

A-B-D-C-E

PART V

'ELEUSIVE' ANSWERS

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They acted without knowledge, till I came. . . .
 Number, chief of sciences, I invented for them,
 And how to set down words in writing,
 The skill of remembrance, mother of the Muses. . . .
 I gave the hidden sense of voices,
 Sounds, sights met by chance upon the road.
 I guided mankind to a hidden art,
 And read to them the intimations of the altar-flames.
 Clearly I set forth all you would learn;
 Speaking not in dark riddles, but simply,
 As speech is due between friends.

—Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*

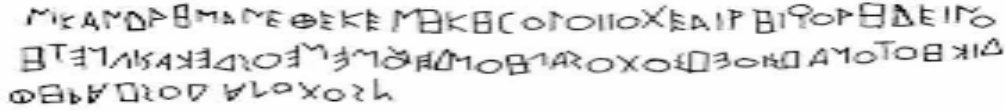
HIS NAME WAS AESCHYLUS and he invented the genre of Tragedy, called by Aristotle “the higher art... attaining its end more perfectly.” And whereas Sophocles may have perfected it and been more popular with the 10,000 people in the audience each April who came to judge and be gripped by the new art form, Aeschylus was the first to recognize and harness the powerful narrative pattern A-B-D-C-E. He was the first to recognize how to build upon the soul-searing, consciousness-altering experience everyone in his audience had each already actively experienced, for all had been initiated into the Great Mysteries of Eleusis.

It was his lot to bridge two worlds, the archaic time of tyrants, and the coming of direct democracy. It was his role to bridge two realities: the narratives we live in daylight; and the narratives in our hearts for which no words exist and none are needed.

Here is what we know of him: that he was born in Eleusis in 525 BCE, seat of the Greater Mystery of Demeter and source of his family’s livelihood... But first a little background.

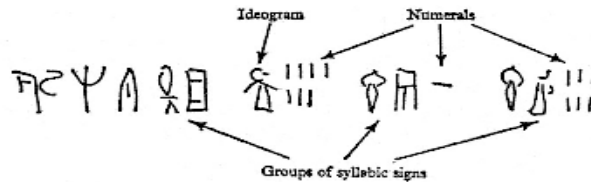
IT'S ONE OF THOSE LITTLE FACTS that slides past you in a survey course. Sometime around 800 BCE, the Greeks acquired an alphabet from the Phoenicians.

Boustrophedon. Text ran from left to right then doubled back, like an ox plowing a field.



The thing is, it was their *second* alphabet. There had been a Linear-B-utilizing civilization a millennium earlier, centered at Mycenae, a city on the plains of the Attic mainland. These Achaean Greeks had been aggressive seafarers who'd conquered the Knossos of King Minos, then island-hopped their way to take on Priam's Troy. Across the wine dark sea, in faraway Asia Minor, they had waged a decade-long war; there a mighty city had been besieged and sacked. Though the Achaeans had been

Linear B of the Myceneans was too complicated for widespread use. Each symbol represented a consonant-vowel combination.



victorious, the Trojan War had exacted a toll. It had taken one epic hero ten years to find his way back home. It left King Agamemnon and the members of his family stained with a guilt so deep it continued to pollute the collective psyches of the Greeks for centuries after. The Trojan victory had taken a physical toll as well, leaving the Greeks too drained to defend against successive waves of barbaric Dorian invaders from the north. The four-hundred-year-occupation had obliterated all traces of their proud and mighty civilization, until the Dorians at last decamped to Sparta, freeing the Greeks to adopt with gusto the replacement alphabet, which they cunningly improved upon by adding vowels.



