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Initiation, ritual, and experience in the Eleusinian Mysteries and on Plato's Symposium: a preliminary analysis

Iniciação, ritual e experiência nos Mistérios Eleusinos e no Banquete de Platão: uma análise preliminar

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to formulate a few preliminary questions on the issue of initiation in both the Eleusinian Mysteries and Plato's Symposium, with the notion of transposition as a basis for our work. We attempt to identify a few elements of the Eleusinian Mysteries that have supposedly been transposed to the dialogue between the 'young Socrates' and Diotima. The paper is divided into two central parts: the first, and the longest, analyses what initiation may have been in the Eleusinian Mysteries to gain a better understanding of the Eleusinian initiation and what transposition this initiation may have carried on to the case of the 'young Socrates'. The second focuses on Plato's Symposium, trying to identify signs and hints of elements from the Eleusinian Mysteries. The central focus is on the transposition of 'vision', to formulate our hypothesis that there are transpositions made by Plato from the Eleusinian Mysteries. In other words, the focus of this paper is mainly on the transposition of the motif of vision supposedly made by Plato from the Eleusinian Mysteries in the dialogue between the 'young Socrates' and Diotima.

Keywords: Initiation; Eleusinian Mysteries; Plato's *Symposium*; Platonism.

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Resumo

Neste artigo formulamos algumas questões preliminares sobre iniciação nos Mistérios Eleusinos e sobre iniciação no Banquete de Platão, tendo como base a ideia de transposição, na tentativa de identificar alguns elementos dos Mistérios Eleusinos supostamente transpostos no diálogo entre as personagens do 'jovem Sócrates' e da sacerdotisa Diotima. Assim, nosso artigo está dividido em duas partes centrais: na primeira, a mais longa, analisamos o que poderia ter sido a iniciação nos Mistérios Eleusinos, tendo como objetivo uma melhor compreensão da iniciação Eleusina e qual elemento central dessa iniciação poderia ser interpretado como transposto para a iniciação do 'jovem Sócrates'; na segunda nos centramos no Banquete de Platão, para tentar sugerir indícios de motes dos Mistérios Eleusinos, centrados especificamente na transposição da 'visão', para formular a hipótese de que podemos sugerir indícios de transposições feitas por Platão a partir dos Mistérios Eleusinos. Em suma, neste artigo centramo-nos sobretudo na transposição da visão supostamente construídas por Platão a partir dos Mistérios Eleusinos no diálogo entre o 'jovem Sócrates' e Diotima.

Palavras-chave: Iniciação; Mistérios Eleusinos; Banquete; Platão.

1. Introduction

What is initiation? This is a question with different meanings in different fields of knowledge, even though such a question is regularly used in studies of religion. Now, when we specify and formulate the following question 'What is an initiation for Plato?', then we make things much more precise and, at the same time, complicated for us. In this paper, we will try to go as far as possible through a couple of more humble and precise questions on initiation, namely: i) 'What could have been initiation in the Eleusinian Mysteries?' and ii) 'What could be read as initiation in Plato's *Symposium*?' One could argue that these questions do not seem humble and simple questions at all. Nonetheless, here we will only try to propose a brief discussion on initiation both in the Eleusinian Mysteries and Plato's *Symposium*. Our focus is on the

motif of vision. Furthermore, a better understanding of this element in the Eleusinian Mysteries could allow us to propose that Plato reframed such a motif in the experience of the ‘young Socrates’.

Plato’s *Symposium* is not a short text. We therefore decided to have the young Socrates, a character portrayed from 201d1 to 213b5, as our target. Moreover, we do not intend to analyse 13 *Stephanus* pages containing arguably the most profound part of the dialogue. Nevertheless, we have chosen a narrow moment of the dialogue not to venture too far from our goal.

To do so, we propose to present a passage in which the vocabulary of initiation is clearly and explicitly presented to the readers (this passage is found between 209e5-210a2).

Thereafter, we will venture out to the world of the Eleusinian Mysteries. We believe it to be enlightening to seek some answers or rather to ask further questions regarding the setting depicted by Plato, that is, the background of the Eleusinian Mysteries, precisely during his time, as it was interestingly pointed out by Edmonds.¹ We will try to find hints that can help us understand how, in our reading of the text, Plato could have made a ‘transposition’, to quote Bernabé,² not only of the imagery, language, and performance of the Eleusinian Mysteries to portray the initiation of Socrates into philosophy but also a reframing of the motif of vision, which is present throughout the dialogue.

There is no better place than the introduction of this paper to define what Bernabé calls transposition. Bernabé, in his works called “*Platão e o orfismo. Diálogos entre religião e filosofia*”, and more specifically in the chapter “*métodos da transposição platônica*”, claims that transposition,

“[It] is how the philosopher quotes or alludes to passages from other authors, generally speaking, the prestigious authors of his time, as groundwork for his own philosophical thesis, reframing such quotes, modifying them in a more or less subtle way, either in terms of the words he uses, or the context in which Plato inserts them, and, by doing so, Plato also transforms the original meaning and intention, especially to make them reasonable within his own philosophical ideas, setting forth whatever is close to his own ideas and hiding or transforming whatever is different

1 Edmonds, R. G. Alcibiades the Profane: Images of the Mysteries. In: Destrée, P.; Giannopoulou, Z. *Plato’s Symposium - A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 194-215.

