



"Orphic" gold leaf, originally folded in four, discovered at the necropolis of Hipponion (today Vibo Valentia), in a tomb containing the skeleton of a woman that goes back to the 5th Century B.C.; the gold leaf is now in the National Archeological Museum in Vibo Valentia.

# Hades

Karen Haid's *Calabria: the other Italy*, 2015 (Mary Jean finished reading aloud on 27 July 2019): "...the historical and artistic gem on display in Vibo is a tiny sheet of gold that outlines instructions on how to avoid Hades in the afterworld. The *laminetta orfica* (Orphean lamina) is exhibited in the archeological museum attractively housed in the castle."

Norman Douglas' *Old Calabria*, 1915 (Mary Jean finished reading aloud on 10 August 2019) Very much *à la* Nietzsche, as in Chapter 38 – The Sage of Croton [= Pythagoras]: "...the inhabitants [of flourishing Croton] had become sufficiently civilized to appreciate the charm of being regenerated. We all do. Renunciation has always exercised an irresistible attraction for good society; it makes us feel so comfortable to be told we are going to hell – and Pythagoras was very eloquent on the subject of Tartarus as a punishment. The Crotonites discovered in repentance of sins a new and subtle form of pleasure; exactly as did the Florentines, when Savonarola appeared on the scene. ¶ ...And then – he permitted and even encouraged the emotional sex to participate in the mysteries; the same tactics that later on materially helped the triumph of Christianity over the more exclusive and rational cult of Mithra [Persian god: Manichean]... ¶ He enjoyed the specious and short-lived success that has attended, elsewhere, such efforts to cultivate the ego at the expense of its environment. ... ¶ ...the country had never attained a higher plane of intellectual curiosity than when Pythagoras made his appearance. ... It is much more gentlemanly (and so much easier) to talk bland balderdash about soul-migration than to calculate an eclipse of the moon or bother about the circulation of the blood [or the contagion of malaria]. ¶¶ ... the insanity of preferring deductions to facts which has degraded philosophy up to the days of Kant; mysticism, demon-worship and much else of pernicious mettle – they are all there, embryonically embedded in Pythagoras. ¶ ...We are at last shaking off the form of self-indulgence called charity; we realize that if mankind is to profit, sterner conceptions must prevail. The apotheosis of the god-favoured loafer is drawing to a close.

For some time now I keep coming back to the inscription on a gold foil found in an ancient tomb in modern Italy's Vibo Valentia, a city called Hipponian in the age of Magna Graecia (Hipponium in Roman times). It consists of instructions on what to do upon your arrival in the realm of Hades: Don't drink of the first water that appears, but pass on to the next, that of Mnemosyne, at which, asked by the guards why you are searching here, you must reply that you are the child of Earth and Heaven, and that you are burning of thirst and withering away. Then the guards, after consulting with Hades himself, will allow you to drink, whereupon you will go your sacred way in good company (that of others who have passed the test).

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Before turning to a close reading of the text, and especially before absorbing the whole of it into historical considerations, you might first take careful stock of the cross-roads, the crises, the choices urged upon us as latter-day readers of the inscription...

Crucial above all is that you remember – not that you learn something more (as Plato, Aristotle and other pagans seem to suggest) or that you profess faith in something (as St. Paul insists). To remember is to keep track of things as they happen, and that includes things that have happened: to keep together, to recollect. The opposite is to forget items on the track, ultimately to forget the track itself.

Remember what, more exactly? Taking care of an estate, a household or a city, playing a complicated game or musical piece you must remember things done and to be done, things promised and things to be promised, an array of givens harboring an array of possibilities. What's needed is a presence of mind coincident with a presence of circumstance. This kind of memory, mindfulness, contrasts with the familiar effort to recall dates and names, and also

with involuntary memory of long-ago events. Opposed to recollection is distraction, an absence of mind, the undoing of life itself.

Then, too, you must acknowledge your double origin — not *one* origin, as many religions and even some philosophers tell us. But two: the earth on which you walk and the heaven under which you work. Earth and Heaven: these are clearly the spatial boundaries of your being. On ever-volatile Earth are the things you must cultivate or avoid, fabricate or maintain — realms of possibility you must learn to govern or to alter: the cows to be milked and the sewers to be cleaned. And from the ever-stable Heaven descend the things over which you have no direct control: day and night, summer and winter, rain and drought, wind and calm.

You are *of* the Earth you trod: evident in your bodily being subject to abuse and disease — recurring pain and occasional delight. You are also *of* the Heaven overhead: evident in your burning desire for the life of the mind, a presence of mind in dealing with earthly givens and earthly possibilities, heavenly givens and heavenly possibilities in dealing with life as a whole.