T I M E L I N E

2000–1200
Bronze Age Mycenaean civilization: conquest of Knossos, use of Linear B, colonization of Mediterranean Islands, Asia Minor, Trojan War

1184
Fall of Troy

1100–800
Iron Age
Dorian Occupation of Attic Peninsula
Greek Dark Ages: commerce, industry, writing cease

800–750
Early Archaic Age
Greeks acquire alphabet from Phoenician traders; other important external influences: knowledge of plane geometry; the cult of Dionysus with orgiastic red wine sacrament

750–650
Homer, Hesiod: consolidation of Olympian myths, epics, hymns

back to the past, then steadily built to a crisis, with a satisfying resolution: A-B-D-C-E. And both contain detailed descriptions of the topography of Hades.

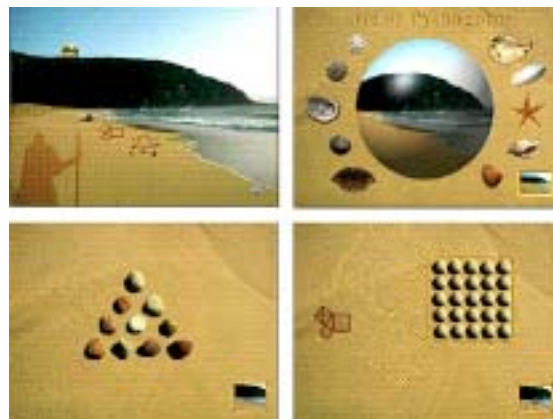
IT WOULD BE A VAST OVERSIMPLIFICATION to imagine that the Attic Greeks now marched smoothly forward into the Golden Age, which we most associate with ancient Greece. Given Greece's mountainous terrain, there wasn't a lot of arable land to go around, and what there was quickly came to be in the hands of a few powerful families. Now, in this more stable time, the population had begun to grow to such an extent that it left poorer Greeks with three options: they could pull up stakes completely and put to sea to form colonies in Asia Minor. (Hence the source of future friction with the Persians). They could move into the city, in this case Athens, where they could be free to make a living not tied to the land, (Hence the rise of the Athenian city state). Or they could angrily demand redress. (Hence the evolution over the next 125 years, from 632 BCE, when Athens' monarchy ended, to direct democracy.)

The raw tension that existed between urban and agrarian sectors of the city state of Athens was clearly mirrored in the choice each made in the gods they held most dear. The agrarian oligarchs were the natural heirs to the traditional gods of Hesiod's pantheon, particularly Demeter, goddess of Agriculture. It is no accident that her myth is the most fully realized of all the Homeric hymns. In case your Greek mythology is rusty, here are the basics:

One day, Persephone, daughter of Demeter, while picking flowers on the plain of Nysa, reached for a narcissus of exceeding beauty, only to see the earth yawn, and a golden chariot bearing Hades loom up and seize her. Though Persephone cried out, no one heard her except Hecate, and so she was borne off and separated from her beloved mother. When Demeter discovered her loss, "bitter pain seized her heart." Bearing a torch, she embarked on a search, roaming the earth for nine days, vainly seeking her child, but on the tenth day, Hecate approached the distraught goddess and reported what she'd heard. From Apollo, Demeter would further learn that Zeus himself had sanctioned the abduction. "But look on the bright side," Apollo would attempt. "Hades is Zeus's brother, and, besides, he rules a third of the universe." Now Demeter shunned the company of the gods, and disguising herself as an old woman, continued her wanderings until she chanced to find herself in Eleusis. There, she refused food and drink, especially "unlawful" wine, calling instead for a mix of meal and water to which mint had been added. "And so the great queen Deo received it to observe the sacrament." All that year, still inconsolable, Demeter prevented the seed from sprouting everywhere on earth and, "so she would have destroyed the whole race of man with cruel famine, and robbed the Olympian gods of the gifts and sacrifices," had not Zeus interceded and arranged for Persephone's return. The reunion was a joyous one, but there was a catch. "If you have tasted food, you must go back again beneath the secret places of the earth, there to dwell a third part of the seasons every year, yet for the two parts you shall be with me and the other deathless gods," for

Persephone had been tricked by Hades into eating the seed of a pomegranate. "But when the earth shall bloom with the fragrant flowers of spring, then from the realm of darkness and gloom thou shalt come." Hecate volunteered to serve as Persephone's companion during the winter months. And in the spring and summer, and the warmer days of autumn, Demeter caused the grain and fruit to again abundantly appear. Then she ordered the elders of Eleusis to build her a temple with an altar, and taught them how to conduct her secret rites.