2 Bernabé, A. Métodos da Transposição Platônica. In: _____. *Platão e o Orfismo: Diálogos entre Religião e Filosofia*. São Paulo: Annablume.

from his own. In any case, Plato presents ideas from authors, he quotes them as if they were almost platonic to support the value of the very ideas Plato himself is presenting to the readers, but such a support carries on the prestige and/or the maturity of his sources.”³

Bernabé presents many methods of transposition, although he originally developed these methods to confront Plato with the Orphic.⁴ However, due to length and time, we will, in this paper, refer to transposition as in the sense of that which adds new elements to platonic ideas, omits things that would weaken them, modifies the meaning of things for them to fit accordingly, and recontextualises much of the rite of the Eleusinian rituals into Plato's own rite, viz. philosophy. As aforementioned, we believe it to be valuable to focus on the transposition of vision, made by Plato in this section of this dialogue, as we hope to confront the one in the Eleusinian rite: the divine as the Form of Beauty and the μύστης or ἐποπτής as the ἐραστής or ἐρώμενος. Or, at the very least, to shed some light on this discussion by the conclusion of this paper.

The first section of the paper analyses the *Symposium's* passage mentioned above and dives then into the discussion of initiation in the Eleusinian Mysteries. We understand that initiation as a ritual, in its own essence, is a mystery, that is, a ritual that was supposed not to be recorded as a text (to quote Burkert in many of his works, such as 2007, 2011)⁵. Rather, Eleusinian rituals were only seen by those who participated in them. Only the participants knew what was actually happening there⁶. For this fact alone, we will have to seek some of the elusive sources at our disposal.

Most importantly, as it has been suggested since Ancient Greece, we do not consider the ritual in the Eleusinian Mysteries as the teaching of doctrines, as would be the case of a ritual based on an actual body of texts, such as doctrinal religions. Rather, we do consider this ritual to be centred in the

3 Ibidem, pp. 367-368 (our translation).

4 On Plato and Orphism, see Cornelli, G. Orphism. In: *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Plato*, edited by Gerald A. Press and Mateo Duque, 2nd edition. London: Bloomsbury, 2023, pp. 311-313.

5 Burkert, W. *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture*. Cambridge/Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007.
Burkert, W. *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche*. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2011.

6 Eur. *Bacc.* vv. 465-474, clearly and directly shows Dionysus reminding Pentheus that the rites are sacred, and mysterious and should remain as such, seen only by the ones who perform them.

undertaken of an experience (Edmonds 2017)⁷. To do so, we will look all the way back to sources such as the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, as well as to much earlier sources, such as Theon of Smyrna and Clemens of Alexandria.

Again, our goal is to clarify what happens to the ‘young Socrates’ in the *Symposium*, having the words used by Plato as our map, and the character’s portrayal as a kind of a compass, aware that the complexity of the question of what could have been initiation in the historical Eleusinian Mysteries is puzzling.

Put differently, we question whether or not Plato is portraying, in these pages of the *Symposium*, a kind of a ‘ritual’ of initiation of the ‘young Socrates’ into philosophy. First, we must clarify that ‘ritual’, which is here under quotation marks, means not a religious ritual, but rather his experience with Diotima, his encounter and dialogue with her, namely, the activity to “give birth to beauty” (ἔστι γὰρ τοῦτο τόκος ἐν καλῷ, 206b7-8), undertaken by “the ones pregnant in the soul” (οἱ ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς κυοῦσιν, 209a1), or more precisely, “to produce and give birth in beauty” (τῆς γεννήσεως καὶ τοῦ τόκου ἐν τῷ καλῷ, 206e5). This cannot be done without a method which would allow one “to give an account of one’s own discourse”, as shown in the *Republic* (δυνάμεναι λόγον διδόναι αὐτῶν, R. VII. 533c2-3). This is a process to become aware of one’s own limitations and ignorance through refutation and thus igniting one’s own desire to actively seek the truth (καὶ ἐγώ, πῶς λέγεις, ἔφην, ὦ Διοτίμα; 201e9), with the aid of someone appropriate to conduct the task (ὁρθῶς ἡγῆται ὁ ἡγουμένο, 210a6-7), which is the Platonic μυσταγωγής, the one that has seen what has to be seen and can thus lead the initiate towards what is to be seen.

