**THREE LINKS IN A GOLDEN CHAIN**

**Bigelow John,**

*Ph.D. (Philosophy) Cambridge University UK,*

*Ph.D. (English) Monash University, Australia,*

*Emeritus Professor of Philosophy School,*

*Philosophical, Historical and International Studies, Monash University,*

*Wellington Rd, Clayton, Victoria, Australia, 3800*

*ORCID: 0000-0002-3087-2809*

*john.bigelow@monash.edu*

**Abstract**

One of Plato’s dialogues, the *Timaeus* (*ca* 370 BCE), describes an abstract numerical pattern that is said to have guided the creative work of an artisan, the Demiurge, who designed both the soul that animates the material world as a whole and the souls of each of the sentient beings that live within this world. Any artist or artisan who took this creation story seriously might reasonably be motivated to take guidance from this same numerical design in his or her own creative work, hoping thereby to mirror the macrocosm in the microcosm of a work of art. Have any artists in history tried to do that? Three likely candidates will be examined here. The first is Plato himself (in a short narrative of the generation of the pantheon of Greek gods, which he recounts in the *Timaeus*). The second is an unknown Medieval author of an epic poem about Charlemagne (*The Song of Roland*, ca. 1100 CE). The third is Iris Murdoch (in a novel, *The Unicorn*, 1963).

**Keywords:** Plato, Platonism, Iris Murdoch, literary history, Medieval poetry, Greek mythology

**Introduction**

One of Plato’s dialogues, the *Timaeus* (*ca* 370 BCE), describes an abstract numerical pattern that is said to have guided the creative work of an artisan, the Demiurge, who created not only the harmonious ratios of the soul of the material world as a whole but also the original harmonies within each individual soul that lives within this astonishing cosmos. When a soul is born into a human body, however, accidents of life create psychological and sociological discords; and our task in life is to restore the original cosmic harmonies both within our own souls and therefore also in the social world around us.

If any artists or artisans wished to hold a mirror up to nature—and if they were to read this creation story in the *Timaeus* and to take it seriously—might therefore reasonably be motivated to take guidance from the same numerical design that had guided the Demiurge. The *Timaeus* encourages any such artists to hope that, if they can mirror the harmonious mathematical ratios of the macrocosm in a microcosm of their own creation, then this might help to nudge human souls back to their original, cosmic harmonies. Have any artists in history tried to do that? Three likely candidates will be examined here. The first work to be closely examined is a short narrative, written in ancient Greek by Plato himself in the *Timaeus* (and, for comparison, a brief mention will also be made of a similar short narrative by Hesiod). The second is an epic poem written in Norman French more than a thousand years later. The third is a novel written in English almost a thousand years after that.

The story told in the *Timaeus* implies that, for some artists, taking guidance from the same mathematical pattern that guided the Demiurge might sometimes help a good author in subtle ways to make a good narrative better. In the first place, it might make the work more interesting to those few (those very few) who notice the way those abstract patterns are embedded in the work. But it is also possible that those patterns might have subliminal effects even on those who do not consciously notice them.

For example, *counting* elements of one kind or another could be one way of achieving a *symmetry* in a work of art. And symmetries can be appreciated subliminally even by those who do not notice them consciously. For example, the Parthenon features the same number of columns left of the entrance as there are on the right. Rembrandt’s painting of *The Night Watch* features approximately as many figures on the left as on the right. A symphony might feature as many movements in major key as in a minor key. And so on. These numerical patterns can of course arise when an artist is working entirely intuitively. But *counting* does provide another way of achieving the same effect. And these subliminal effects of the counting that an author might do can work their subliminal magic on the author’s audience even if they do not bother to count.

Under a Pythagorean or Platonist way of thinking, symmetry arises when the relationship between two measurable magnitudes (of one kind or another) is approximately equal to the ratio of 1:1. When the ratio of wavelengths for two musical notes is approximately 1:1 they are said to be in *unison*, and this is perceived as a harmony. Other ratios generate other harmonies or discords that can be registered intuitively even by those who do not consciously understand how these effects are being produced. Analogously harmonious or discordant effects can be produced by analogous ratios embodied in visual, narrative, and other arts. The ratios that guided the Demiurge, according to Plato, are precisely the ratios that mark the pivotal harmonies and discords in music theory; and so there is a good chance that the human soul might be subliminally moved by these ratios in a work of art, with or without any conscious awareness of the reasons why this work affects the soul in the ways that it does.