In addition, by the 6th century, there had also come to be a distinctly modern cast to the narrative that naturally linked it to the myth of Orpheus, the musician who nearly succeeds in releasing his beloved Euridyce from the Underworld, and, by extension, to the cosmology of Pythagoras. To the Greeks, geometry was far more than a way to establish property boundaries, construct buildings, and chart a navigational course. It was the literal, logical, and metaphorical foundation where written language and mathematics converge, upon which everything is built, and to which anything can be compared. To Pythagoras, numbers emitted a harmonic bond that balanced the universe. Mystical geometric numbers, such as the tetractys, had the power to conquer death as well; it combined four triangles on a square base, its components adding up to a perfect 10. This pyramid shape was thought to perpetually preserve a soul departed from the body. The squared hypotenuse of the famous Pythagorean right angle triangle also took on a particularly powerful symbolism for a culture seeking to restore its buried truths. The theorem has a logical fallacy at its core. Rooted in the impossibility of determining the square root of 2, it requires acquiescing to the accommodation that two numbers can be mutually prime, simultaneously rational and irrational.

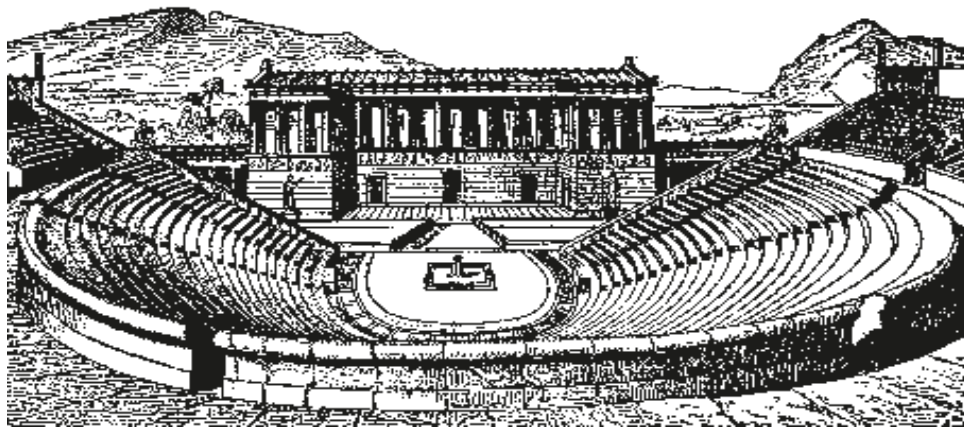


In the urban camp, the deity of choice was Dionysus. Like the alphabet and geometry, Dionysus worship had been brought to Greece by sailors. Like the rites of Demeter and Pythagoras, Dionysus' were also meant to be a secret. But it was no secret what popularized the new religion: consumption of

red wine in mass quantities, which in turn led to ecstatic dancing, fueled by the erotic strains of tympani and flute. Women were known to be highly susceptible to shedding all inhibitions in this fashion. It was said that in their frenzied state, they tore to pieces anything that crossed their paths.



Fortunately, there was a sacramental side to the ecstatic bliss Dionysus offered. He was the patron god of "re-creation" in every meaning of the word including drama. By 600 BCE, Arion of Mehtymna had written down the first formal lyrics to the dithyrambic ode to which each spring a chorus of fifty men, dressed in satyr costumes and wearing phallic headgear assembled to emote. Before very long, some of the song and dance began to include dialogue between a *protagonist* and the Chorus. By 535 BCE, under the reign of Peisistratus, a state run theater was constructed into the side of the Acropolis, with Thespis emerging as the winner of the first drama competition, at a new state holiday, 'The City Dionysia.'