2. The passage from the *Symposium*: 209a5-210a2.

Now we know the route that we will undertake in this paper. As mentioned above, we must turn our attention to the platonic text and see if there are signs that can lead us to question the process undertaken by the ‘young Socrates’ in Plato’s *Symposium*. This text is in 209e5-210a2. It is quite short, yet puzzling nonetheless:

κἂν σὺ **μνηθείης**· τὰ δὲ **τέλεα** καὶ **ἐποπτικά** ὧν ἕνεκα καὶ ταῦτα
ἔστιν, ἐάν τις ὁρθῶς μετή, οὐκ οἶδ’ εἰ οἷός τ’ ἂν εἴης

7 Edmonds, R. G., op. cit., p. 202.

We have translated this passage into:

*“Perhaps you could be **initiated** as well: regarding the **rituals** and the **experiences**, through which it is [possible to move up the latter], if one proceeds correctly, I am not sure you would be able to”.*

We claim that what comes after this passage in the *Symposium* may take these references to initiation as presupposed in them, which means that this could be the groundwork upon which Plato suggests that Socrates have passed through something analogous to being initiated. In this sense, we would like to better understand what ‘initiation’ could have been, what the ‘rituals’, the τέλεα (if it is possible to translate this word to “rituals”) are; and what the ἐποπτικά is, although the latter is a tricky word to translate, one that we have to carefully analyse. We have consequently chosen ‘experience’, simply because it is what Diotima offers Socrates in this dialogue. Nonetheless, it is a better understanding of what initiation in Plato’s time could have been which might allow us to sharpen our translation and better understand the ‘young Socrates’ ‘initiation’ in Plato’s *Symposium*.

3. The problem of initiation and the Eleusinian Mysteries: a multi-phased experience and a non-doctrinal ritual.

What is an initiation then? That is the first question that we directed to Plato’s *Symposium*, and, more precisely, a question that asks what the ‘young Socrates’ initiation along with Diotima would be. We believe that Dowden has quite strong arguments for establishing what he calls “grades” in Eleusinian Mysteries, rather than levels.⁸ An initiation would fall into this category of being a grade and not a phase or a level in the ritual – if we are to follow Dowden⁹. He starts by claiming that “a grade is defined as ‘a step or stage in a process’ and, in this case, I am considering the process of advancement of an individual from the profane to the sacred, as it was institutionalised in the Eleusinian mysteries.”¹⁰

8 Dowden, K. Grades in the Eleusinian Mysteries. *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 197, 4, 1980, pp. 409-427.

9 Idem.

10 Idem, p. 410.

Dowden also remarks that “the subject is not new: it has been discussed since there has been scholarship on Eleusis. But it has been beset by confusions of which there are still traces even in modern scholarship”.¹¹

We do not believe we can or should be as bold as Dowden with his claims. But we must bring up this so-called confusion to reflect upon the problems surrounding initiation in the Eleusinian Mysteries.

Clinton¹² deeply examines the words themselves philologically for a better understanding of the initiation, and constantly quotes Dowden throughout the text, since the latter had done the same philological work forty years ago: “The term used for the initiate, namely *mystes* (μύστης), is derived from the verb μύω, “to close (the lips or, more usually, the eyes), and means the one ‘who keeps silence or closes the eyes,’” as Dowden (1980, p. 414) emphasised.”¹³

In fact, Dowden did a similar philological research on the terminology of initiation years before, which begs us to analyse Dowden’s reading which goes a little bit further in analysing the terms:

*“myesis is an abstract noun derived from myeo and means “initiation” [...] Myesis [...] derives from a causative verb, means in effect “the making into a mystes”. [...] The fact there is no such word [mysteia] probably highlights that epopteia is an artificial word relatively recently introduced or that there is, as will be suggested below, no act of the mystai which is exclusive of the epoptai”*¹⁴

We now have a preliminary formulation of both initiate and initiation, μύστης, to mirror the term μυθητής which we have seen above in the translation of the quote from the *Symposium*. Clinton clarifies that the term μύστης “expresses the opposite of *epoptes* (ἐπόπτης, “viewer”).¹⁵ But in what sense? Clinton believes that “the first stage is characterised mainly by ritual blindness (when

11 Idem, p. 410.

12 Clinton, K. Stages of initiation in the Eleusinian and Samothracian Mysteries. In: Cosmopoulos, M. (ed.). *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*. London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 50–78.

13 Idem, p. 50.

14 Dowden, K., op. cit., p. 415.

15 Clinton, K., op. cit., p. 50.

the initiate is led by a *mystagogue*), the second stage by sight"¹⁶. Lastly, Dowden points toward the inexistence of μυστεία, which is a sound argument in favour of a non-opposition between initiate and ἐποπτής.¹⁷

However, although Clinton and Dowden solved a problem for us in appearance, they actually seem to have created more problems for us than before. As of now, not only do we have one definition of initiate and another of initiation, but we rather have two definitions of initiate: i) the one that sees and ii) the one that does not see. According to both authors, one stage of the initiation is marked by being of the μύστης, the first 'kind' of initiate, so to speak, and the other stage of initiation is marked by being what figures the ἐπόπτης, the second 'kind' of initiate.