To illustrate further, taking guidance from the pattern that guided the Demiurge could conceivably encourage a writer to *count* the number of male and female characters in a story. That could conceivably result in a gender balance, and this might have a subliminal effect that counteracts the ubiquitous predominance of males in narratives that are written by males. It will be argued that taking guidance from the numbers that guided Plato’s Demiurge did generate a gender-balance in a short narrative that Plato himself recounted in the *Timaeus*; and it will be argued that it had the same effect in Iris Murdoch’s *The Unicorn* (1963).

However, before attempting to gauge the positive or negative value of taking guidance from the abstract pattern that is described in the *Timaeus* 35a-36b (Plato, 1997: 1239), it would be appropriate to examine some examples of writers for whom we can credibly confirm that they have verifiably woven these numerical patterns into their narratives—and that they have done so in intricate ways that are more likely to have arisen deliberately than either subliminally or by chance alone.

**Numerical patterns in Plato’s *Timaeus***

Plato’s *Timaeus* 34a-35b describes an abstract pattern that starts with seven ratios that can be modelled by the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 8 and 27. Then the narrative adds twelve more further ratios, and then another eighteen after that, and it culminates in a reference to the ratio of 256:243,

Over the centuries, this numerical pattern has been mentioned by a handful of literary commentators. To illustrate with one example, Parker (1998/2011) identified this numerical pattern, called it ‘the World Soul’, and demonstrated that this numerical pattern is subtly echoed in the poetry of Sir Philip Sidney and others in his circle in the late sixteenth century in England. For example, Parker investigated the possibility that the reason why Sidney’s influential sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella* contains 108 sonnets is that this number arises naturally within the World Soul (and indeed it does, because 1+2+3+4+9+8 = 27 and 27x4 = 108).

In this essay, that same numerical World Soul will be subjected to investigations that are analogous in some respects to this prior work by Parker and others that he cites. But the investigations in the present essay will address different works of art, and different sources of evidence, and they will employ somewhat different logical forms of inference in justifying conclusions. The present investigation reinforces work by Bigelow (2019a, 2019b) and Bigelow and Leckey (forthcoming). But it draws on independent evidence that is not quite as complicated as the evidence examined in those earlier works. Those earlier investigations focussed especially on Shakespeare and Raphael, and in both of those cases the evidence is compelling but complicated. The present investigation focusses on cases in which the evidence is significantly simpler but just as compelling.

The evidence to be presented here will focus especially on a novel, *The Unicorn*, by Iris Murdoch (1963). This work has been selected for two reasons. In the first place, there is evidence that is readily accessible and relatively easily explained, and this evidence demonstrates conclusively that Murdoch not only knew the *Timaeus* well but also consciously (and not just subliminally) thought about it while she was writing *The Unicorn*. In the second place, there are readily observable numerical patterns in this novel that closely match the numerical patterns that are described in the *Timaeus*—under at least one credible interpretation of that exceedingly difficult text.

The interpretation of the *Timaeus* is difficult; and hence it will be useful to take guidance from an example of a past commentary on this text. And it will be useful to examine a commentary that extracts from this text the very same numerical structure as the one that aligns neatly with numerical patterns that are easily observable in Murdoch’s *The Unicorn*. Over the centuries, there have been at least a handful of commentaries by Platonists and Neoplatonists that explicitly articulate this distinctive numerical interpretation of the *Timaeus*. But attention will be focussed here on a relatively obscure commentary that turns out to be an especially rich source of further evidence.

The commentary that is to be examined here is one that can be found in annotations that were written in the margins of a manuscript copy of a Latin translation of Plato’s *Timaeus*. This Latin translation was first published by Calcidius in the year 321CE or thereabouts, and over the following centuries many copies were made by hand and were widespread circulated throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. Copying by hand was an expensive undertaking and required close attention. Hence the *Timaeus* was certainly read, and read closely, by many monks. The manuscript copy to be investigated here was probably written around the year 1100 CE. Little is known of either the origin of this manuscript or its early fortunes—not until the time that it was donated by Kenelm Digby to the Bodleian Library in Oxford in 1634, where it subsequently lay, catalogued as ‘MS Digby 23’, for about two centuries before it was finally brought to the world’s attention in 1835 by a young scholar, Francisque Michel (1809-1887).

When Michel found this manuscript in the Bodleian Library, what he found (to his great surprise and excitement) was that this Latin translation of the *Timaeus* was followed (within the same binding) by a narrative poem, *The Song of Roland*, which was written in Norman French. The last line of the poem says that it was written by Turoldus (‘Ci falt la geste que Turoldus declinet’, line 4002), but Turoldus has not been identified.