Peisistratus himself was Dionysus-like in this iconoclastic approach to obstacles. Dubbed the Benevolent Tyrant, he had seized control of Athens by bypassing the reigning oligarchy altogether; instead he'd simply raised an army of his own and taken over. His base of support was, of course, the increasingly vocal *demos* of Athens and he did whatever needed to be done to please them. Fortunately, Peisistratus was as well a lover of the arts. In addition to legitimatizing Dionysus by

building the first theater, he commissioned the permanent authoritative transcription of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Then, in a true stroke of genius, he reduced the sting of the oligarchy's loss of political power by transferring full control of all civic pomp and ceremony to nine administrative archons. In no time, a calendar full of well-run fiscally sound celebrations was prominently erected in Athens' new Agora. The Festival Dionysia was held in the spring; Athena's Panathenian Games commanded the summer; there were days in winter sacred to Apollo, but what to do with the fall?

ATHENS HAD ANNEXED ELEUSIS in 600 BCE during the height of political instability. Up until now, it was easy to overlook the possibilities of this sleepy shrine. Now, however, the archons approached the priests and priestesses there and made them an offer they would have been foolish to refuse. A spruced-up Sacred Way between Athens and Eleusis would now lead to an expanded temple to Demeter. Oh, and there would be a slight modification of the storyline. After all, would it diminish any of the power of the formerly all-matriarchal ritual if it turned out that Demeter had had a son as well? who mystically *also* turned out to be her consort Dionysus?

More democratic than most of Athens' state-run operations, the Mysteries of Eleusis were open to all who spoke Greek, men and women, slave and citizen, and eventually even foreigners, who could afford to pay the fee, the equivalent of one week's wages. But there was one stipulation with a deep resonance to the Greek psyche. The rite could be joined only by those who had shed no blood, or who had undergone strictly supervised ritual cleansing. It was a proviso mythology had rendered particularly vivid. According to Greek myth, Heracles had come to Eleusis to cleanse himself after massacring the Centaurs. Orestes, too, had come to rid himself of pollution after having killed his mother, Clytemnestra. Anyone seeking to be initiated into the Mysteries at Eleusis had to first produce an affidavit attesting that he/she had previously partaken in the Lesser Mystery. These were conducted in late February during Anthestrion, the Month of Flowers at Agra on the east bank of the Illisos River. The Lesser Mysteries required fasting, sacrifice, and, finally, immersing oneself in the river.



The first stage of the Greater Mysteries again involved immersion, this time in the Bay of Eleusis, as well as undergoing three days of instruction under the tutelage of a personally assigned mentor. Following this, initiates now assembled back in Athens on Day 5 of the nine-day ordeal. Even then, all initiates were well aware that, at a future date, an even more sacred rite lay beyond, which was open only to those who had first successfully completed this one.

On the fifth day of the festival (19 Boedromion) the rites began to assume a distinct mimetic quality. Celebrants would proceed on foot in formal procession the seventeen miles from Athens back to Eleusis, bearing the sacred Hieria as well as a statue of the boy-god Iacchos. The initiates would then rest, again purify themselves, and maintain either a partial or complete fast. It is believed that they broke their fast as evening approached by drinking the "kykeon," a nonalcoholic sacramental beverage known as consisting of the same meal and water mixed with fresh pennyroyal mint leaves Demeter had consumed.

A long emotionally tense night lay ahead, which was designed to evoke an even deeper identification with Demeter's grief over the rape of her daughter. According to some reports, the initiates were now subjected to a carefully orchestrated experience which required them to grope their way through a dark passageway without direction or guidance.

Finally, however, all found their way to the sacred space.

To confirm their readiness to participate in the rites, when the *mystai* entered the Telesterion that night, they were required to utter in unison a special, formulaic password, or "synthema": "I fasted; I drank the kykeon; I took from the kiste [a cylindrical reliquary]; having done my task, I placed it in the basket, and from the basket into the kiste." This comprised Part One of the initiation: the *legomena* ("things said.")