If we look back to Plato's *Symposium*, we will actually find what looks like three stages of what we are calling the initiation of the 'young Socrates' into philosophy. This was emphasised in a work by Riedweg,¹⁸ where it is claimed that there is a division into three stages: "i) *elenkhos*, ii) *didachē* + *mythos*, iii) *epoptika*". These can respectively be found at i) 199c3–201c9, ii) 201e8–209e4 e iii) 209e5–212a7. This is a reading which was also followed by Belfiore (2012, p. 141),¹⁹ but strongly refuted by Edmonds.²⁰ According to him, "various attempts have been made to reconstruct the rituals, but the tripartite schema most recently expounded by Riedweg seems to be most influential in the interpretations of the *Symposium*"²¹ And he goes further by adding that:

"Riedweg, in his study of mystery terminology in Plato, sees the references in the Symposium to the Greater and Lesser Mysteries as reflecting an actual sequence of initiations focused on imparting secret doctrines to the initiates. Plato, in his view, constructs Diotima's account of erōs along the model of the Eleusinian Mysteries, following a tripartite pattern that would

16 Idem.

17 Dowden, K., op. cit., p. 415.

18 Riedweg, C. *Mysterienterminologie bei Platon, Philon und Klemens von Alexandrien*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987.

19 Belfiore, E. *Socrates' Daimonic Art: Love for Wisdom in Four Platonic Dialogues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

20 Edmonds, R. G. op. cit., p. 197.

21 Idem.

have been familiar to the Athenians of Plato's day as the sequence of the Mysteries. Riedweg's pattern has been influential in recent discussions of the passage, but it unfortunately misrepresents the Mysteries, providing an overly simplified schema based on the systematizations of later Christian and Neoplatonic writers. The tripartite schema is simple and appealing to use, but, as H. L. Mencken famously said, for every complicated problem, there is always an easy solution – "neat, plausible, and wrong."²²

Other authors have also indicated that we should look to latter authors and revise what they have said and based their arguments on so that we can see if the tripartite schema makes sense in the Eleusinian context. We will first deal with Theon of Smyrna, a platonic mathematician of second century CE, who might have been one of the first writer to see multiple stages during the rituals in the Eleusinian Mysteries. In his work called "*Mathematics useful for understanding Plato*", he says:

μυήσεως δὲ μέρη πέντε. τὸ μὲν προηγούμενον καθαρμός· οὔτε γὰρ ἅπασι τοῖς βουλομένοις μετουσία μυστηρίων ἐστίν, ἀλλ' εἰσὶν οὓς αὐτῶν εἶργεσθαι προαγορεύεται, οἷον τοὺς χεῖρας μὲ καθαρὰς καὶ φωνὴν ἀξύνετον ἔχοντας, καὶ αὐτοὺς δὲ τοὺς μὴ εἰργομένους ἀνάγκη καθαρμοῦ τινος πρότερον τυχεῖν. μετὰ δὲ τὴν κάθαρσιν δευτέρα ἐστὶν ἡ τῆς τελετῆς παράδοσις τρίτη δὲ (ἡ) ἐπονομρζομένη ἐποπτεία· τετάρτη δέ, ὃ δὴ καὶ τέλος τῆς ἐποπτείας, ἀνάδεσις καὶ στεμμάτων ἐπίθεσις, ὥστε καὶ ἑτέροις, τις παρέλαβε τελετάς, παραδοῦναι δύνασθαι, δαδουχίας τυχόντα ἢ ἱεροφαντέας ἢ τινος ἄλλης ἱερωσύνης" πέμπτη δὲ ἡ ἐξ αὐτῶν περιγενομένη κατὰ τὸ θεοφιλὲς καὶ θεοῖς συνδίατον εὐδαιμονέα.

"Of initiation there are five parts: the first is purification. Not all who wish may partake in the mysteries, but some are publicly told to keep away from them, e.g., those not having pure hands or having unintelligible speech. And even the very people who are not excluded must first have some purification. After the purification, second is the bestowing of the rite (telete), third is what is called epopteia; fourth — and this is the climax of epopteia — wreathing and laying on of garlands, so as to be able to bestow on

22 Idem.

*others the rites one has received, getting the dadouchy or hierophancy or some other priesthood, fifth is the happiness that comes from them in the way of being loved by god and living with the gods.”*²³

There are five stages, the first being ‘purification’. Let us start by reflecting on this first one, ‘purification’. Clinton²⁴ claims that it is not hard to understand why the verb μύω is used by those partaking in the μυεῖσθαι of the τελετή for the first time: they are μύσται, whose experience as μύσται began with the preliminary μύησις and continues in the τελετή; they are μούμενοι throughout. Once they have completed the τελετή, they are ‘initiated’, μούμενοι. A year later, if they participate again, they are no longer μούμενοι but ἐποπτούντης.²⁵

If we are to follow Clinton’s claims,²⁶ then the initiation could have had some sort of ‘purification’, a preliminary stage a year before the ‘Greater Mysteries’, but not as a stage of its own, but more of a preparation for the μύησις. We quote Clinton to clarify what we are calling this preliminary initiation, or, as he says, “lower stage”: “This confirms what the preceding analysis was leading us towards: in the context of the *telete*, the verb *myeisthai* is used in reference only to the lower grade of initiation, that of the *mystai*, whereas *teleisthai* is used of initiates of either grade.”²⁷

