

24. Non-musical Notes on the Orphic *Lyra* (OF 417)

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The aim of these notes is to make a contribution to the assessment of the evidence for a poem ascribed to Orpheus under the title *Lyra*. This poem seems to have dealt with the invocation of souls, and stated the necessity of the lyre in that connection. Besides, it is usually admitted that the Orphic poem *Lyra* mentioned the affinity between the seven strings of the lyre and the seven spheres corresponding to the Sun, the Moon, and the five planets that can be seen without a telescope.¹ If so, the ascension of the souls alluded to by our source about that Orphic poem might have taken place through those seven spheres.² But such an idea seems very strange in the Orphic realm, where the abode of the souls of the deceased was held to be underground.³ We think it is worthwhile to discuss this issue: did the Orphic poem itself deal with the cosmic lyre and the heavenly ascension of the souls?

First of all, let us present our piece of evidence for the Orphic *Lyra*. As it is well known, it is a *scholion* to Vergil, *Aeneis* 6.119 (*si potuit manis accersere coniugis Orpheus*); this *scholion* has been preserved only in an eleventh century codex named *Parisinus Latinus* 7930, but the *scholion* itself may go back to the ninth century.⁴ The *scholion* reads:

*Si potuit manes: orpheus secundum fabulas descendit ad inferos ad revocandam animam coniugis. re autem vera quibusdam carminibus voluit revocare animam coniugis sive, quod quia implere non potuit, fingitur a poetis receptam perdidisse dura lege plutonis: quod iste ostendit cum dicit accersere, id est evocare. dicunt tamen quidam liram orphei cum VII cordis fuisse, et celum habet VII zonas, unde teologia assignatur. varro autem dicit librum orfei de vocanda anima liram nominari, et negantur animae sine cithara posse ascendere.*⁵

- 1 Bernabé (2008: 399).
- 2 Vid., e.g., Nock (1927: 169); Cumont (1942: 499, *addendum* to p. 18, n. 4, and to p. 262), and Ferrero (1955: 302 of the 2008 edition). Burkert (1972: 357) and West (1983: 29–33) implicitly agree with the same view.
- 3 OF 474 and 475. Nock (1927: 170) already pointed out the difficulty of admitting that the source about the Orphic *Lyra* could allude to the ascension of the souls through heavenly spheres; cf. also Lambardi (1986: 152–155).
- 4 Savage (1925: 229).
- 5 We quote the whole text of the *scholion*, as it is printed in Savage (1925: 235–236); cf. also, although these cannot be considered editions as such, Nock (1927: 169);

If (*sc.* Orpheus) could (*sc.* summon her wife's) spirit: According to the myth, Orpheus descended to the Lower World in order to call back her wife's soul. Actually he tried to call her wife's soul back by means of certain incantations, or (since he could not fulfil such a wish) he is said by poets to have lost her after having got her back, due to Pluton's stern law, which he (that is, Vergil) conveys when he says 'summon', that is, 'call out'. However, some people say that Orpheus' lyre had seven strings, and heaven has seven spheres, whence a religious meaning is attributed (*sc.* to the lyre). On the other hand, Varro says that 'Lyre' was the title of a book by Orpheus on summoning souls. And souls are said not to be able to ascend without a lyre.⁶

As we can see, the sentence about the seven strings of the lyre and their correspondence with the celestial spheres falls outside the mention of Varro and the Orphic poem allegedly quoted by the illustrious Roman scholar;⁷ moreover, the correspondence between strings and spheres is not relevant as far as the Vergilian verse is concerned. It would seem as if we owe the mention of that correspondence just to a cumulative method of the scholiast,⁸ who would have gathered a mass of heterogeneous pieces of information, more or less related to the text he was discussing: for example, Servius, in his commentary upon *Aeneis* 6.645, also alluded to the correspondence between strings and spheres, without this being relevant to the understanding of a passage where Orpheus is making music in the underground kingdom of Hades. And if that is the case in our *scholion*, the verb *ascendere*, would mean the ascension from the Underworld to the earthly world of the living people. Might this be the reason why Orpheus is handing his lyre over to a young man, at the entrance to the realm of Hades, on an Apulian red-figured calyx krater?⁹ It does not seem the most likely hypothesis: although Nock said that *ascendere* may refer to the ascension from the Underworld up to earth,¹⁰ he did not present any piece of evidence for that meaning, and

Ferrero (1955: 302 of the 2008 edition); Deschamps (1979: 18, n. 53); West (1983: 29); Lambardi (1986: 152); Paterlini (1992: 78, n. 3 to p. 77). I think it is necessary to do so for a better understanding of the evidence about the Orphic *Lyra*, and for a more detailed statement of what I propose in these pages.

- 6 Due to their relevance for our discussion, the conjunctions *tamen* and *autem* have been emphasized by means of bold types in our translation.
- 7 Both Varro Reatinus and Varro of Atax (who mentioned it in his fr. 14 Morel) could have been familiar with the correspondence between strings and spheres. Concerning Varro of Atax, fr. 14 Morel, cf. Lambardi (1986); as for Varro Reatinus as a Pythagorean, cf. Ferrero (1955: 291–304 of the 2008 edition) and Deschamps (1979). Bernabé (2008: 399) assumes that the scholiast referred to Varro of Atax, although it is usually admitted that the Varro alluded to by the scholiast was Varro Reatinus; cf. Ferrero (1955: 302 of the 2008 edition), Deschamps (1979: 18), etc.
- 8 Nock (1927: 169).
- 9 Now in the British Museum, F 270, *ca.* 330 BC; cf. Schmidt (1978: 121 and pl. 14), and Garezou (1994: 89, nr. 81).
- 10 Nock (1927: 170).

we have been able to find just one text where such meaning can be attested, but where the subject is not the soul of a deceased person, but Ulysses alive.¹¹

Now we could ask why the scholiast alluded to the correspondence between strings and spheres. We believe that it was not an arbitrary juxtaposition. What leads us to think that there is a relationship between the Vergilian verse and the strings-spheres correspondence is the conjunction *tamen*, which cannot be understood if we do not take into consideration the preceding sentences of the *scholion*. The text means that, although Orpheus could not take Eurydice back, there are some people, however, according to whom the lyre of Orpheus had seven strings, and, since the heaven encompasses seven spheres, the music of Orpheus' lyre could have been expected to have made Eurydice come back to this world.