Or. . . *must* you acknowledge these origins? Not at all! The most common refusal consists in affirming only the earthly origin: each is born, lives a while in pain and pleasure, and vanishes. Another refusal consists in giving up on earthly being: you may wish to destroy the body, leaving nothing; or, conceivably, opt for a purely heavenly life of the mind and avoid attending to the body. . . . In either case you will be sent back to the other water for refreshment, which allows you simply to forget your origins.

You acknowledge your double origin by declaring your burning thirst and your withering-away. Thirst for this water of memory allows you to acknowledge your double origin as well: after all, you have been told in advance what you are to say, and perhaps the water you then drink allows you to understand, actually remember, what you are otherwise only reciting.

A burning thirst, the recognition that you are losing out, that you *need* to drink properly: opposite to this recognition is smugness, complacency, perhaps arrogance — even saintliness or absolute sagacity.

And the reward for passing these various tests? Good company, your read very simply! Not a life in heaven, as some doctrines hold, and not extinction, emptiness, *nirvana*, as other doctrines seem to say. Only like-minded people to accompany you on your sacred way.

But then the inscription was placed on a corpse buried in the earth, and it reads as an instructional sheet advising on behavior after death. What can “traveling with good company” mean under these circumstances?

The sixteen lines of the inscription speak to one entombed as though living — and now to us, apparently living, as dying. They talk about life and death, and about the stakes in these two. As though living and dying might be the same, or at least raise the same question — if only we can remember it. So that we can read the words in either way: as limning either the recurring stakes of life (living well) or the final stakes of death (dying well); or perhaps as speaking to us both in our earthly, withering being and in our heavenly, stable being.

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To understand the words of the inscription you may seek help by recalling various stories circulating at the time — as reported by scholars who have found these stories in ancient and subsequent literature. Apparently many people in those days, following either Orpheus or Pythagoras, believed that souls migrated from one animal body to another in a restless and painful cycle of birth and death, i.e. rebirth and redeath — and that, if only you yourself behave properly, you can escape into rest and pleasure. Although the inscription says nothing either of soul-migration or of escaping

Hades, you may still interpret the talk of two waters as marking the difference between entrapment and liberation, and the final talk of good company as signaling a special place of residence — not so much extra-terrestrial as sub-terrestrial.

Wrapping original texts within such explanatory stories allows you to observe them as an ethnologist does: as parading belief-systems rather than as mapping your own engagements. Still, you might make something of these wider-ranging accounts. Down in the dumps, you do have the option to forget what you have to do and have to suffer: you seek relief in watching more newscasts or adventure movies, in reading junk novels or scandal sheets, in listening in on mindless chatter of neighbors or relatives, in eating yet another bag of chips or candies, of drinking yet another martini or hot chocolate. Or, more disposed to action, you may take up one project after another and seek relief in the anticipation of accomplishment, even recognition. The relief these things provide is, as we learn, essentially short-lived, and we have to start all over again, fall ever again into the dumps. Life can be a never-ending cycle of aspiration and frustration, hope and despair, expectancy and disappointment, gnawing pain and fleeting pleasure. Is there no liberation? Well, there's death: that seems to put an end to the cycle. But not at all, the story goes: finally dying, you may just find that the cycle starts all over again! What a relief, then, to believe, on the contrary, that you have only one shot: born, live for a while, and vanish. But then, the story goes, you simply drink at the first, the most easily accessible fount, where there are no guardians and no further questions — and the cycle goes on.

But, of course, the question is whether or how you might extend credence to these stories.

Meanwhile, the original speaks of drinking at the fount farther on, that of the goddess Mnemosyne. Appropriately, she is one of the old gods, a Titaness, daughter of Earth and Heaven (recall that

the original speaks of you and me as children of that same pairing). She creates (or at least protects) our ability to remember, to recall, to keep things together — to gather up into coherent wholes things already happened, and things therefore ineluctable, while also engaging us in them, whereby we have a future as well. She delegates the specifics of this ability variously to her nine daughters, opening for us the possibilities of story-telling, the possibilities of heroic, comic and tragic portrayals, the possibilities of hymns to our provenance and poems of our love, the possibilities of dances and melodies, the possibilities of accounting for the marvels of the stars and, finally, the possibilities of that special speech necessary for gathering and directing people in the governance of earthly domains.

Does drinking at the fount of Mnemosyne allow (or even mean) drinking at the fount of the Muses — more exactly, imbibing stories, poems, stage-plays, novels (epics), great speeches and the like? But these more obviously serve as distractions — as opiates of the masses. What do you do when bored or down in the mouth? Nowadays: you turn on the TV, check your email, listen to music from your smartphone, go dancing, read a magazine or a book — all possibilities of getting out of yourself, into something other than yourself, forgetting the burdens otherwise weighing on you.