Clinton finishes his argument, saying that what Theon would call ‘purification’ would be a sort of stage of κάθαρσις, and the ritual in its entirety would be the τελετή, culminating in the ἐποπτεία, that is, the individual becoming fully initiated.²⁸

Dowden would have none of it. He believes that Theon’s first grade is wrongly taken as a purification ritual within some sort of ‘Lesser Mysteries’. And I quote him: “Yet this is not really supported by an examination of his [Theon’s] words”.²⁹ Dowden concludes his verdict by saying that

23 Theon, *De Util. Math.*, pp. 14-15 (transl. Hiller).

24 Clinton, K., op. cit., p. 57.

25 Idem.

26 Clinton, K., op. cit., p. 57.

27 Idem.

28 Idem.

29 Dowden, K., op. cit., p. 420.

*“Theon simply does not know about the Lesser Mysteries. This is an ignorance which we shall presently see repeated in imperial authors and which reinforces Burkert’s suggestion that the Lesser Mysteries were defunct by these times. He seems to be imposing a framework like the Mithraic where there are many grades and an initiation ceremony into each; whereas at Eleusis, there is no evidence for more than one level of initiation — one simply qualifies, without ceremony, for the epopt grade.”*³⁰

This is not only the case of Theon, but of another author that was rebuked by Dowden, namely, Clemens of Alexandria. A passage in Clemens’ work *Stromata* states:

τῶν μυστηρίων τῶν παρ’ Ἑλληνισιν ἄρχει μὲν τὰ χαθάρσια, καθάπερ καὶ τοῖς βαρβάροις τὸ λουτρόν. μετὰ ταῦτα δ’ ἐστὶ τὰ μικρὰ μυστήρια διδασκαλίας τινὰ ὑπόθῃσιν ἔχοντα καὶ προπαρασκευῆς τῶν μελλόντων, τὰ δὲ μεγάλα περὶ τῶν συμπάντων, οὗ μανθάνειν <οὐκ>ἐτι ὑπολείπεται, ἐποπτεύειν δὲ καὶ περινοεῖν τήν τε φύσιν καὶ τὰ πράγματα.

*“In the Eleusinian Mysteries first comes the catharsis, after this, there are the Small Mysteries with a sort of role of instruction and preparation for what is to come; but the Great Mysteries about the universe (?) — it no longer remains to learn but to epopt and embrace with the mind nature and matters”.*³¹

According to this reading, there were three stages in the Eleusinian Mysteries: first, the ‘purification’; second, the ‘Lesser Mysteries’; and, lastly, the ‘Greater Mysteries’. After presenting the quote by Clemens, Dowden immediately claims that the author “does not know about the Lesser Mysteries”.³²

Clemens’ account is structured like Theon’s in terms of the first three grades: ‘purification’, μύησις, ἐποπτεία. Clemens thinks that the Great Mysteries comprise only ἐποπτεία and that ‘Small Mysteries’ is the term used to contrast μύστις with ἐπόπτης.

30 Idem.

31 *Stromata* 5.11.71.1–2, transl. Dowden

32 Dowden, K., op. cit., p. 422.

As mentioned before, not having a body of texts through which we would be able to analyse the Eleusinian Mysteries proves to be the biggest puzzle we will face throughout our research. Sourvinou-Inwood, says that

*“The evidence is scarce and problematic; it comes from mostly late sources, often of questionable reliability, as we often do not know how well-informed the relevant writers were – and in any case their particular filters had shaped their perceptions of what had taken place (let alone of what it had meant) and their articulations of what they had perceived, in texts written with particular aims and biases.”*³³

Here, this quote sheds some light on a possible bias that latter authors would have had on the description of the rituals. This only causes more problems than solutions for us. Nonetheless, scarcity does not mean we cannot re-research ancient cults and rituals. We can find evidence in, for example, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*:

‘Ὀλβιο ὃς τάδ’ ὅπωπεν ἐπιχθονίων ἀνθρώπων·
ὃς δ’ ἀτελῆς ἱερῶν, ὃς τ’ ἄμμορος, οὐποθ’ ὁμοίων
αἴσαν ἔχει φθιμένός περ ὑπὸ ζόφῳ εὐρόεντι’

*Olbios among earth-bound mortals is he who has seen these things.
But whoever is uninitiated in the rites, whoever takes no part in them,
will never get a share [aisa] of those sorts of things [that the initiated get]
once they die, down below in the dank realms of mist.*³⁴

Here we have a good example of what was expected of the one who undergoes the ritual, that is, the initiate. Once one finishes one's initiation, one can see things, and the things one sees, whatever they are, provide one with a better life. Still, our questions remain unresolved: if what defines the initiate are grades, that is, being able to see and not being able to see, what are these grades?

Dowden defined, as we have seen at the start of this section, grades as “step[s] in a process”. This means that the initiate is the one who goes through

33 Sourvinou-Inwood, C. Festival and Mysteries: aspects of the Eleusinian Cult. In: Cosmopoulos, M. B. *Greek Mysteries. The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*. London: Routledge, p. 28.