Understandably, neither Michel nor anyone else showed much interest in the fact that this epic poem in French was bound together with yet another manuscript copy of Plato’s *Timaeus*; but the discovery of this copy of *The Song of Roland* was immediately celebrated in France. Michel was made a *chevalier de la Legion d’honneur* in 1838, while he was still under 30 years of age. This poem became a kind of nation-making paradigm of both the French language and the French national character, and it was set as compulsory reading for generations of French children (Gaunt and Pratt, 2016: xi).

It will be argued here that this Digby version of *The Song of Roland* embodies many of the mathematical patterns that are vividly displayed in the margins of the Latin translation of Plato’s *Timaeus* with which it had been bound. To use a figure of speech, it is almost as if the numerical forms that are described in Plato’s *Timaeus* have been explained in the margins, and then (as a figure of speech) *reincarnated* in *The Song of Roland*. And there is evidence that these same numerical forms have been reincarnated yet again in Murdoch’s *The Unicorn*.

**Reincarnation**

Plato’s *Timaeus* is the most influential European source for a distinctive version of the doctrine of reincarnation. The doctrine is that every soul receives its first birth in a star but is then reborn into a succession of human or animal bodies until eventually it returns to the star within which it received its first birth. It is possible to take this doctrine literally—and if it is taken that way then it does not receive any significant endorsement from modern science. Furthermore, taken literally it is palpably heretical within almost every Christian, Hebrew or Muslim tradition. This is registered for instance in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*:

You also find it matter for perplexity

That souls seem to find their way back to the stars

Which is in accordance with what Plato taught.

Dante, *Paradiso* 4.23

Dante goes on to imply that this doctrine, taken literally would be wicked and heretical (line 69). And best science seems to tell us that it is not well grounded in evidence.

Nevertheless, there are also alternative and much more charitable ways of interpreting Plato’s words—by taking them as figures of speech. And, thus understood, Plato’s story of reincarnation points towards important truths in the near neighbourhood, truths which are readily endorsed by common sense and by science; and these truths are also compatible with most major religious traditions. Dante suggested something along precisely those lines:

What Timaeus argues concerning souls

Is not like that which can be seen here,

For he appears to be speaking literally.

He says that the soul returns to its star,

Believing that it has been carved out from there

When nature made use of it as a form;

Or perhaps his meaning is not what it seems

From the words he uses, and there may be some

Purport in them which is not to be derided.

Dante, *Paradiso* 4.49-57.

As Dante suggested, there may be charitable readings of Plato’s *Timaeus* in which there will be some purport that is not to be derided.

What did Plato mean by his talk of a ‘soul’ that moves from one material body to another? A soul might be thought of as if it were a kind of object, like a silver pellet that is lodged in the body while you are alive. Or it might be thought of as if it were a liquid or (better) a gas—breath—that is diffused throughout the body. In the *Timaeus*, however, the soul is not spoken of as if it were just another body that is made of some *substance* which is for a time located within the material body. Many of the relevant passages in the *Timaeus* are hard to understand; but sometimes the soul is described much more as if it were a *form*, a mathematical pattern (like a set of harmonious ratios), that is imperfectly instantiated, for a time, by a material body. For example, this reading receives some support from the *Timaeus* 34b-35b and 48e-50e. It is not certain that this is what Plato meant; nevertheless, this is a possible way of interpreting his text; and it is an interpretation that has been echoed in various ways down the ages, by at least some self-avowed Platonists. For example, a view very like that is summarized in one of the works of Bertrand Russell:

Now what I wish to suggest is that in this respect the cinema is a better metaphysician than common sense, physics, or philosophy. The real man too, I believe, however the police may swear to his identity, is really a series of momentary men, each different one from the other, and bound together, not by a numerical identity, but by continuity and certain intrinsic causal laws.

…

The particulars are to be conceived, not on the analogy of bricks in a building, but rather on the analogy of notes in a symphony. The ultimate constituents of a symphony (apart from relations) each of which lasts for only a very short time. We may collect together all the notes played by one instrument: these may be regarded as the analogue of the successive particulars which common sense would regard as successive states of one ‘thing’. But the ‘thing’ ought to be regarded as no more ‘real’ or ‘substantial’ than, for example, the role of the trombone.

Russell (1963:96-7).

And Russell is a Platonist of special relevance to an investigation of Murdoch, because she was a philosopher who was working in the English-speaking world at a time when Russell was an enormously influential figure.

When Russell wrote this paper for an address to the Philosophical Society of Manchester in 1915, he was at that time also working on deeply Platonic research into the foundations of mathematics, Platonism of this mathematical character is to be found for instance in Russell (1903) and Russell (1919). And there is a more accessible and introductory articulation of his enthusiasm for kindred ways of understanding Platonism that he explained in his chapter 9, ‘The world of universals’, and chapter 10, ‘On our knowledge of universals’, in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912: 91-110).

