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1

One, Two, Three

‘ONE, TWO, THREE’: the *Timaeus* opens simply with the enumeration of the three guests—Critias, Hermocrates and Timaeus—who have accepted Socrates’s proposal to meet for a discussion. The tone is light, almost an echo of the joking song of the protagonist of Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*: ‘Five, ten, twenty, thirty, thirty-six, forty-three’. But Plato is not beginning an *opera buffa*. He is opening one of his most important dialogues. And one of the most beautiful. The early Socratic works, the *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*, staging the trial and death of Socrates while he preaches justice, the duty of the citizen and the immortality of the soul, have unparalleled dramatic force. *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, dedicated to love and beauty, are bedazzling. The *Republic* has the merit of admirable completeness. But the *Timaeus* has a fascination all its own, the fascination of a text that replaces Hesiod’s myths and Parmenides’s accounts with its own view of the creation of the cosmos, its structure, its soul and body, the generation of man. The *Timaeus* recounts our origins and destiny; it enchants us with images of the model, the triangles, the order and beauty that reign supreme in the universe; of our souls descending from the stars and returning to them after death.¹ In his introduction to the splendid most recent Italian edition of the *Timaeus*, Franco Ferrari summarises in a few lines what has been traced in this work since ancient times: ‘the lineaments of a unitary project able to combine the main aspects of philosophy, namely ontology, theology, cosmogony, ethics, anthropology and psychology, enriched by its engrafting of a complex set of specialised

branches of knowledge, ranging from astronomy to medicine, from biology to optics and the theory of music'.²

In short, the *Timaeus* is a sort of *summa* of Platonic thought and imagination (the whole of the first part speaks, among other things, of Atlantis, a theme that always guarantees success). In addition, it has in its favour its form: varied and multiple, yes, yet for the most part no longer dialogical but monological, and always original in its verbal formulation. Supreme, too, in its creation and presentation of the rational, reasonable, 'verisimilar' myths by which it is distinguished. Often considered obscure, its very difficulty generates attraction and the desire to understand it. But no reader can escape the bubbly vivacity of Socrates's opening line—what I call its almost Mozartian enumeration: 'One, two, three, but where, my dear Timaeus, is the fourth of those who were yesterday my guests and are to be my entertainers today? Few will remain insensitive to this simple, clear and solemn announcement of the preliminary theme and how it should be understood:

First then, in my judgment, we must make a distinction and ask, What is *that which always is and has no becoming*, and what is *that which is always becoming* and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state, but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is.³

Reverberations of the most famous passages of the *Timaeus* would continue, not for centuries, but for millennia; first and foremost, the consideration of sight as a gift from the gods, founding the human conception of time, research into the nature of the cosmos, and ultimately philosophy, 'than which there is no greater good':

[S]ight in my opinion is the source of the greatest benefit to us, for had we never seen the stars and the sun and the heaven, none of the words which we have spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered. But now the sight of day and night, and the months and the revolutions of the years have created number and have given us a conception of time, and the power of inquiring about the nature of the

universe. And from this source we have derived philosophy, than which no greater good ever was or will be given by the gods to mortal man.⁴

A passionate and fundamental proclamation of the *raison d'être* of science and thought, this must be seen together with the passage on the Demiurge and the model he used to shape the universe:

But the father and the maker of all this universe is past finding out, and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible. This question, however, we must ask about the world. Which of the patterns had the artificer in view when he made it—the pattern of the unchangeable or of that which is created? If the world be indeed fair and the artificer good, it is manifest that he must have looked to that which is eternal, but if what cannot be said without blasphemy is true, then to the created pattern. Everyone will see that he must have looked to the eternal, for the world is the fairest of creations and he is the best of causes.⁵

And also together with the *Timaeus*'s last proclamation, the one that concludes the work with the celebration of the living cosmos, the beautiful and perfect god:

We may now say that our discourse about the nature of the universe has an end. The world has received animals, mortal and immortal, and is fulfilled with them, and has become a visible animal containing the visible—the sensible God who is the image of the intellectual, the greatest, best, fairest, most perfect—the one only-begotten heaven.⁶