34 *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, transl. Gregory Nagy.

a process. Regarding “process”, Dowden considers the “advancement of an individual from the profane to the sacred”, or, in other words, the process of transformation of the individual in such a way that one is allowed to see what is divine. But what about τέλεα, which is the last word from the *Symposium* passage we have yet to analyse?

Dowden also clarifies the meaning of the word, which we quote:

“teleo is derived from telos by regular laws via Teles-yo. It can mean “to fulfil or perform”, including a technical sense “to perform rites” [...] Teleo must mean, when it has a person as an object, not “to initiate”, but “to do the rites on” and maybe even with that colloquial tone. [...] telete derives from the verb teleo in the same way that melete derives from meleo. It therefore means “performance”, but in fact is restricted in usage to a “performed rite”.³⁵

If τελετή means performance, and in the sense of “performance of the rite”, “[τὰ] τέλεα” (Smp. 209e5), as we have seen in the *Symposium* passage above, must mean something like “the things related to the ritual performance”, or simply “the divine”. But that is not how it has been translated or used, according to Dowden. He says that

“It is therefore not unnatural that authors constantly refer to the ceremonies at Eleusis as “the telete” (e.g. Pausanias 1.37.4: “Anyone who has seen the telete at Eleusis knows what I mean”). But it is a very far cry from this to state, as writers on Eleusis endlessly do, that the rite of the first grade (of the mystai, that is) was actually called, named, labelled Telete. [...] The use is understandable: if an ancient author wants to refer to this part of the ceremony he can only talk of “the rite”. There was in fact no special name for this ceremony, presumably because in some sense it did not need one, as I will suggest below”.³⁶

Therefore, according to Dowden, this usage suggests that the τελετή or the τελεταί were employed to simply refer to the rituals, and such a usage should be understandable and semantically acceptable. But the meaning, stricto sensu, of the word, would still be ‘performance of the ritual’, a word of the utmost importance to the initiate, the μύστης, whose performance in the ritual would, somehow, turn him into an ἐπόπτης.

35 Dowden, K., op. cit., p. 416.

36 Idem, pp. 416-417.

Now that we have worked to find the meaning of each of the, so to speak, 'technical' words used by Plato in the passage we analysed above, we should end this section by underlining the structure of the ritual, so we can look back to Plato's *Symposium* to see any traces of the ritual in the initiation of 'young Socrates'.

Foucart³⁷ underlines the idea that the ritual portrays a drama. He defends that, even though it has a religious connotation, that is, a way to get closer to the divine, it was literally the performance of a drama: actors and audience. And this reading of the Nineteenth Century is followed by Dowden in his work from forty years ago:

*"The emphasis of these passages seems to me to be much more on participation. Surely every initiate had a torch, mourned, wandered, searched. Such a mass mime would be a hopeless mess in the Telesterion, but outside it would make very good sense. The mystai could mime around (like so many Stations of the Cross) the cave of Pluto and the well Kallikhoron "where first the Eleusinian women set up a dance and sang for the goddess" and the well where Demeter sat in sorrow searching for her daughter. And in the process the mystai would be deeply affected and something of the attraction of Eleusis might be understood".*³⁸

The μύσται remained blindfolded, Clinton adds³⁹, and had to wander in the dark, evidently helped by someone that could actually see, the μυσταγωγός, in a μίμησις of the search for Kore, "and experienced all the terrors of the route". In other words, "while the initiate wandered, blinded and frightened, through the darkness, the *epoptai* were able to watch".⁴⁰

The ἐποπταί, as our reading has been suggesting, partake in the same ritual, but with a different approach: they can see what the μύσται only hear, they see the light that the μύσται can only glimpse, they know what is making the strong sounds that shake the very being of the μύσται, and most importantly, they can enter the Telesterion to see images of the divine, according to Dowden:

37 Foucart, P. F. *Recherches sur l'origine et la nature des mystères d'Éleusis*. Paris: Inst. de France, 1896, p. 43.

38 Dowden, K., op. cit., p. 426.

39 Clinton, K., op. cit., p. 66.

40 Idem.

“The epoptai, if they are only a class of mystai privileged in one respect, would presumably take part in these dances and mimes — which may explain why the activity of mystai (contrast epopteia) has no special name. But the epopts, when the moment came, would be allowed entrance to the vision in the Telesterion. For if numbers had to be restricted in the Telesterion, it would only be sensible that those who were not just attending for the first time should be the ones to be admitted, or in the words of Plutarch that “they epopted leaving at least an interval of a year after the Great Mysteries”.⁴¹

Clinton,⁴² specifically on this matter of the usage of the Telesterion, disagrees with Dowden and believes that the μύσται were allowed inside the temple. According to Clinton