Instead of drinking as imbibing, how about drinking as performing — performing the stories, the poems, the plays, the music, the dance, the speeches? As against trying to live off them, absorbing them from the sidelines (perhaps with beer and popcorn as auxiliaries). Indeed, just as Mnemosyne needed something more (Zeus) to procreate her nine children, so each of her progeny needs something more to generate legitimate offspring. And surely you or I have some role in the paternity — in determining whether a score, a script, a choreography is performed well. And works have the peculiar power of inviting participation even when others appear to be the performers. A concert, a movie, a play, a ballet, a

grand speech — each can fall flat, serve at most as a distraction along the path of oblivion (and even be refashioned by its progenitor to serve precisely this purpose). So too the story on our inscription, as also the wider-ranging stories readers often call upon for explanations of the original (e.g., stories from Hesiod, and of course all the stories told by commentators to explain the event).

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Before turning directly to the inscription, a few words about the temporal bearings of the story: the talk of past and future, of life before and after entombment, of origins and destinies...

Just as we can mean by “time before” either “just now” (meaning what’s now established as fully present) or “a long way back” (meaning no longer present but dateable backwards in thought), so we can mean by “time after” either “from now on” (meaning a continuing present) or “way down the road” (meaning not present but dateable forwards in thought). In each of the four instances there’s a presence to which the before or after refers. Before I became a teacher and after I became a teacher refer to my being in fact a teacher. Everything depends on that reference point *and* on whether we are pondering it from the outside or the inside. From the outside, i.e. when we are simply examining what others are up to, the before and the after necessarily take dateable form. From the inside, as when I consider the before and after of a great moment, i.e. a moment when I finally got it right, the after takes the form of “from now on” (a henceforth) and the before takes the form of a “just now” (a wherefrom). And since the henceforth consists precisely in recovering, re-assessing, resuming the wherefrom, temporality is here circular. The other is linear, an incessant flight.

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Now finally to the original itself, or rather to a photograph of the foil on display at the National Museum in today’s Vibo Valentia. It measures, variably, about 3 cm high and 6 cm wide — comparable to the measurements of the reproduction here:



Archeologists have deciphered and transcribed it for us:

1. ΜΝΑΜΟΣΥΝΑΣΤΟΔΕΕΡΙΟΝΕΠΕΙΑΜΜΕΛΛΕΙΣΙΘΑΝΕΣΘΑΙ
2. ΕΙΣΑΙΔΑΟΔΟΜΟΣΕΥΕΡΕΑΣΕΣΤΕΠΙΔΕΙΑΚΡΕΝΑ
3. ΠΑΡΔΑΥΤΑΝΕΣΤΑΚΥΑΛΕΥΚΑΚΥΠΑΡΙΣΟΣ
4. ΕΝΘΑΚΑΤΕΡΧΟΜΕΝΑΙΨΥΚΑΙΝΕΚΥΟΝΨΥΧΟΝΤΑΙ
5. ΤΑΥΤΑΣΤΑΣΚΡΑΝΑΣΜΕΔΕΣΧΕΔΟΝΕΝΓΥΘΕΝΕΛΘΕΙΣ
6. ΠΡΟΣΘΕΝΔΕΗΕΥΡΕΣΕΙΣΤΑΣΜΝΑΜΟΣΥΝΑΣΑΠΟΛΙΜΝΑΣ
7. ΨΥΧΡΟΝΥΔΟΡΠΠΟΡΕΟΝΦΥΛΑΚΕΣΔΕΕΠΥΠΕΡΘΕΝΕΑΣΙ
8. ΤΟΙΔΕΣΕΕΙΡΕΣΟΝΤΑΙΕΝΦΡΑΣΙΠΕΥΚΑΛΙΜΑΙΣΙ
9. ΟΤΙΔΕΕΞΕΡΕΕΙΣΑΙΔΟΣΣΚΟΤΟΣΟΡΟΕΕΝΤΟΣ
10. ΕΙΠΟΝΓΕΣΠΑΙΚΑΙΟΡΑΝΟΑΣΤΕΡΟΕΝΤΟΣ
11. ΔΙΨΑΙΔΕΜΕΑΥΟΣΚΑΙΑΠΟΛΛΥΜΑΙΑΛΛΑΔΟΤΟ
12. ΨΥΧΡΟΝΥΔΟΡΠΠΙΕΝΑΙΤΕΣΜΝΕΜΟΣΥΝΕΣΑΠΟΛΙΜ
13. ΚΑΙΔΕΤΟΙΕΛΕΟΣΙΝΙΥΠΙΟΧΘΟΝΙΟΙΒΑΣΙΛΕΙ
14. ΚΑΙΔΕΤΟΙΔΟΣΟΣΙΠΠΙΕΝΤΑΣΜΝΑΜΟΣΥΝΑΣΑΠΟΛΙΜΝΑΣ
15. ΚΑΙΔΕΚΑΙΣΥΠΠΙΟΝΗΟΔΟΝΕΡΧΕΑΗΑΝΤΕΚΑΙΑΛΛΟΙ
16. ΜΥΣΤΑΙΚΑΙΒΑΧΧΟΙΗΙΕΡΑΝΣΤΕΙΧΟΣΙΚΛΕΙΝΟΙ