Next, illuminated in a sudden blaze of torchlight, there would have been the joyous moment of Persephone's resurrection...? and/or: the mystical merging of Demeter and Dionysus...? and/or Persephone's possible mystical melding into the boy god Iacchos...? *some* wordless demonstration that, just as a kernel of wheat can sprout, itself become fecund, then wither into chaff, and yet sprout again, so, too, does each initiate live, die and become reborn. That was Step Two, the *dromena*. ("things done").

At last came Step Three: the *deiknymena* ("things shown"), when the Hierophant would withdraw alone into the Anaktoron (the sacred, secret chamber of the Telesterion) and reemerge with the Hieria, those most mysterious and holy relics of Demeter and Persephone. Possibly these, according to classical

scholar C. Kerényi in *Essays on a Science of Mythology: the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis* (Bollingen, 1963), consisted simply of a shaft of wheat, just as the Buddha is said to have wordlessly held up a perfect flower as the sole text of the Lotus Sermon.

Whatever it was provoked a moment of inarticulate profundity in whomever experienced it.

THE THEORY HAS BEEN ADVANCED (*The Road to Eleusis* authors Hofmann, Wasson, Ruck) that the wheat-based kykeon contained ergot, the mold from which LSD is derived, which would have certainly helped produce the elevated state of Oneness with the cosmos the Mysteries obviously engendered. I personally think that's plausible. But I also think it doesn't really matter. According to E.R. Dodds' classic work, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), this was a culture capable of and comfortable with blurring the lines between dream, trance, obsession, and creative meditation. It was a culture to whom Plato would demarcate four distinct forms of divinely induced madness, (distinct, that is, from "ordinary" mental illness.) Prophetic Madness, domain of dreams and oracular trance, was governed by Apollo; Poetic Madness by the Muses; Erotic Madness by Aphrodite and Eros; and Ritual Madness—the domain of Dionysus. But, whether psychedelically-fueled or no, we do know something wordless happened here that people didn't talk about because there were no words to describe it. We also know that whatever it was, this spiritual, mind-expanding experience became a part of the shared psyches of every single Athenian man, woman, and slave who took part in the Mysteries of Eleusis. It's an impressive list, for, to name a few, it includes Pericles, Socrates, Plato, Phidias and Praxiteles, Demosthenes, Thucydides, Herodotus, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, yes, and even Aristotle. Indeed, it was part of the collective experience of 10,000 people a year for 2,000 years!

Perhaps Mircea Eliade in his conclusion to *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Bollingen, 1964), approximates the dramatic alteration that clearly took place during this climactic moment of the Eleusian Mysteries. Speaking of the power evoked by Siberian shamans, he states:

Something must ...be said concerning the dramatic structure of the shamanic seance. We refer not only to the sometimes highly elaborate "staging" that obviously exercises a beneficial influence on the patient. But every genuinely shamanic seance ends as a spectacle unequalled in the world of daily experience... (a) world in which everything seems possible, where the dead return to life and the living die only to live again, where one can disappear and reappear instantaneously, where the "laws of nature" are abolished, and a certain superhuman "freedom" is exemplified and made dazzlingly present.

Indeed, Eliade takes the observation even further:

It is likewise probable that the pre-ecstatic euphoria constituted one of the universal sources of lyric poetry. In preparing his trance, the shaman drums, summons his spirit helpers, speaks a "secret language" or the "animal language," imitating the cries of beasts and especially the songs of birds. He ends by obtaining a "second state" that provides the impetus for linguistic creation and the rhythms of lyric poetry. Poetic creation still remains an act of perfect spiritual freedom. Poetry remakes and prolongs language; every poetic language begins by being a secret language, that is, the creation of a personal universe, of a completely closed world. The purest poetic act seems to re-create language from an inner experience that, like the ecstasy or the religious inspiration of "primitives," reveals the essence of things. It is from such linguistic creations, made possible by pre-ecstatic "inspiration," that the "secret languages" of the mystics and the traditional allegorical languages later crystallize...