“Of course, the mystai only succeed in “finding” her [Kore] when she finally reveals herself to them, presumably in the midst of the extraordinary light within the Telesterion. Before that moment, as the blinded mystai search for Kore, the epoptai who are waiting outside the Telesterion could see her, together with her mother, emerging from the cave precinct where she arose from the underworld, but the epoptai waiting within the Telesterion would see mother and daughter only as they enter the building. [...] The light that blazed forth from within the Telesterion came, I imagine, from the torches that were suddenly lit by the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these epoptai standing on the steps that line the walls of the Telesterion. It was at that moment that the mystai entered and beheld the image of the reunited goddesses. [...] Finally, both the mystai, their vision restored, and the epoptai could take delight in the spectacle of a divine wedding, with its magnificendence, and all its attendant blessings”.⁴³

The ‘ritual’ of initiation of ‘young Socrates’ into philosophy: an activity of unveiling by his μυσταγωγής and the action of being able to see by himself

We have so far ventured through initiation in the Eleusinian Mysteries. Unfortunately, due to the limited length of this paper, we will not be able to analyse each passage in Plato’s *Symposium* which mentions or at least transposes

41 Dowden, K., op. cit., p. 427.

42 Clinton, K., op. cit., pp. 66-70.

43 Ibidem.

elements of the Mysteries in general (which is not restricted to the Eleusinian ones). We can, however, point out a few, although a careful philological analysis would by far go beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, we have Dionysian elements in Alcibiades appearance and double coronation (212d3-213e7), we have Bacchic elements on 218b3-4, Korymbant elements on 215e1-3, Orphic elements on 218b5-7 and Eleusinian on 209e5-210a2, which happens to be the passage we analysed and the theme of this paper, that is, the initiation in Eleusinian Mysteries and a possible reflection of its elements in the initiation of the 'young Socrates'. Edmonds reminds us that

"The term 'mysteries' may derive originally from the name of the festival at Eleusis for the goddesses Demeter and Kore, but such was the prestige of these rites that 'mysteries' becomes a general term in ancient (and especially modern) sources for all rites of this kind".⁴⁴

But what about Socrates and Diotima? What about his dialogue with her, which seems to portray the highest point of Plato's transposition of the Eleusinian Mysteries' initiation, the peak of the transformation of the μύσται: the vision of the divine. This happens only after a process of going from many refutations on the quest to define things philosophically, to the point of defining and allowing the initiate to see the truth, the divine, for himself. As the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* enlightened us, the one who goes through the experience of the Eleusinian Mysteries can see things that would lead him to a happy life.

We see the terminology of vision when Diotima tries to guide Socrates towards more universal and general definitions of what beauty and desire are. As displayed in 211e4:

ἀλλ' αὐτὸ τὸ θεῖον καλὸν δύναιτο μονοειδὲς κατιδεῖν;

"But would one be capable of seeing the divine beauty in itself in its unique form?"

It seems so far that Plato is trying to show us that Diotima, unlike what Agathon believed, is not transmitting knowledge as if it went from a filled vat to

44 Edmonds, R., G., op. cit. 2017, p. 196.

an empty one, but we see a prophetess actually providing an experience to the young Socrates, one that in fact transforms him from someone who ignored the nature of what they were inquiring about into someone who desires the truth and who, after beholding the truth, definitely becomes something different from the young Socrates. He becomes someone who is able to lead initiates, a sort of *ψυχαγωγός*.

As it is attributed to Aristotle:⁴⁵

καθάπερ Ἀριστοτέλης ἀξιοῖ τοὺς τελουμένους οὐ μαθεῖν τι δεῖν ἀλλὰ παθεῖν καὶ διατεθῆναι, δηλονότι γενομένους ἐπιτηδεύουσ.

We can translate this passage to something like the following:

“According to Aristotle, the value of performing the ritual [lies in the fact that] one does not have to learn anything, but resides in experiencing the rituals and transforming himself, clearly becoming suitable.”⁴⁶

When we return to the *Symposium*, we are told that “the desire for immortality is necessarily tied to the good (δὲ ἀναγκαῖον ἐπιθυμεῖν μετὰ ἀγαθοῦ, 207a1), because “desire always is a desire for immortality (τῆς ἀθανασίας τὸν ἔρωτα εἶναι, 207a3-4). However, such a search for immortality and the good must be a constant process, that is, the ones seeking the truth must practice it over and over again, and not just once, as if it was obtaining a set of doctrines. The *Symposium* tells us this, precisely because “our knowledge leaves us” (ὡς ἐξιούσης ἐστὶ τῆς ἐπιστήμης, 208a4). We forget what we have seen, either as μύστης or as ἐπόπτης: “forgetfulness is the loss of the knowledge acquired” (λήθη γὰρ ἐπιστήμης ἔξοδος, 208a4-5), that is why we must “create a new memory, as recollection, to take place of the one that left us, as if the knowledge were the same” (μελέτη δὲ πάλιν καινὴν ἐμποιοῦσα ἀντὶ τῆς ἀπιούσης μνήμην σῶζει τὴν ἐπιστήμην, ὥστε τὴν αὐτὴν δοκεῖν εἶναι, 208a5-6).