Which itself provides only a starting point for obtaining a reading in classical Greek, from which to procure a translation into a modern language. The massive detective work over the last decades I find fascinating in its detail, only some of which I repeat here (I’ll append some references later)...

For one thing, the engraver did not distinguish between the short and long vowels (E stands for both ε and η, O for both ο and ω). For another, there are no diacritical marks, except that the engraver (sometimes!) marks aspirants with H. Then, too, while the dominant dialect is Doric, the text occasionally shifts into Ionic (e.g. ΤΑΣ ΜΝΑΜΟΣΥΝΑΣ in verse 6 and ΤΕΣ ΜΝΕΜΟΣΥΝΕΣ in verse 12). Some words appear in abbreviated form (e.g., ΔΕΙΑ for ΔΕΕΙΑ in verse 2). And while 14 of the verses appear in hexameter, verses 2 and 14 do not — so that decisions necessary for extracting a clean Greek text cannot entirely rely on clues supplied by the necessities of prosody.

Add to these difficulties the distortions left by the multiple foldings of the foil, conspicuous already in the reproduction, and even sloppiness on the part of the engraver: e.g., in verse 4, to obtain ΨΥΚΑΙ, he first inscribed ΨΧΚΑΙ and then corrected it.

For all the material difficulties, it seems that only two verses (the first and tenth) pose any serious semantic challenge to the comprehension of the whole, and only the first of these remains definitely unresolvable. Here is a transcription of the entirety, in lower-case and with words duly separated in a modern manner:

1 μναμοσυνας τοδε εριον επει αμ μελλεισι θανεσθαι  
 2 εις αιδαο δομος ευερεας εστ επι δεξια κρενα  
 3 παρ δ αυταν εστακυα λευκα κυπαρισσος  
 4 ενθα κατερχομεναι ψυχαι νεκρον ψυχονται  
 5 ταυτας τας κρανας μεδε σχεδον ενγυθεν ελθεις  
 6 προσθεν δε ευρεσεις τας μναμοσυνας απο λιμνας  
 7 ψυχρον υδωρ προρεον φυλακες δε επυπερθεν εασι  
 8 οι δε σε ειρεσονται εν φρασι πευκαλιμιασι  
 9 οτι δε εξερεεις αιδος σκοτος ο ροεεντος  
 10 ειπον γεσ παι ειμ και ορανο αστεροεντος  
 11 διψαι δ εμ αυος και απολλυμαι αλλα δοτ οκα  
 12 ψυχρον υδωρ πιεναι τες μνεμοσυνες απο λιμνες  
 13 και δε τοι ερεοσιν υποχθονιοι βασιλει  
 14 και δε τοι δοσοσι πιεν τας μναμοσυνας απο λιμνας  
 15 και δε τοι συ πιον οδον ερχεα αν τε και αλλοι  
 16 μυσται και βαχχοι ιεραν στειχοσι κλεινοι

From this bare-bones version Greek scholars can devise a fleshed-out reading with punctuation and some corrections:

1 Μναμοσύνας τόδε ἱερὸν ἐπεὶ ἂν μέλλησι θανείσται·  
 2 εἰς Ἄϊδαο δόμους εὐήρεας· ἔστ' ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ κρήνα,  
 3 παρ δ' αὐτὰν ἔστακυὰ λευκὰ κυπάρισσος·  
 4 ἔνθα κατερχόμεναι ψυχὰὶ νεκύων ψύχονται  
 5 ταύτας τὰς κράνας μηδὲ σχεδὸν ἐγγύθεν ἔλθεις·  
 6 πρόσθεν δὲ εὐρήσεις τὰς Μναμοσύνας ἀπὸ λίμνας  
 7 ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ προρέον· φύλακες δὲ ἐπύπερθεν ἔασι,  
 8 οἱ δέ σε εἰρήσονται ἐν φρασὶ πευκαλίμιασι  
 9 ὅτι δὴ ἐξερέεις Ἄϊδος σκότους ὀλοέεντος [for ορφνοεντος?]  
 10 εἶπον: ὕός Βαρέας καὶ Οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος,  
 11 δίψαι δ' εἰμ' αὐῶος καὶ ἀπόλλυμαι· ἀλλὰ δοτ' ὦκα  
 12 ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ π[ρο]ρέον τὰς Μνημοσύνης ἀπὸ λίμνης  
 13 καὶ δὴ τοι ἐρέουσιν ὑπο χθονίῳ βασιλείῳ  
 14 καὶ δὴ τοι δώσουσι πιεῖν τὰς Μναμοσύνας λίμνας·  
 15 καὶ δὴ καὶ σὺχνὸν ὁδὸν ἔρχεαι ἂν τε καὶ ἄλλοι  
 16 μύσται καὶ βάρχοι ἱερὰν στείχουσι κλεινοί.

Before noting some of the deviations this transcription introduces, let us finally consider an English translation:

1 This is the [sacred work] of Memory. When you are about to die  
 2 you will go to the well-built halls of Hades; a spring is on the right,  
 3 and standing by it a glowing-white cypress tree;  
 4 there the descending souls of the dead refresh themselves.  
 5 Do not go near to this spring at all.  
 6 Further along you will find, from the lake of Memory,  
 7 refreshing water flowing forth. But guardians are nearby.  
 8 They will ask you, with sharp minds,  
 9 why you are seeking in the shadowy gloom of Hades.  
 10 Say: "I am the child of Earth and starry Heaven;  
 11 I am parched with thirst and withering; but give me quickly  
 12 refreshing water to drink from the lake of Memory."  
 13 And then they will speak to the underground ruler,  
 14 and then they will give you to drink from the lake of Memory,  
 15 and you too, having drunk, will go along the sacred road that the  
 16 other gloried initiates and bacchics travel.

One difference immediately protrudes: the distinction between common nouns and proper names. In modern languages we distinguish the latter by capitalization. When capitalized, memory, earth and heaven (the skies, the heavens, we want to say in routine talk) appear as singular items in the roster of the universe — even as gods. Nothing wrong with that, but it narrows down what we first read on the gold foil, constricts what our ear in fact first catches in the flow of talk, which itself does not individuate the words, let alone distinguish proper names from common nouns.

But if “Memory” is taken as the proper name of the goddess, the opening verse hardly has any sense at all. Two expert scholars have carefully reasoned out an alternative reading for the whole line as one way of making sense of it (not as a proven emendation):

Μνημόσυνον τόδ' ἄειρον, ἐπὶν μέλλης θανέεσθαι.  
This reminder take up, whenever you are about to die.

Which also reminds us of the peculiar, universally agreed-upon address in the remainder of the first verse: a second-person injunction to attend *now* to the matters subsequently recounted — not long before, nor sometime after you die, but as you are on the verge of dying. Obedience to which, you might think, would be a once-in-a-lifetime affair. But both our Ancient Pagan and our Medieval Christian traditions point to our mortality as distinctively human, to our “being about to die” as essential to the self-knowing that distinguishes us from other living beings. Recalling this disposition, we might think of the gold foil as something to be kept nearby throughout life — as an elaborate *memento mori*.

And now down to the “well-built halls of Hades”: to the region below the soil (ὑπο χθονίωι) where this god reigns (verse 13): he’s the brother of Zeus and Poseidon (reigning over the sky and the sea) as well as Demeter, Hera and Hestia (reigning over harvesting, motherhood and householdery), all descendants of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, themselves born of Gaia and Ouranos.

Immediately under the surface is the region from which grow the grain for our bread and the grapes for our wine, in cycles of generation and decay. Of the six domains, Hades is the most mysterious, the forever-dark source of life and destination of death — so that one speculative etymology of the “hades” is “what’s not seen” — in contrast to what’s above on earth, where we normally live with seas, lakes and rain, and under sun, moon and stars.

The guardians of the water flowing from the lake of Memory will quiz you on *why* you are searching here in the gloom and dark — not, as you might have guessed, *what* you seek. The question supposes that you have in fact chosen to seek here, in the dark, rather than above, in the light.

There are in fact two kinds of looking, searching, “finding out”: in the light and in the dark. Looking in the light, you will accept as seen (understood) only what you can see before you. However, anything you see before you appears as a result. So that, no matter how far you proceed in your researches, you will discover only a linear sequence, a genealogy without end: there will always be both a preceding and a succeeding point to be discovered beyond where you happen to be. You are essentially out of it.