We should notice that the interest in the heavenly ascension of the soul is not typically Orphic. Such a remark could raise the objection that the *scholion* does not deal with a passage about Orphic beliefs, but about the myth of Orpheus, or, more specifically, to the myth of Orpheus' music. We think that the myth of Orpheus conveys a belief in the power of music akin to those expressed by the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition in the field of philosophy.¹² The interest in the heavenly ascension of souls, as expressed in the *scholion*, would make sense within the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition, since this tradition shared the belief in the heavenly or astral destiny of the souls of the blest.¹³ But Orpheus' goal, according to the sources of myth, was to take back Eurydice to earthly life, not to make her ascend through heavenly spheres. In other words, the correspondence between strings and spheres is related neither to Orphism nor to the myth of Orpheus.

Actually, the correspondence between strings and spheres belongs to a different circle of beliefs; therefore it is introduced by the conjunction *tamen*. Within eschatological beliefs, according to which the abode of the blest is to be found in heaven, the musical instrument that could lead the souls to their destiny should be the lyre, given the correspondence between the number of strings of the standard lyre and that of the cosmic spheres: this might be the religious meaning that, according to the *scholion*, was attributed to the lyre, and that we find attested, besides our *scholion*, in Cicero's sublime *Somnium Scipionis*.¹⁴ However, there is no clear evidence outside the Pythagorean milieu for the lyre being employed in order to communicate with the souls of the dead, neither (even less) to make them come back to this world;¹⁵ the

11 Apul. *Soc.* 24.19–21.

12 Molina Moreno (2008: 37–58).

13 Cf. Varro, *Rer. div. rel.* 1, p. 154 Agahd; Alexander Polyhistor, quoted by D. L. 8.31–32; Iambl. *VP* 18.82; Procl. *in R.* II 119 and 129–130 Kroll.

14 Cf. Cic. *Resp.* 6.18–19.

15 We know several pieces of evidence for the use of songs in the invocation of souls (A. *Pers.* 619–632), as well as for the use of bronze instruments (Sch. *Theoc.* 2.36; cf. *II.*

failure of Orpheus is a conspicuous mythical example of the lyre's inadequacy for such a goal. If Orpheus did not get Eurydice back, this was so because the lyre was not appropriate for dealing with the chthonic deities. A lyre could have made Eurydice ascend through the celestial spheres, but this was not what Orpheus tried to do, and therefore he failed. That is the reason why the scholiast opposes through the conjunction *tamen* the failure of Orpheus and the beliefs allegedly attested in the poem *Lyra* (we can see that the structure of the *scholion* is not as unsystematic as it seems at a first glance). And, since the poem *Lyra* would belong to a Pythagorean milieu (as we can see from the allusion to the celestial ascension of the soul), it is likely that it also mentioned the correspondence between strings and spheres (a correspondence the discovery of which was later attributed to Orpheus by Ps.-Lucian and Servius; cf. *OF* 417 II and 418). But all that was "Orphic" for no other reason that it was attributed to Orpheus. The *Lyra* was, therefore, as M. L. West put it, a pseudo-Pythagorean Orphic poem.

These speculations about the affinity between lyre and celestial spheres are absent from our first sources about the myth of Orpheus. Perhaps there never was a version in which Orpheus succeeded,¹⁶ but, if such version had ever been proposed, it would have made no sense to people who admitted the affinity between lyre and celestial spheres, and believed that lyres guided souls to heaven. Perhaps it was not just by chance if not too much time after Varro and Cicero (who provide us with evidence for the beliefs about lyre and celestial immortality), Vergil and Ovid established the "failure version" of the myth of Orpheus. But despite his failure in the realm of myth, Orpheus was perceived as the most prestigious lyre player of the ancient world, and therefore a poem with such content as the *Lyra* was attributed to him.

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8.13–15, and Porph. *Phil.* p. 141 Wolff, vv. 1–2); it was even said that the gods of the dead should be addressed silently (Sch. *S. OT* 489), and some passages by Euripides suggest that funeral songs were sung without lyre (*E. Alc.* 179–90; *IT* 143–147). On the other hand, lyres are sculpted on ancient sarcophagi, and they have been found among some sets of grave goods (cf. Delatte: 1913). Such finds can suggest that souls were believed to spend their time making music in the abode of the blest (the same belief about music as a part of a paradisaical Other World is attested for the first time by Pindar, fr. 129. 6–7 Maehler). It is likely that, when Orpheus hands his lyre over to a young man at the entrance of Hades' kingdom, as it is depicted on an Apulian calyx krater mentioned above (cf. our note 9), it was not for the lyre to be a guide for the young man, but for the young man to participate in the otherworldly feast.

¹⁶ Cf. Bernabé (2008: 21–24).

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