INTO OUR EQUATION we are now ready to place Aeschylus' achievement that Sophocles would take further in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, and which Aristotle would extol.

It is said that Aeschylus realized his calling when Dionysus appeared to him in a dream and exhorted him to become a playwright. As a "townie" raised in Eleusis and privy his whole life to the backstage mechanics of the Mysteries, right down to the lighting, the sound effects, and even the garments worn by the priesthood, there can be no question that Aeschylus knew them intimately and respected their power. Moreover, Aeschylus's *de facto* affiliation with Eleusis was a mutual exchange. So impressive were the costumes Aeschylus designed for the stage, we are told, that the Hierophants and Dadouchoi at Demeter's Temple at Eleusis duplicated their "comeliness and dignity of dress" for their own dramatic ritual!

In addition to melding the Eleusian Mysteries with the rites of Dionysus, Aeschylus's Eleusis-inspired new medium successfully created a bridge as well across the divide between meaning and structure. Through a trilogy of tragedies (and one satyr play), Aeschylus revealed to an audience, each member of which had already acted as the protagonist in his or her own personal Eleusian drama, its most unvarnished impulses by means of stories and myths that had been ritualistically, cathartically crafted in a way that was both profoundly familiar, yet arrestingly original. He served as the experienced guide who knew how to safely expose an experienced audience to the previously unimaginable, whose impact was catharsis, to be sure, but epiphany as well. The Mysteries were private, subterranean, serenity-eliciting, and taboo to talk about. Athenian theater was public, performed in broad daylight, emotionally wrenching, and designed to provoke discussion. Aeschylus

Athens' revolutionary new form of government, direct democracy, which had only really begun functioning as we know it in 505 under Cleisthenes, placed a premium on the ability to speak and argue well in public. To develop this skill required a new form of education, one emphasizing public speaking. Rhetoric, Grammar and Logic (Dialectic) would comprise the *trivium*, three of the original seven liberal arts, which would also include the Pythagorean-influenced *quadrivium*: Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy. From across the Mediterranean, philosophers and teachers would be drawn to Athens in large number: Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Euthdemus, Prodicus, Evenus, Antiphon, Critias, and Socrates. Athens' population would swell to 150,000. The writings of Herodotus and Thucydides would give birth to the discipline of History. And over the next seventy-five years, from 479 to 404, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides would collectively pen nearly three hundred plays for audiences numbering in the neighborhood of 30,000, and even Plato would render his philosophy in the form of dialogue.

Still, how does a democracy deal with excellence? In Athens, the answer was: by self-destructively sentencing its most outstanding individuals to ten years of ostracism. Though in 458, Aeschylus's *Orestia* trilogy, his last, would win first prize at the Festival Dionysia, its third play, *Eumenides*, was a patriotic plea in the face of the coming Peloponnesian Wars to preserve classic morality and values. Decrying the abolition of the Areopagus, the assembly at the civic heart of Athens' tradition-protective aristocracy, will see the architect of tragedy tried for impiety and for revealing the secret workings of the Mysteries. Aeschylus would be acquitted, go into voluntary exile, and be dead within two years.

True to Aeschylus's premonitions, by the end of the fifth century, the Athenian experiment in radical democracy will have imploded and with it the genre of Dionysian tragedy with which it was intertwined. The art form Aeschylus's piety had pioneered, and which Sophocles perfected would, with Euripides, swiftly descend into shock theater, mimetically mirroring a society that had hubristically embarked upon a cavalcade of folly, atrocity, even self-inflicted plague, drum majored by the gross ineptitude of demagogues. *The Bacchae*, Euripides final work, will describe a society in denial and utterly out of control. It is the stomach-churning spectacle of catharsis devoid of enlightenment.