What, though, can it mean to look in the dark? You cannot see anything in front of you, so it’s not a question of understanding things you run up against: still, you are plunged into them, and the question is rather how to understand yourself in this condition. It can happen, and it does happen: extremely hazardous situations, sudden falling-in-love, life-threatening disease, being lost in the woods, losing someone with whom your life has taken its shape, perhaps sudden blindness itself — any such occasion might call into question your ability to discern what’s around you. But not necessarily: if one does, it will only be because it adumbrates a final plunge, that of death itself, or rather of *your* death. Facing your mortality, you “see” yourself — yourself not as something

toward which you are moving but yourself as moving back, as being drawn back. You may counteract this movement by rushing forward, running away — and you may even succeed for a while. Or you may let yourself back into your origin and devote yourself to your destiny: the movement of discovery is then essentially yours. What touches you in the dark is *your* origin, *your* destiny — *your* place to be.

Thus the required answer to the request that you account for your being where you are: you acknowledge yourself to be the *child* of Earth and Heaven. As a child rather than an adult, you still need your parents: you are burning of thirst for the water allowing you to recollect your being. For you now see that, without *this* water, without the recollection of your origins, you continue to wither away.

For decades after the foil was unearthed in 1969 the answer appeared in another form. Careful scholars at first detected in the engraving of the tenth verse the letters ΕΙΠΙΟΝ ΙΟΣ ΒΑΡΕΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΟΠΑΝΟ, a string easily translated as “Say: Son of Heavy and Heaven” — which requires that the common adjective “heavy” serve as a noun naming an origin (just as “Heaven” does), that we supply a verb (most suitably “I am”), and that we stretch “son” to signify “descendent” (the tomb is that of a young woman). This form of the “right answer” appears to offer a variation on the child-of-Earth-and-Heaven version found on foils excavated at Petelia (also in today’s Calabria), Pharsalos (in Thessaly) and Eleutherna (on Crete, where the question reads “Who are you? Whence are you?” and the answer reads *son* rather than *child* of Earth and Heaven).

For all I know, scholars may still dispute whether the original reads “heavy” or “earth” as the first of the two origins an initiate must acknowledge. Either way, the difference reflects a tension running through our traditions: How are we to understand our double nature as both corporeal and intellectual, material and

spiritual, earthly and heavenly, downward-moving and upward-moving, tempted and graced? On the reading of “Heavy” scholars immediately recall the literature of the time that speaks of the body as “the tomb of the soul,” a weight pulling down against the upward pull of the soul, of earth in general as heavy and hard (whereas water is heavy but pliable, and both air and fire are light and rising). This reading, too, offers a pagan parallel to the struggle in Christianity on the question whether our bodily condition, intertwined with the earth, is inherently evil (as the Cathars insisted) or only bedeviled by misunderstanding of our spiritual destiny.

And, on the other reading, our double origination from earth and heaven? Earth is here *Gaia* — Mother Earth, a source to be revered, not overcome, let alone abandoned. Although we also had a mother from whose fleshy, earthly womb we issued, long before we ever even heard of this issue (let alone learned to acknowledge Her as our immediate origin), Mater Gaia continues, day by day, to support us, right down to our dying moment, when we, whatever is left of us, re-enter Her. The bountiful Earth, you read in Homer: the grain-bearing soil, the fish-filled seas, bird-carrying air, the cooking and warming fire . . . Yet Gaia needs the sun and the rain to become fecund, and supplies herself with the necessary mate. Heaven is here *Ouranos* — Father Sky, a source likewise to be revered, our kinship with whom parallels our own commitment to *work* the soil, the waters, the fires sustaining us over and over again, each day and each year, in cycles. Such work requires craft, knowledge, the ability to shape and reshape the incessant growth and variability of earth, air, water and fire — fixed responses (soon called noetics, much later called concepts) allowing us to dance with the wiles of the moment (soon called aesthetics, much later called percepts), a dance also called that of sensation and intellection. The feminine needs, most originally even generates and then castrates the masculine — in startling contrast to the male-

favoring account further to the south, perhaps even to the later accounts within the Greek tradition itself. Not that we ourselves, our ancestors, had from the start the necessary craft with which to dance the dance: it was the Titan Prometheus, another descendent of Gaia, who, in rebellion against the Olympian Zeus, allowed us to dance the dance of Mother Earth's daily and yearly progeny — who taught us the crafts and gave us the hope and fore-thought to dance effectively, even to forget for a while our pending doom.

On this second reading of the right answer, our basic task is to learn to dwell on earth and under heaven — in the famous image in Plato's *Republic*, to climb up from underground onto the earth and into the sunshine; or, in the less famous image in his *Phaedo*, to learn that we mostly wander through valley fogs and, like fish in the sea, believe only what we see through and under water and fail understand the reports of those who have climbed up onto mountain tops, out of the fog and into sunny vistas.

