

HEROIC JOURNEYS

MALCOLM SCHOFIELD



CLASSICAL ASSOCIATION
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Cover illustration by Neil Barrett, from a black-figure cup by Exekias showing the god Dionysus sailing triumphant in his ship

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Printed in Great Britain
By Remous Ltd.
Sherborne
DT9 5EP

Heroic journeys

Malcolm Schofield

I

Having read or listened to a great number of CA Presidential Addresses in my time, I think I know how to begin.¹ I must start by apologizing for not being the Archbishop of Canterbury or T.S. Eliot or Lindsey Davis or Emma Kirkby (funny how often people mention Emma Kirkby). And I must share with you some of the sensations I am harbouring right now – which resemble those I had twelve years ago, the last time I was a President (of my Cambridge college), and had been asked to preach the sermon at the Commemoration of Benefactors. Then there was an acute sense of moral and intellectual exposure in front of friends and colleagues who knew me pretty well, but were now bound to take a fresh and clear-eyed new look, as I for my part attempted something rather terrifying I'd never done before and would never do again. Still, on this occasion I hope cheerfulness will break in before too long. And like not a few predecessors I'll try and get myself going with a spot of autobiography.

The first Classics book I ever read must I think have been Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes*, probably when I was around twelve or thirteen. It was a small brown cloth edition, sitting a bit incongruously among my father's maths textbooks and bible reading aids in the dining room. My father didn't have much of a classical background himself. Whereas my mother had done Latin at school, and sometimes expressed regret that she'd read English rather than Latin at university (Manchester in her case), his knowledge of it had been limited to what he'd had to get up for 'little go' (Cambridge's own special matriculation exam), in order to take up a mathematics scholarship at St John's. What he did have a taste for (at least in his armchair) was heroes and adventures. When we were little he would sometimes read or invent stories for my brother and me, as we sat either side of him on the sofa, relentlessly demanding more until he dozed off mid-sentence. Not surprisingly there was plenty of John Buchan and Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson in the house, and books on the great British mountaineering expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s.

¹ This Presidential Address was delivered on Saturday 14 April 2007 in the University of Birmingham.

Kingsley's heroes are in a way an odd bunch. You might expect from his title the likes of Heracles and Hector and Achilles, Ajax and Odysseus, perhaps Antigone and Penthesileia – and others too. In fact he tells the stories of just three: Perseus, Jason, and Theseus. He calls them fairy tales (they were originally written for his own children). They share some common features of the genre. All these protagonists undertake apparently impossible challenges, on quests involving encounters with monsters and entanglement with magic or the uncanny. 'Where', exclaims Theseus at one point, 'can I find strange adventures, robbers, and monsters, and the children of evil, the enemies of men?' This is Greek myth as viewed from the perspective of the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen, although the cadences of the prose are often those of the King James Bible. For me it did the trick, caught my imagination. It must have been very soon afterwards that I acquired the newly published Penguin of Robert Graves' *Greek Myths*, and devoured both volumes from cover to cover, white goddess and all.

I found when I looked at *The Heroes* for the first time in fifty years or more the other day that the story I remembered the book for – Jason and the Argonauts – was indeed the centrepiece of the volume, most compelling and much the longest of the three narratives. I imagine Kingsley would have preferred the *Odyssey* to the *Iliad*. There is a lot of the folk tale hero about the *Odyssey*'s Odysseus, as was pointed out long ago by Rhys Carpenter, and more recently by Denys Page (and by the way it was Denys Page who in his inimitable husk of a voice addressed the first meeting of the St John's College Classical Society I ever attended, presided over by the august figure of the twenty year old Anthony Bowen, on 'Words in Homer that nobody understands', a title which told me immediately and decisively that I was now not at school but at university).² More recently still the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* published a fine article by Richard Rutherford on 'The philosophy of the *Odyssey*', which charts Odysseus's progress not just from his escapes from monsters and magicians to homecoming in Ithaca, but from 'dashing buccaneer' to 'brooding, deep-thinking planner and almost Stoic moralist'; an Odysseus who still enjoys lying through his teeth, but has it all much more under control, and eventually achieves

² John Henderson was wondering on Thursday evening in the discussion following his plenary session lecture at the Conference what Dodds's voice sounded like. I never heard Dodds, but Denys Page's by the 1960s was an extraordinary instrument, people said because of surgery to his larynx.