This initiation appears to be some sort of preparation for a vision, related to knowledge and having to be practised over and over again throughout the dialogue, or to use a ‘technical’ word that is absent in the *Symposium*, through dialectics. This means that, on the one hand, the initiate, the μύστης

⁴⁵ *De Philosophia*, fr. 15 Ross.

⁴⁶ Idem.

in philosophy cannot see properly without a process which is guided by his Platonic *μυσταγωγής*, a philosopher, on the other. The goal seems to be like the one in the Eleusinian Mysteries: it is not a scientific or contemplative sort of knowledge, but as it says in the *Symposium*:

ἐνταῦθα αὐτῷ μοναχοῦ γενήσεται, ὁρῶντι ὃ ὁρατὸν τὸ καλόν, τίκειν οὐκ εἰδῶλα ἀρετῆς, ἅτε οὐκ εἰδῶλου ἐφαπτομένῳ, ἀλλὰ ἀληθῆ, ἅτε τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἐφαπτομένῳ (212a2-5)

which we can translate approximately as:

“Then, he alone, who has seen the beauty that is visible, will become able to produce not images of excellence, for he is not fixing his vision on images, but on true excellence, because [his vision] is fixed on the truth”.

We can now look back to the passage in Plato's *Symposium* that we translated at the beginning of this paper, and provide a better translation, now grounded on our research on the terminology of initiation. The text is found at 209e5- 210a2:

κἂν σὺ *μυηθείης*· τὰ δὲ *τέλεα* καὶ *ἐποπτικά* ὧν ἔνεκα καὶ ταῦτα ἔστιν, ἓάν τις ὁρθῶς μετή, οὐκ οἶδ' εἰ οἶός τ' ἂν εἴης

And, finally, a translation that fits our reading of the text would be:

*“Perhaps you could be made into an **initiate**: regarding the things [that happen in the] **performance of the ritual** and the things related to the **vision** [in the ritual], through which it is [possible to move up the latter], if one proceeds correctly, I am not sure you would be able to”⁴⁷.*

47 We used a bracket to maintain a very literal and, consequently, conceptual translation to do. However, this was necessary so the meaning of the plural of the neuter (τὰ 'something') could be preserved, as we cannot simply translate the text to 'regarding the performance of the rituals' or 'and the success of initiation' ignoring the syntax, without making it clear that we are now aware of the fact that Plato is speaking of 'the things', which might be 'the things' that happen during Socrates' dialogue with Diotima, i.e., the τὰ that are related to dialectics. In other words, Plato decided to use τὰ δὲ τέλεα καὶ ἐποπτικά, instead of simply using τελετή and ἐποπτεία, perhaps to emphasise his transposition, that is, to emphasise that he will be speaking of a new kind of initiation, one that has nothing to do with Eleusis but with his philosophy, which is not the Mysteries. Despite the conjecture, this is a discussion for another paper, so we should stop here.

To conclude, we end this analysis by quoting Edmonds:

“The culminating experience of Diotima’s ascent to the Beautiful itself is not an explanation of the Theory of Forms or even the secret knowledge that the phenomenal world is a reflection of the true world of the Forms; rather it is an encounter with the Beautiful itself, where the philosopher contemplates the Beautiful itself, face-to-face”.⁴⁸

Conclusion

We have learned that, in the Eleusinian Mysteries, according to some readings, an ‘initiation’ is a stage, and the ‘initiate’ the protagonist of this stage, which is a sort of performance, a kind of ‘religious drama’, so to speak. The μύστης, the initiate, undergoes a kind of drama in which one seeks to find the deity, while blindfolded and bombarded with several sensorial stimuli. At the end, when one is correctly led by the μυσταγωγός, the divine itself is revealed to them in the Telesterion, or even outside, if we are to follow other readings. This marks the end of a process and is not a teaching of a set of doctrines but rather the undertaking of intense and deep experiences that might lead to a transformation in one’s way of life. Such similarities between the ‘initiation’ and ‘rituals’ of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the ‘initiation’ of Socrates and the ‘ritual’ of philosophy seem to lie exactly on this point: Socrates has not seen the truth and has a hard time following his μυσταγωγός more than once. But as he becomes aware of his ignorance and of the transformative value of his goal, the ‘young Socrates’ decides to, with the aid of his μυσταγωγός, to keep going further towards the truth with the fuel of ἔρως, which is the nourishment of his desire for the truth. Up they go, and upon reaching the ‘Telesterion’ of Philosophy, the young Socrates’ veil is gone, and this unveiling represents the affinity with philosophy and with the process of seeking the truth: he has nourished with the aid of Diotima the desire to see the truth, as this kind of desire seems to be one of the main motifs of Plato’s *Symposium*. Once moved by his desire, and aided by Diotima, he can behold the truth.

48 Edmonds, R. G., op. cit., p. 202.

Put differently, Socrates is able to grasp a proper definition of what both true desire and beauty are. Socrates seems to end his 'initiation' and, as we have seen in other dialogues, becomes an *ἐποπταί*, but most importantly, a Platonic *μυσταγωγός* of his own, who will assist the 'initiation' of others, such as Diotima seems to have assisted his.

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