As a *child* now acknowledging your parentage in Gaia and Ouranos (subsequently castrated, you might remember), you also have many distinguished siblings, uncles and aunts — both of the earthly and heavenly sort. You are on intimate terms with the Titans (including Mnemosyne, Prometheus...) as well as with the Olympians (Hestia, Demeter and Hera, Hades, Poseidon and Zeus). Your feet finally on the ground and your head finally exposed to the sun, you walk and dwell on a sacred way.

As a *child* the first time, you were already credulous: you not only believed what you heard, you took part in any play, danced any dance designed for you — either did so immediately, or just slept, cried, or threw tantrums. You were out of yourself, ecstatic. Grown-ups rightly noticed and likely told you that you were not doing things correctly, or that you were being fooled. And you did eventually learn to stand back, to assess matters and question what you heard — to be yourself, a separate self, no longer absorbed in

the immediacy of childhood, no longer enjoying the immediate contact with circumstances. You became a grown-up, moved on your own, more or less in conflict with other grown-ups, each seeking his or her satisfaction on the edge of the public sphere otherwise all-absorbing.

Now, though, you are about to die, about to lose it all — yourself along with that public sphere, as well as what you have claimed to be your own in that sphere. Can you become a child again, be part rather than apart, in effect to have and to hold, or rather *be* had and *be* held, by the whole — as at the beginning?

Well . . . perhaps you have never entirely lost your childhood after all — certainly not if you have ever found yourself completely absorbed in effective handling of circumstances and honest dealings with others (to be carefully and arduously distinguished from its look-alike: absorption in the local norms and expectations defining your public sphere). Perhaps as a long-distance runner. Perhaps as a skilled fighter-pilot. Perhaps just once as you unexpectedly tended to another in dire emergency. Perhaps simply when meeting a stranger. Perhaps even as a writer — even as a reader, or a listener caught out by one who, you found, finally spoke from the matter itself and therefore to you, or rather with you. For then “being yourself” no longer means being at the edge seeking satisfaction, but being at the center, sharing a whole, once again being a part — being the same self as the self of the circumstance itself, being at one in the core from which and back into which every genuine deed and every genuine word flows, in one simple and shared and enduring orgasm: for the moment, for that while.

Recovering our childhood requires us to drink the fresh water flowing from the lake of Mnemosyne, to recollect our own life in its dynamic sameness from the moment of birth to the moment of death — rather than simply draw upon this or that part of it and find our self badly bothered by some of the parts and having to

repress them. Such self-knowledge is the condition for any genuine heeding or knowing of circumstances, for any genuine respecting or loving of others, any genuine writing, reading, speaking, listening to our divine origin and divine destiny. For without such drinking, such self-knowing, such participation in the events talked about, you hover at the edge, demand satisfaction of your own ego and, missing your own selfhood (sameness) can recognize no sameness in your circumstance and meld with no sameness of any other of your own kind: your knowledge is not yours but that of others, more or less lamely regurgitated; your respect of others is an irksome duty or a flight back into the public sphere; your talk of the divine a vain hope or a mere critique of some pie in the sky.

The great boon of such recovery is that you are now nevermore alone. For, as you go your way, others fall in stride with you, namely those likewise brought into the full fold, those fully in the dance (ἄλλοι μύσται καὶ βάκχοι) These will be long dead because only as dead no longer having to prove themselves — and in the public sphere, if recalled at all, known only by name, where they will be proclaimed “mystics” or even “drunkards”: as though the knowledge and obligations and discourses surfacing in the public sphere were first-hand and water-tight rather than stale left-overs. (The καί, often translated as “and,” often signals a specification, like our Latin/English *i.e.* or German *beziehungsweise* or French *voire*: a “mystic” *is* as a follower of Dionysus.).

\* \* \* \* \*

Several more words in those sixteen verses deserve careful attention — all the more because the Instruction (or *memento mori*) is not only brief but materially difficult to decipher. However, any significant text, to be read well, must be read as a call to respond, an invitation to embark on a shared voyage — not, as an outsider is doomed to believe, as a pretense to impart information or to formulate an opinion or to express an emotion.