a fierce but not unambiguously admirable moral authority.³

Together with Philip Hooker I was lucky enough to represent the CA – as one of the funders of the project – at the launch a month ago of *Return from Troy*, sequel to *War at Troy*, which has now sold 1,500 copies of its CD. Like its predecessor, *Return from Troy* retells an abbreviated Homer – this time the *Odyssey* – for children, within the context of development of speaking and listening skills in the primary curriculum, but with an economy and directness of language, a wit, and a spare emotional force that speaks to adults too. The storyteller Hugh Lupton, joint winner of last year’s CA Prize, gave us a riveting rendering of the last episode, in which Odysseus returns to his palace disguised as a beggar, and then plots and accomplishes his extravagant revenge, before being finally reunited with Penelope. Lupton’s performance conveyed with clarity and precision the dreadful authority in Odysseus to which Rutherford was trying to call attention. Not a fairy story, but a tale all too evocative of the Chechnya and Bosnia and Kosovo of our own times.

Despite Rutherford’s title ‘The philosophy of the *Odyssey*’, you may think this is all a long way from the philosophy I profess in the day job. But when in this talk we get into the home stretch, we’ll be looking at the strange heroic journey – culminating in encounters with the Homeric heroes themselves – which Plato recounts in the myth of Er at the end of his *Republic*, probably the greatest work of philosophy ever written. For the present let me remind you of how philosophy in its early days found it helpful to appropriate for its own purposes the motif of the strange journey undertaken by a heroic youthful protagonist, only to be confronted by a seemingly impossible challenge. The Presocratic philosopher Parmenides is often seen as the first real philosopher in Western thought, on account of his rigorous use of deductive argument deployed to establish the conditions of meaningful thought and discourse, and then to build startling metaphysical conclusions on those foundations. But he begins his hexameter poem not with logic, but with the tale of a magical chariot ride taken by a young man of exceptional powers (his power is esoteric knowledge, not uncommon physical prowess or Odyssean cunning)

³ See R. Rutherford, ‘The philosophy of the *Odyssey*’, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 106 (1986) 145-62. The other titles referred to: Rhys Carpenter, *Folk Tale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1946); D.L. Page, *Folktales in Homer’s Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973).

through the gates of the paths of Night and Day, to be received by a goddess.

Parmenides' narrative (or at any rate what we have of it) begins mid-journey. He (or the young man he describes) speaks first of the wise horses which carry him 'as far as my heart ever aspires', straining at the chariot, with its blazing, whistling axel. Then we hear of his escort – *kourai*, young women, subsequently identified as the *Heliades*, the daughters of the Sun: Parmenides is evidently to be a Phaethon who does not fall from the heaven. They reach a great barrier: 'the gates of the paths of Night and Day', with a lintel and stone threshold enclosing them, and blocked with great doors bolted by avenging Justice.⁴ Justice is beguiled by the maidens' gentle words and persuaded to unbar them: a great dramatic moment, as 'they swing in turn in their sockets the bronze-bound pivots made fast with dowels and rivets', and the daughters of the Sun keep chariot and horses driving straight through the gap.⁵

Parmenides is now greeted by the goddess. Somewhat like the Muses in Hesiod's *Theogony*, she promises to teach him both the 'unshaken heart of well-rounded truth' (as she describes it), and the untrustworthy opinions of mortals. But as so often in heroic narratives, it turns out that all in the end is down to the young man himself. Later fragments of the poem articulate the decision (*krisis*) he has to make. If *he* actively puts his reason to work, his reason alone ('judge by reason my much-contested proof', says the goddess), then if he makes the intellectual choice reason dictates he will find that truth consists in eternal changeless reality. Whereas if he does nothing but listen passively – 'out of habit born of much experience' – to what mortals say about the world of the senses, then he will be deceived. What divine revelation reveals is that the choice is ours – as it will do *mutatis mutandis* in the myth of Er.

'In that case', I hear you object, 'couldn't Parmenides have dispensed with all the paraphernalia of the magical heroic journey beyond the world of ordinary men, if that was the philosophical point he wanted to make? Couldn't he develop his *logos* without recourse to *muthos*?' I'm not sure that he could. Or at least, I don't think there is any non-

⁴ This sequence in the poem inspired Hermann Diels to add to his edition a very substantial learned appendix on Greek doors, locks and bolts: see *Parmenides Lehrgedicht* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1897).