Plato's preoccupation with the beautiful and the good emerges forcefully here, and it is a force that dominates the whole of the *Timaeus* in all its articulations and that inevitably brings with it the discussion of the kind of language and imagery that should be used in contexts such as this. Plato is well aware that 'beautiful things are difficult', as he repeats several times in his works: 'khalepà tà kalá'.⁷ Our accounts, consequently, 'need only be likely and analogous to the former words'. Those that concern what is stable, fixed and evident to the intellect will thus be stable, irrefutable, 'invincible'. Those, on the other hand, that we give

of that which has been formed to be like that reality, since they are accounts of what is a likeness, are themselves likely, and stand in proportion to the previous accounts: ‘as being is to becoming,’ that is, ‘so is truth to belief.’⁸

Here, then, are the *eikòs lógos* and the *eikòs mýthos*, likely accounts and myths, which will serve to illustrate, for example, ‘gods and the coming to be of the universe,’ and which, after all, are the inevitable consequence of the fact that both speaker and listener are human. The conclusion of the piece is great:

Let me tell you then why the creator made this world of generation. He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be. This is in the truest sense the origin of creation and of the world, as we shall do well in believing on the testimony of wise men. God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad, so far as this was attainable. Wherefore also finding the whole visible sphere not at rest, but moving in an irregular and disorderly fashion, out of disorder he brought order, considering that this was in every way better than the other. Now the deeds of the best could never be or have been other than the fairest, and the creator, reflecting on the things which are by nature visible, found that no unintelligent creature taken as a whole could ever be fairer than the intelligent taken as a whole, and again that intelligence could not be present in anything which was devoid of soul. For which reason, when he was framing the universe, he put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, that he might be the creator of a work which was by nature fairest and best. On this wise, using the language of probability, we may say that the world came into being—a living creature truly endowed with soul and intelligence by the providence of God.

This being supposed, let us proceed to the next stage. In the likeness of what animal did the creator make the world? It would be an unworthy thing to liken it to any nature which exists as a part only, for nothing can be beautiful which is like any imperfect thing. But let us suppose the world to be the very image of that whole of which all

other animals both individually and in their tribes are portions. For the original of the universe contains in itself all intelligible beings, just as this world comprehends us and all other visible creatures. For the deity, intending to make this world like the fairest and most perfect of intelligible beings, framed one visible animal comprehending within itself all other animals of a kindred nature. Are we right in saying that there is one world, or that they are many and infinite? There must be one only if the created copy is to accord with the original. For that which includes all other intelligible creatures cannot have a second or companion; in that case there would be need of another living being which would include both, and of which they would be parts, and the likeness would be more truly said to resemble not them, but that other which included them. In order then that the world might be solitary, like the perfect animal, the creator made not two worlds or an infinite number of them, but there is and ever will be one only-begotten and created heaven.⁹

I wanted to quote the whole of this passage so that its unparalleled *claritas*, the unusually elevated style of its reasoning and the range of its rhythm could appear as clearly as possible, even in translation. Over two thousand years later, it impressed Friedrich Schelling, who noted that the idea of the creation of the cosmos by the Demiurge ‘free of jealousy’ and as similar as possible to himself was something that had never occurred to Moses or any of the Jews.¹⁰ But it did not impress the greatest of Plato’s disciples, Aristotle, who quoted it in the *De caelo* in order to use it against the author: ‘This is held in the *Timaeus*, where Plato says that the heaven, though it was generated, will none the less exist to eternity’: which is obviously contradictory.¹¹ Aristotle, moreover, will consider the universe ungenerated and existing since the beginning of time, and when he reaches Plato in his account of the succession of theories on the principle of the cosmos at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, he ignores the *Timaeus* and turns decisively towards the Platonic world of Ideas. Finally, the man who loved myth, as is clear from the *Poetics* and his other works, was obviously not going to be persuaded by the ‘verisimilar’ myths proposed by Plato.

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