I shall end with some indications of the help I received when puzzling over these verses:

- 1 This reminder take up, whenever you are about to die.
- 2 You will go to the well-built house of Hades; a spring is on the right,
- 3 and standing by it a glowing-white cypress tree;
- 4 there the descending souls of the dead refresh themselves.
- 5 Do not go near this spring at all.
- 6 Further along you will find, from the lake of Memory,
- 7 refreshing water flowing forth. But guardians are nearby.
- 8 They will ask you, with sharp minds,
- 9 why you are seeking in the shadowy gloom of Hades.
- 10 Say: “I am the child of Earth and starry Heaven;
- 11 I am parched with thirst and withering; but give me quickly
- 12 refreshing water to drink from the lake of Memory.”
- 13 And then they will speak to the underground ruler,
- 14 and then they will give you to drink from the lake of Memory,
- 15 and you too, having drunk, will go along the sacred road that the
- 16 other gloried initiates and bacchics travel.

On the Internet I found several sites simply reciting the verses, mostly in Italian translation. I was first puzzled by the common rendering of the crucial password: “I’m the son of Greve (Heavy) and starry Ouranos (Heaven, or Sky).” An article by Giulia Sacco in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, vol. 137 (2001), pp. 27-33, seems to have set the reading right: “Της παυς εἶμι Sul v. 10 della laminetta Hipponion.” The article is also available on line through JSTOR.

Then, wondering about the opening line, I came across an article that slowly and carefully works through various proposed emendations and comes up with the plausible reading I have adopted: “On the Text of the Hipponium Tablet,” by Sergio Giannobile and D. R. Jordan in *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, vol. 48 (2008), pp. 287–294. It’s also available on line:

<https://grbs.library.duke.edu/article/viewFile/941/1021>

(Inadvertently, no doubt, the article itself illustrates the material

problems of transcription. The authors' notes 2 and 3 on their version of the text are garbled, and some text is missing: evidently errors in both typesetting and proofreading.)

Both these articles review the problems of transcription and translation arising in all sixteen verses. They appear to be modifying the original work of Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli, *Le lamine d'oro orfiche* (first edition 1993, slightly amended and extended edition by Adelphi in 2001). This work reviews all the Orphic gold foils of Magna Graecia discovered by that time, none of which is as complete as the one now in Vibo Valentia. The variations on the "reward" I find telling: according to the one labeled "II B 2. Thurii," dating perhaps a century after the one we have been considering, the reward consists of (1) no longer suffering, (2) becoming a god, and (3) wandering the sacred meadows and woods of Persephone. Mortals have difficulty being satisfied with getting it right at the time and place of their own lives and not resting their hopes on an entirely different time and place.

Pugliese Carratelli (he's always referred to by both middle and last name) is a thinker as well as an archaeologist. On the Internet I found an engaging chapter from his book *Tra Cadmo e Orfeo*, 1990: <http://www.camillolentini.it/2019/06/23/mnemosyne-e-limmortalita/> where he works out the interpretation of the password "Son of Heavy and Heaven," drawing extensively on passages from Plato that, contrary to the images of the Cave and the Fog, suggest revilement of the body and liberation from the earth.

One major task of scholars assessing these gold foils is to relate the inscribed Greek to the Greek in other, more amply conserved texts. In search of a supposed model which may have served as the original of several of the very-similar foils, Carles Garriga looks to the Homeric corpus: "Memoria scritta su lamine d'oro" in *LEXIS – Poetica, retorica e comunicazione nella tradizione classica*, vol. 27 (2009), pp. 457-473. It's available on line:

[http://www.lexisonline.eu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Lexis27\\_Garriga\\_memoria.pdf](http://www.lexisonline.eu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Lexis27_Garriga_memoria.pdf)

Puzzled by the mention of the "glowing-white cypress tree" (λευκὰ κυπάρισσος), I searched for and found a somewhat helpful article by Radcliff G. Edmunds:

[https://repository.brynmawr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1095&context=classics\\_pubs](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1095&context=classics_pubs)

(This overview of the question is also published as part of a book: *Light and Darkness in Ancient Greek Myth and Religion*, 2010, pp. 221-234.) The author calls attention to the fact that it's only the "wrong" way that's clearly marked in the dark. What to make of this he's not sure; nor am I. It does occur to me, though, that the difference between the two founts is that this one (the one with a neon sign, so to speak) does not call its numerous drinkers into question — does not require that they produce any account of their origin and destiny.

At about the same time another Crotonite, Alkmaion, is said to have written that we ourselves differ from all other beings in that we not only run up against things (αἰσθάνεται) but also have to put them together (ξυνίησι) — and are undone (ἀπόλλυσθαι) when not able to tie the beginning of things to their end (τὴν ἀρχὴν τῷ τέλει προσάψαι). You can illustrate these dictums by looking to any chore, any effort to know or do something fully — and any effort to listen or read carefully. How else might we, in the dark, do this together-putting of what we see/hear/read, this together-tying of origins to destinies, if not under the auspices of Mnemosyne's daughters?

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