⁵ For text, translation and commentary, see G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 [second edition]), Ch.VIII.

metaphorical way of making his point, nor any way of *arguing* us into it.⁶ After all, what he needed to be able to convey to us is the idea of a detached reflective space: a space in which you and I can somehow or other be transported out of our ordinary selves, and from the world we ordinarily inhabit, and ask ourselves the Socratic question: Shall I follow reason (and if I do, where will it take me?)? Or shall I rely on what others say to me, and what I'm used to thinking I see (and where will *that* take me?)⁷ A well-signposted route? Or a backward-turning path, reflecting the muddle-headed indecision of those who don't make a clear choice? It's hard to conceive of any better way of communicating any of this than by the image of a perilous heroic journey, with a more than merely human epistemological vantage point its objective and outcome. The metaphor of the 'gods' eye' view, or as the contemporary American philosopher Thomas Nagel rephrases it 'the view from nowhere' (notice '*nowhere*'),⁸ seems to be indispensable – and with good reason a hardy perennial in philosophical discussion. Parmenides' pioneering image of what it might be like to attain it is what first put the idea on the agenda.

II

⁶ Notice in what follows the battery of spatial metaphors I've had to use in articulating Parmenides' idea ('detached ... space', 'transported', 'inhabit', 'where').

⁷ Our selves aren't here to be just equated with our reason: the self which is invited to choose whether or not it will follow reason can hardly *be* just reason.

⁸ See T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

The Jason of Kingsley's *Heroes* was not the only Jason in my young life. There was also Jason the Headmaster's boxer. At St Albans School (a stable from which Colin Renfrew, Stephen Hawking, and the film director Mike Newell emerged in my time) our Headmaster was a gruff Classicist with naval connections by name of W.T. Marsh. Those of us in the sixth form Classics set were summoned to his study from time to time to be put through our paces on our *Aeneid* set book, and to listen to his Gilbert and Sullivan records. This was ordeal enough in itself without the added value of Jason's attentions. Jason produced froth at the mouth in massive quantities unusual even in boxers. It was his practice to waddle slowly round the table until he had identified what he considered the most satisfactorily aromatic trousered leg. Then he would nuzzle up for as long as it took to deposit boxer saliva over as much trouser as he could cover. This was of course excellent training in the British stiff upper lip. None of us ever complained, nor did we betray signs of having noticed or experienced anything out of the ordinary. Truth to tell it was less disconcerting than the expectation of appreciative and intelligent responses to the Gilbert and Sullivan.

I look back to W.T. Marsh with gratitude. The Classics set was a recent invention of his (though he'd been Headmaster for well over twenty years already) – recent and short-lived, since he killed it off when the first lot of A-level results were much weaker than he thought they should have been. Without its brief epiphany I would never have become a Classicist. Marsh had appointed two first-rate teachers for the purpose, David Billingham, a King's, Cambridge graduate who taught us our ancient history as well as languages, and John Miles, from Worcester College, Oxford, a charismatic figure who flew and occasionally crashed aeroplanes at the weekend in the RAF Volunteer Reserve, and would read to us from Berkeley and Hume if we got through our prose or verse composition double periods in good time. Marsh and his son, then himself a serving naval officer, took a party of us by train to Rome in the fifth form year (my first trip abroad). They showed us the forum and the capitol, and arranged excursions to Ostia and Tivoli, as well as to a concert in the opera house. The Headmaster told us the story of how Jack Goody, the anthropologist, a boy at the school in the thirties, had during the War gone to the opera there while a prisoner-of-war in Rome on the run, and had collected

the signature of the commandant of the garrison on his programme. Or at least, that's how I remember it. Jack, a colleague at St John's for 35 years, once told me those weren't quite the circumstances, but I'm afraid I don't recall his emendations.

Teachers and teaching hold a special place in all our lives. Mine at St Albans opened new horizons for me. Many of us in this room are or have been in the business ourselves. I don't suppose I'm alone in feeling that many of the rewards are ours, not or not just our students'. Between teachers and students there can be a special relationship not to be captured in league tables or OFSTED reports or lecture questionnaire returns. Back in January I was able to attend the funeral in Llandaff Cathedral of John Percival, my predecessor as Secretary to CA Council and subsequently its Chair. Many of you will remember him as a wise, kindly presence who embodied the public service ethic. I wasn't surprised to learn that he was not only rated the best lecturer in the Cardiff department, but was loved by his students, especially those of the fairer sex – one of whom became his second wife. For myself I can claim at any rate that I've only ever once to my knowledge been sacked as academic supervisor by an undergraduate. It happened about 25 years ago. The student in question has become a good and productive classical scholar. We met for the first time since my dismissal three or four years ago at drinks after someone's lecture. The first thing he did was apologize for his behaviour two decades before: something I supposed he'd have entirely forgotten long ago. More usual is my experience at this like other CA conferences. When I meet former students there is a beam of mutual affection that somehow sums up in a moment the memory of all those hours of what at its best was joint exploration, a journey we shared. I've had special reason to appreciate this over the last two years, following my wife Liz's death. As well as family, colleagues and other friends, my old PhD students (if they'll pardon the expression) have gone out of their way to keep an eye on me.