T I M E L I N E

447 Construction of Parthenon begins; rebuilding expansion of Eleusis	428 Plato Born	404 Athens surrenders to Sparta, Death of Sophocles, Euripides	399 Trial, Death of Socrates	343-340 Aristotle tutor to Alexander
431-429 2nd Peloponnesian War begins; Plague decimates Athens, Pericles is victim; Sophocles wins for Oedipus Tyrannos	425-415 Euripides, Aristophanes in ascendancy; Defeat of Athenian Fleet off Sicily	403-322 Democracy restored	388 Plato founds Academy in Athens	335 Aristotle returns to Athens, found Lyceum
	411-405 Oligarchy reassumes power in Athens		384 Birth of Aristotle	323,322 Death of Alexander; Death of Aristotle
			367 Aristotle => Plato's pupil	

Performed posthumously, *Bacchae* coincided with the death of both Sophocles and Euripides, as well as with Athens' surrender to Sparta and its allies in 404, and was the last of the Greek tragedies.

Forced to face its own hubris, Western Civilization found it had permanently lost its appetite for venturing into the uncharted labyrinths of the mind. For all time, Athens would become a cautionary tale. Where before it had been a "given" that the rational and irrational could, no, should be synthesized, now increasingly rigid religious dogma gradually gained primacy to split the universe into simpler, safer, easier to comprehend antagonistic dualisms: Flesh versus Spirit, Good versus Evil, God versus Satan. As for the morphing and blurring of irrational with the rational creative imagination, the nether world would begin to be declared "off limits," realm of demons and the damned. And so Western thought would remain for the next 2200 years, until the German Romantic movement.

FROM HIS MORE SOCIALLY STABLE perspective a generation later, Aristotle would dismiss the Eleusian Mysteries thusly: "The initiates were not going to learn anything, but they were to suffer, to feel, to experience, certain impressions and psychic moods"—never realizing that *this*, not the cathartic rush which accompanies and obscures it, IS the moment of enlightenment. With his pronouncement, Aristotle will miss the opportunity to become the enlightened guide with regard to creativity that he was in virtually every other sphere of knowledge. He will cut off any opportunity to show a student how to make the creative leap of faith across the gap into the invisible zone where he/she can experience, define, align and share the encounter with the extreme excellence that exists in each of us. For the student the result will be to feel threatened rather than supportive, whenever encountering excellence in others. By failing to guide a student to know what excellence actually feels like, Aristotle has ultimately guaranteed that for both student and teacher, true education at its most fundamental level will remain perpetually incomplete.

In Book 8 of his *Politics*, we begin to see the consequences of this position. What should children in an ideal society be taught about melody, rhythm, and harmonics? Aristotle will ask, rhetorically, of course. Is merely *listening* to music sufficient? Or should children be taught to play an instrument as well?

By the time Aristotle has finished the astonishing explanation that follows, the seductive power within the creative process will seem more dangerous than ever. Yes, youth should learn to play an instrument, Aristotle allows, but it shouldn't be anything too complicated—like the lyre—because mastery would take time away from achieving balance in the academics and athletics. Nor, he cautions, should children be allowed to take their mastery past a certain level, or an audience might actually be

driven to want to pay them money solely for the pleasure of hearing them—or a student who excelled might be tempted to enter a vulgar music competition.

And *under no circumstances* should that musical instrument be the flute!

...the flute is not an instrument which is expressive of moral character; it is too exciting. The proper time for using it is when the performance aims not at instruction, but at the relief of the passions...The ancients therefore were right in forbidding the flute to youths and freemen, although they had once allowed it. For when their wealth gave them a greater inclination to leisure, *and they had loftier notions of excellence*, being also elated with their success, both before and after the Persian War, with more zeal than discernment they pursued ***every kind of knowledge***....

Education must not result in going overboard. And so, the Liberal Arts of Aristotle's Academy, with its safely sanitized core curriculum, assumed the role it holds to this very day.