as a result, I agree with those scholars who consider the allegory earlier than the Platonic composition of the dialogue. I shall refer to a well-known thesis concerning the authorship of the Orphic allegory in relation to the Cratylus, and then I shall focus my attention to the textual links between the two works.

As Charles Kahn has pointed out, the issue of the authorship of the text preserved on PDerv can be approached also from a comparative study of the allegory and the dialogue. Although I agree with those scholars who claim that the evidence currently available does not allow us to identify with certainty the author of the Orphic allegory, I think Charles Kahn is right in emphasizing that the figure of Euthyphro as he is described in the Cratylus and the dialogue named after him provides and important clue for a better understanding of the identity of the Derveni author. As Kahn argues, Euthyphro cannot be simply identified with a representative of conventional common piety, for his behaviour and his obses-

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1 I am heartily thankful to Prof. Gábor Betegh for his supervision.
2 BAXTER (1992), quoted also by KAHN (1997), 60. The textual reference is Plat. Cra., 389 a.
3 As already BURKERT (1970) and BAXTER (1992), 130 ff pointed out.
4 I refer to BETEGH (2004), 92 ff.
sion with ritual pollution does not characterize traditional Greek religiosity, and
his fixation on purification after pollution could be a clue that Euthyphro – at
least the fictional character – was a religious sectarian who practiced some form
of Orphic or Bacchic cult\(^5\). This point, as Kahn underlines, was already taken
into consideration by Burnet, with reference to that passage of the *Euthyphro*
in which the protagonist shows his familiarity with the cruelest details of theogony
(*Euthyrh.*., 8b). Moreover, the relationships within the divine triad Ouranos/Kronos/Zeus – even if these relationships diverge from the Hesiodic narra-
tive – have got a crucial role in the allegory. In that respect, it is worth reminding
that Euthyphro is mentioned by Socrates in the *Cratylus* for the first time after
the etymologies of these three gods\(^6\) (*Cra.*, 398 d5). I would like to add that Plato
chooses to use, at this point of the dialogue, a curious and quite unusual verb to
indicate the purification from the divine inspiration, which could be another clue
of the ritual obsession of Euthyphro. The verb I'm referring to is ἀποδιώτουμεθα, which is used by Plato for the first time in the *Cratylus*
\((369\text{e3})\) and, after that, only three times in the *Laws* \((877\text{e8}; 900\text{b}5; 857\text{b}7, using
the nominal form). Socrates, in this passage, invites Hermogenes and Cratylus to
proceed in the discussion using the inspiration of the priest until the following
day, with the precaution to "conjure it away" and "purify" themselves after the
etymological performance, ἀποδιώτουμεθα τε α θετήν καὶ θε-καθαροпромышлен. Similarly, in the *Laws*, the verb is used to indicate the need for
liberation from some sort of extra-ordinary power or pollution, with a negative
connotation\(^7\). The verb is used in a curious relation with λόγοι at 900 b5, to
indicate the attempt to avoid impiety through the dialectical pursuing of justice.

The connection between Orphic religiosity and the extra-ordinary power of
Euthyphro as a μάντις is made explicit at *Cra.*, 400 a-e, in relation to the etym-
ologies of ψυχή and σῶμα. As Socrates claims, there are specific etymologi-
cal explanations of these two words that could better satisfy the "disciples of
Euthyphro" (*Cra.*, 400 a1) and the "followers of Orpheus" (*Cra.*, 400 c5). I shall
come back to these important terms later, when I will turn to examine the links
between the *Cratylus* and the eschatology of *PDerv* and the Orphic Gold Tablets.

Before doing that, I shall first focus on the broader issue of the textual links
between the *Cratylus* and *PDerv*. This question was first broached by Burkert,
who connected the topic of *onomatology* and *cosmology* with the idea of linguisti-
col naturalism\(^8\). Burkert also suggests a link between the onomatology of *PDerv*
and the importance attributed to the divine names in the cosmogonies of the

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\(^5\) See KAHN (1997), 60.

\(^6\) See also ADEMOLLO (2011), 241.

\(^7\) See Plat. *Lg.*, IX 854 b, IX 877 e.

\(^8\) BURKERT (1970), 443-455. See also FUNghi (1997), 33, "Burkert emphasized the important role
attributed to language by the commentator, who assimilates the cosmogonic event to an *onomatogony*".