Liz greatly enjoyed coming to this conference whenever she could. Whilst regretting that there weren't more talks on archaeology, she liked the intellectual variety and the general friendliness, and she enjoyed the excursions (at our last conference together we had fun battling our way round the centre of Leeds against the bitter wind and lashing rain looking at buildings, and of course getting soaked to the skin). I didn't

myself do any archaeology as an undergraduate, and despite growing up with Verulamium on the doorstep didn't have much idea about it until I met her. She could look at a building and immediately spot phases and reorganizations. On a walk she would detect evidences of habitation in the lie of the land, where I would never have suspected anything. She for her part didn't know much about philosophy when we met, though she had greatly enjoyed a course on the Presocratics in graduate school. So when we moved to Cambridge in 1972, I took her to an undergraduate lecture by Elizabeth Anscombe,⁹ to show her what philosophizing was like – to see a philosopher in action agonizing about a problem. Liz had great respect for the authority and wisdom of the best philosophers she encountered: Myles Burnyeat in particular, and in the last year of her life Onora O'Neill, when we met her at a friend's over Sunday tea. Clarity came as second nature to her. When a few months later I showed her a longish review I'd just published (my first and only) in the *London Review of Books* – of Tony Kenny's ancient volume in his now just completed *History of Western Philosophy* – she read it through without comment. As she finished, her face lit up with her lovely smile, and she said: 'It's all wonderfully clear, from beginning to end.'

I suppose there's a sense in which all of us in Classics are practising a form of archaeology: picking our way through the wreckage of antiquity, and trying to make sense of whatever documents or inscriptions or literary or historical or philosophical productions are our own particular interest, in a context we have to reconstruct – whether the original context or the later contexts of the classical tradition. Not that that was how our subject looked – to me at any rate – when I was an undergraduate in the 1960s. Some radical agendas, all with a critical and determinedly contemporary edge, were being pursued. In literature the American new criticism of the 1950s, together with the practical criticism of the Cambridge English school pioneered by I.A. Richards, was making the running. One aim was to expose biographical and historicist approaches to Catullus and the Augustan poets (for example) as philosophically wrongheaded (because they were liable to commit the so-called 'intentionalist fallacy' of appealing to the poet's intentions in interpreting the

⁹ By then she was Professor Anscombe. But she was always the utterly terrifying 'Miss Anscombe' in my student days. And that's how one of the members of my audience referred to her, when remarking to me afterwards that the mention of her name had brought back memories,

meaning of a poem), and as failing to exercise the responsibilities of the critic: traditional readings didn't respond to the poem as a poem. In philosophy there was a rather similar phenomenon. Its practitioners saw the analytical philosophy that had taken hold above all in Oxford in the 1950s, but elsewhere in Britain and America too, as enabling us at long last to see the real *philosophy* in Plato and Aristotle. Analysis of argument became the dominant preoccupation. It was symptomatic that a shortish paper of 1963 entitled 'A fallacy in Plato's *Republic*' became one of the most influential contributions to the study of Greek philosophy for at least a generation.¹⁰ In history Moses Finley was telling us that most of what passed for the practice of ancient history in academe just wasn't history at all, but credulous repetition of inadequate ancient narrative sources. Ancient historians needed to put to their material the questions social and economic historians of more recent eras were asking, and to exploit the conceptual and analytic resources they had developed for the purpose.¹¹ Finley had of course himself supplied a brilliant and still wonderfully readable paradigm of how to do it in *The World of Odysseus*.

So a lot of what my undergraduate self encountered in Classics offered plenty of intellectual challenge. But there wasn't much sense of contribution to a common enterprise. In fact so far as I could see there *was* no common enterprise. Literature was literature, philosophy was philosophy, history was history – all vigorously asserting their own exclusive identities. I don't recall anyone ever using any words like 'interdisciplinarity' (perhaps we shouldn't altogether regret that). If they had, they would have been regarded, I suspect, as missing the point. It all seems a very long time ago. These days we have a different paradigm. I recently found myself having to write a citation which included the sentence: 'He has shed light on the many subjects – archaeological, epigraphic, iconographic, historical, philological, literary – on which he has written'. Holistic Classics is what we admire. I remember saying apologetically to Eric Handley after I'd published a paper on the *Iliad* (twenty years ago now) that I supposed I had rather a nerve venturing into Homer studies. He replied that in his opinion the more non-Homerists there were who did that the better. Which made me appreciate that the era when Homer was Homer,

¹⁰ See D. Sachs, 'A fallacy in Plato's *Republic*', *Philosophical Review* 72 (1963) 141-58.

¹¹ Here the example of Max Weber was particularly important, as Daniel Tompkins was reminding us in a fascinating talk yesterday.

the preserve of specialists on Yugoslav guslars and oral poetics, was well and truly over. I can't believe Classics has ever been more of a collaborative venture between our sub-disciplines than it is now; and its breadth and diversity are often precisely the things that attract able and enthusiastic students to this rather than other subjects. That breadth and diversity are what we wanted to capture and showcase when we set about reconstructing the CA Conference nearly twenty years ago.

As you'll recall, a few years ago the CA celebrated its centenary, and for that occasion Chris Stray edited for us a volume surveying the first hundred years of our existence.¹² Chris's own opening chapter documented how it was the sense of a crisis for Classics as a subject under assault which the foundation of the Association in 1903 was designed to address. He quoted liberally from J.P. Postgate on the threats posed by state control of the educational system and by changes in university matriculation requirements, as the sciences (somewhat ironically) and (still more ironically) modern languages gained more ground in the curriculum. At the Association's 75th anniversary meeting in 1979 here in Birmingham, Bryn Rees, President that year, saw its whole history from the time of its foundation as an elaborate defensive campaign, 'resisting attacks from all sides, consolidating its entrenched positions', constructing networks, and developing new lines of communication. When I became Secretary ten years later the same atmosphere prevailed. That was the moment when we were inventing Peter Jones' role as spokesman for Classics, to make sure we seized opportunities to promote the profile of Classics in the media, and to engage as needed with politicians, civil servants and examination and assessment authorities.

Twenty years on things look a bit different. It's not that the survival of Classics in the school system looks markedly healthier (Bob Lister will produce statistics to indicate likely further decline) – even if there have been some remarkable and successful new initiatives the CA has helped to foster, such as *Minimus* and *War at Troy*, which may yet pay long-term dividends. At the moment the subject finds itself in the novel situation where it depends for much of the curriculum on a single examining board, a monopoly supplier respected for its

¹² See C. Stray (ed.), *The Classical Association: The First Century 1903-2003* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

standards, but embarked on some rationalization, and not seemingly as open to dialogue about changing needs as might be hoped. At the level of scholarship and research, the future well-being of one of our finest internationally distinguished institutions in the arts and humanities, the London Institute of Classical Studies, is right now in grave danger. The Institute has over fifty years proved its worth as a highly fruitful pioneering example of sustained collaborative use of publicly and privately funded resources. Collaboration of this sort is fairly obviously the shape of things to come. For it to work, however, partners have to remember that they *are* partners. There has to be appreciation that a one-size-fits-all approach to problems that are genuine enough is never going to be adequate to the needs and opportunities of partnership. *Without* partnership everyone is likely to face a needlessly diminished future. Classics has in my time proved itself adept at not getting shunted or shunting itself into backwaters. The trick of course lies in spotting the backwater before you're stuck in it.

So battles are always with us. What's different is that Classics now unquestionably has a higher profile than it did back in 1989. Whether you think of TV, radio, the internet, video games, film, theatre, detective fiction, historical novels, popular biography and history (which we'll be celebrating when the CA Prize for 2007 is presented later this evening), classical antiquity is everywhere. Peter Jones is still of course busy placing his own news items in the papers, and discreetly putting journalists in touch with people and stories they might miss; and his own long-running column in the *Spectator* continues. But the range and variety covered by Philip Hooker's regular roundup of what's new in *CA News* is simply astonishing. Some of it's trivia and gossip, and none the worse for that. I expect others were intrigued as I was to discover that one of the two stern silver-haired lieutenants who flank Alan Sugar in the board room scenes in *The Apprentice* apparently softens a little when conversation moves on to talk of Greek papyrology, on which she's doing a PhD.¹³ At the other end of the spectrum one thing I'm struck by is the evident attractiveness of big themes, often imperial, often evoking thoughts on the clash of civilizations: Philip reports numerous performances of the *Persae*, for example, as well as the Thermopylae film *300*, playing right

¹³ See *The Guardian*, 28 March 2007 (G2, pp.10-11).

now in a cinema near you. Heroic names recur: Alexander, Hannibal; and the great tortured figures of tragedy refuse to tiptoe out and leave us alone, whether we think of Fiona Shaw's Medea or the Oedipus we are to have from Ralph Fiennes at the National Theatre this autumn.

If the media cater to a taste for the heroic in the popular imagination, scholarship is not immune either. Aristotle was the hero of Anthony Kenny's *History*, Aristotle the scientific observer and philosopher of science, Aristotle the inventor of the notion of a system of scientific disciplines, Aristotle the first proper professor, organizing student lectures into a curriculum and creating the first research institute and research library in the Western world. I've never met anybody who worked seriously on Aristotle – whether the ethics or the psychology or the metaphysics – without feeling themselves in the presence of a mind of extraordinary subtlety and penetration, and of course phenomenal range and energy, even if (as on slavery) there are blind spots. Plato, by contrast, has as often as not been cast as the villain of the piece. Karl Popper famously saw him as the intellectual godfather of the fascist and Marxist ideologies which prevailed in Europe during the central decades of the last century, with the *Republic* the original blueprint for a wholesale rationalizing project for a closed authoritarian society. Nietzsche no less famously perceived in Plato the wrecker of Hellenism. 'Plato *against* Homer', he cries (*On the Genealogy of Morals* 3.25).¹⁴ 'That is the whole, authentic antagonism – on that side the sincerist advocate of the "beyond", the great slanderer of life; on this side, the instinctive panegyrist, the *golden* nature.' Some of the great Hellenists of my youth – Dodds, Lloyd-Jones – thought Nietzsche had it exactly right; and when you think of the *Phaedo* and its characterization of philosophizing as practising for death, it's hard altogether to disagree.

Another who shared this view of Plato was Bernard Williams, as he made clear in the best of all his books, *Shame & Necessity*, based on his Sather Lectures. A few years after *Shame & Necessity*, however, he published a little cameo study entitled *Plato: The Invention of Philosophy*.¹⁵ The title of its final section echoes Nietzsche: 'Plato's philosophy and the denial of life'. But Williams concludes the work

¹⁴ I owe the reference to Angela Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.44.

¹⁵ Most conveniently available in B. Williams, *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, ed. M. Burnyeat (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

with his own list of the qualities which make a great philosopher: ‘intellectual power and depth; a grasp of the sciences; a sense of the political, and of human destructiveness as well as creativity; a broad range and a fertile imagination; an unwillingness to settle for the superficially reassuring; and in an unusually lucky case, the gifts of a great writer’. ‘If we ask’, Williams goes on, ‘which philosopher has, more than any other, combined all these qualities – to that question there is certainly an answer, Plato.’ The myth of Er, I submit, gives us a glimpse of how and why Williams was right about that.

III

When Plato got close to finishing the *Republic*, he faced a problem. Readers would be expecting a dialogue with justice and injustice its

central themes to end with a myth of judgement. After all, that was how the *Gorgias*, which anticipates much of the basic argument of the *Republic*, had ended. But Plato wasn't the sort of writer just to recycle material from an earlier work. The *Phaedo*, too, ends with a myth of judgement, and there he had managed to produce something utterly different from the *Gorgias* myth. Could he bring off something similar but again quite different a third time? The myth of Er – the most elaborate of the three – solves the problem by reconstructing or deconstructing the whole idea of a final judgment, and by subverting traditional notions of fate, reincarnation, and the rewards of justice and injustice along with it.

Let me proceed by reminding you of the story.¹⁶ Er is the human who returns from death charged with the mission of telling us what lies beyond it. We've heard a lot about ancient viewing this week: listening and especially looking, his own or others', are the insistent preoccupation in virtually all Er has to say. The first thing he reports is the last judgement. But what catches his attention is not so much the tribunal itself as the entry and exit arrangements for heaven and hell. When it comes to his turn, instead of being sentenced he is told to keep his eyes and ears open to what is happening, since his role is to report back to humanity at large. As well as those passing through the entrances to heaven and hell, with placards on chests or backs respectively, he also sees people constantly emerging from opposite exits, from heaven on one side and up from the earth on the other, evidently after long journeys, and then gathering together in a large field, rather as at the Glastonbury Festival. This is where we are given an idea of what judgement entails: from the novel standpoint of a retrospect on what heaven and hell *were* like, as retailed to one other by those who've served out their time in either place. There isn't actually much about heaven, but some salutary detail on hell, encapsulated in the story of the fate of the Pamphylian tyrant Ardiaeus.

All this, however, is merely the prelude to something that is to prove far more momentous: the last judgement turns out not really to be the last thing at all. There is now another three day journey, to a much more spectacular vision and a much more significant event. It's a journey which bears I think significant similarities with the heroic journeys we were musing upon earlier. Er tells of how souls who have

¹⁶ It runs from 614B to 621D in Book 10 of the *Republic*.

returned from heaven or hell eventually arrive at a place ‘where from above they can look down on a straight column of light, stretching over the whole of heaven and earth, more like a rainbow than anything else, but brighter and more pure’ (616B). After yet another day’s journey they reach the light itself and penetrate to its centre. They find that it binds the heavens like cables girding a trireme, and holding the motions of the heavenly bodies together. There follows Er’s description of the extraordinarily complex structure of the spindle which controls these revolutions. It turns out to be a sort of gigantic astrolabe, conceived in Pythagorean fashion as producing a single sound: the concord of the harmony of the spheres. The spindle is operated by the three Fates: Clotho the spinner, Lachesis, responsible for the hands we are dealt with in life, and Atropos, who ensures their inexorable necessity. Astronomical interpretation of all this gave the old commentators a field day. More to Plato’s immediate purpose is the moral he will now point up for human destiny at the climax of this tremendous narrative build-up.

Since the Fates are the agencies that in traditional belief determine our fates, what comes next is a shock – the calculated surprise Plato makes the fulcrum of the whole story. A speaker, a *prophêtês* – as at Delphi, or as I like to imagine something resembling the Speaker in the *Magic Flute* – takes lots from the lap of Lachesis, and addresses the assembled souls (617D-E):

Here is the message of the maiden Lachesis, the daughter of Necessity: ‘Souls, ephemeral creatures, here begins another cycle of mortal life and the death it brings. Your guardian spirit will not come your way by lot. You will be the ones to choose a guardian spirit. Let the one who draws the first lot be the first to choose a life. He will then be joined to it by necessity. Virtue knows no master. Respect or contempt for it will give each more or less of a share of it. Responsibility is with the chooser. God has none.’

In other words, daughter of Necessity though Lachesis is, fate is *not* fate. Or if it is, it’s *our* fate – in the sense that we are the ones who choose who we shall be, what kind of lives we shall live; although once we’ve chosen, that’s it: there’s no going back, for we’ve bound ourselves by and to the choices we make. The hands Lachesis allocates to us represent nothing

more than an ordering of the chances we have in life, some of us ahead of others in the queue, some behind (we're not all born equal) – chances to *choose* between a whole variety of life-models. Plato has reworked fate into something else entirely: the question of the choice of lives, a long-running favourite in ancient thought from Prodicus's 'Choice of Heracles' to Cicero's obsession with the problem, from Aristotle in the last few chapters of the *Ethics* to Seneca's *De Otio*. And Prodicus's very representation of the choice as a Herculean decision at a crossroads in life marks it, of course, as heroic.

The choice of lives as ordinarily understood is a choice we have to make in life, not after death. But for Plato that doesn't make much of a difference. All his myths of judgement *post mortem* have as their chief moral a message about how we should live. And Lachesis's lottery is I think best read as an allegory of our situation in life, couched in terms of a *post mortem* scenario. It is significant that once Er has finished his account of the announcement of the lottery and of the life-models associated with it, Socrates breaks in, to offer Glaucon detailed reflection on the extreme danger that humans face at this point in their journey, and on the way they need to prepare themselves in order to make the best kind of decision 'whether in life or in death' (618E). The key thing is to keep one's eye on the true nature of the soul – the self – and to work out how the different circumstances with which humans may be faced, or of the attributes they may possess, influence the way the self develops for good or ill. Whether *it* develops well or badly is what makes for a better or worse life, whether the choice is made 'in' life or 'after' it.

However given the *post mortem* scenario, choice is choice of how to be reincarnated. Reincarnation is another concept Plato has thereby simultaneously reconstructed. In the traditional Pythagorean conception of reincarnation, as represented for example in Empedocles or by Plato himself in the *Phaedo*, my next life is probably punishment for sin, and in any event an inexorable consequence of the way I have lived my present life. It's pretty unclear how Pythagoreans related reincarnation to the idea of a last judgement. And it's striking that in the *Phaedo* the main passage on reincarnation (80D-82C) comes long before the judgement described in the final myth (113D-114C), which doesn't mention reincarnation. Reincarnation as ordinarily conceived is itself a kind of automatic judgement we bring upon ourselves. If in this life I've devoted myself to injustice and tyranny and grabbing all I can get, the

next time round I'll inevitably turn into a wolf or a bird of prey. Gluttons will become donkeys or the like. Whereas if I've led a decent sort of life, untouched by philosophy but making my contribution to society, I can expect to mutate into a bee or a wasp or an ant – and even re-emerge eventually as a decent human being all over again.

The myth of Er thinks quite differently about reincarnation, and thereby avoids any problem of its relation to last judgement. Er reports with pity, amusement and amazement on many transmutations into animals: 'a sight worth seeing', he says (619E), in words which remind us of the very beginning of the dialogue, where Polemarchus says just the same of the all-night exchanges of torches on horseback at the festival in honour of the goddess Bendis (1.328A). All these transmutations represent *choices* of souls reflecting on their previous experiences. That's not a matter of predetermination, even if it's not unexplained or inexplicable in terms of past lives (as is symbolized by having Lachesis sing of the past, in contrast to Atropos, whose theme is the future). So Orpheus chooses a swan's life, because he had come to hate the female sex, and in consequence is unwilling to have a woman conceive and give birth to him another time. Another musician, the singer Thamyris, chooses to be a nightingale. On the other hand swans and other musical birds may choose human lives, presumably devoted once more to the music business. Ajax and Agamemnon cannot face being human again: their experiences have set them against humanity. Clownish Thersites becomes a monkey. Plato is careful not to leave women out of the picture, and there's no indication that he thinks a woman's life inferior. Rather the contrary, if anything. When Atalanta the sprinter opts for a man's life, because of the honours that come the way of male athletes, one suspects that he doesn't applaud the wisdom of her choice. Epeius, architect of the wooden horse at Troy, is so devoted to his mentor Athena that he becomes a *craftswoman*. Last of all to choose is Odysseus. Unsurprisingly, being Odysseus, he wanders around for a long time. He now looks not for honour or its restoration, but for the life of a private person: *apragmôn* – someone not busying himself in public activity at all. He's had enough of the heroic life.

Some people have fewer options to choose from than others. Again, that's life. But here, as in scripture, there is something of the first being last and the last first. Odysseus comes last, but because he recalls his sufferings – *pathei mathos* – he makes a wise choice: nothing grand, but

acceptable. The first to go, on the other hand, takes no notice of the Speaker's advice to choose carefully, and elects for ultimate tyranny. He fails to notice that written into the script is eating his own children (among other disasters). He blames chance, his guardian spirit, anything but himself. Here Plato introduces an idea which Michael Inwood in a forthcoming paper has christened 'metempsychotic egalitarianism'.¹⁷ When souls are gathered in the Glastonbury-style field, then naturally enough they exchange their experiences: those who've been in heaven telling those who've been in hell what it's like, and *vice versa*. But this doesn't seem to be information that has any effect when it comes to life choices (parents among you won't be surprised). The Thyestes type who chooses first had been virtuous in the past through habit and without philosophy. He had been rewarded with heaven, and in consequence he was untrained in suffering. That's why he made his mistake: he hadn't suffered. By contrast, those who have been suffering in hell, and have seen others suffer, don't rush into their choices.

So we get a democratic kind of reversal. Sheep become goats, and goats sheep. The Platonic wisdom of the Myth of Er is in the end simplicity itself. All of us have to attempt the heroic journey of life – from Agamemnon to the lowliest. But over the long haul most of us are much the same in moral stature, and deserve pretty much the same. Suffering is what can make a difference. And philosophy too, though even Socrates – for as I've indicated we hear Socrates' voice as well as Er's – is at pains to indicate that if you're unlucky with the hand dealt you by fate or chance, even philosophy won't guarantee a good choice.

Fellow Classicists, on this occasion you have suffered enough. Being your President has been a great honour. I hope philosophy may save me from being spoiled by it for eternity.

¹⁷ To appear in a collection of essays on Plato's myths to be edited by Catalin Partenie, with publication by Cambridge University Press.