Following a Russellian line of thought, the soul may be thought to be like a melody that is being played on the body; and when the body dies another body can sometimes continue to play the very same melody. With that Russellian reconceptualization of reincarnation, consider the following passage from one of the books in the series of *Great Books of the Western World* edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins, for the Encyclopaedia Britannica:

Nicomachus also appears to have been considered one of the “golden chain,” or succession, of true philosophers; for Proclus, the fifth century Neo-Platonist, who belonged to that “chain,” claimed, on the basis of a dream, that he had within him the soul of Nicomachus.

Martin L. D’Ooge, biographical note to Nicomachus (1952: 808).

Among the things that Nicomachus clearly did have within him were certain seminal ideas that can be found in Plato’s *Timaeus*. It is worth exploring what Russell called the ‘continuity and certain causal laws’ that connect these Platonic ideas across the centuries between Plato and Iris Murdoch.

**Iris Murdoch**

Murdoch’s novels clearly recognize that—as one of her characters (Midge, in *The Good Apprentice*) remarks—‘Where there are people, there’s mess’. There is a chaotic element in all of Murdoch’s narratives, and not everything fits in predictable ways into any simplistic, preconceived Platonic patterns. Nevertheless, the presence of human deviations from abstract perfection is not inconsistent with Platonism, properly understood. Quite the contrary.

Murdoch was an acclaimed novelist. And she was also an accomplished academic philosopher. That is an unusual juxtaposition. Furthermore, among academic philosophers working in English in the late twentieth century she was also exceptional in two further respects—both in being a woman and in being an unapologetic Platonist.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Platonism was integral to the philosophical tradition of so-called *analytic* philosophy that was grounded in the work of Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore. And Murdoch worked within that analytic tradition. Nevertheless, in the late twentieth century Platonism was acutely unfashionable among the professional, English-speaking philosophers that Murdoch associated with throughout her academic career. All, or almost all, her philosophical colleagues were deeply influenced by a widespread and evangelical rejection of metaphysics, and Platonism stood as a paradigm of the kind of metaphysics that was being rejected by these philosophers. This widespread rejection of metaphysics came in the wake of Logical Positivism and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Furthermore, Platonism was equally unfashionable among the so-called Existentialists in Paris (who were said to be maintaining that ‘existence precedes essence’—which roughly means that ‘free choices’ are more important than Platonic abstractions). And, insofar as people understood German philosophers like Heidegger (in whom Murdoch took strikingly more interest than did most of her English-speaking colleagues), they, too, at least appeared to be treating Platonism as thoroughly misguided. Swimming against the tide ̶ on both sides of the English Chanel ̶ Murdoch wrote a book on *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), this being a title that echoes a deeply Platonic theme.

Furthermore, various recognizably Platonic themes are often readily identifiable in her novels. Furthermore, one of the key characters in this novel is a scholar called Max Lejour, who lives across the valley from Gaze Castle. As the story progresses it gradually emerges that a woman, Mrs Crean-Smith, has been confined in Gaze Castle for seven years under a kind of informal house arrest. Max does not ever visit her (even though it would be easy to do so) but only admires her from afar, sometimes with binoculars. His love for her is an instance of what is known as ‘Platonic love’, which avoids physical contact. And Max Lejour has for years been writing a book on Plato. In Chapter 8, on an occasion when conversations cease and each person is free to choose his or her own solitary pursuits, we read that ‘Max was eager to settle down to the *Timaeus*’.

Let us grasp that little thread in the tapestry—this passing mention of the *Timaeus*—and pull persistently on it to see what else might be attached. And there are many, many things that are intimately and intricately attached to the *Timaeus* ̶ as Murdoch well knew.

**Plato’s *Timaeus***

Plato’s *Timaeus* is a remarkable text. In Europe, it has been closely studied by at least a select few people in virtually every generation across about twenty-four centuries. In the Medieval centuries of so-called chivalry and ‘Courtly Love’, when other Platonic and Aristotelian texts had been utterly lost to Europe, a Latin translation of the *Timaeus* was always to be found in the library of virtually any Christian monastery.

The Medieval vision of the world is vividly encapsulated in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; and in that great work the *Timaeus* is explicitly discussed in *Paradiso* 4.49-58. A few centuries after Dante, in the Italian High Renaissance, the *Timaeus* became even more visibly influential. In the

Vatican, in Raphael’s iconic fresco known as *The School of Athens*, a book with the title ‘TIMEO’ can be seen in the hand of the figure that represents Plato—right at the focal point (the ‘vanishing point’, the perspectival ‘point at infinity’) for the entire fresco. And this text contains a bewitching description of a mathematical pattern that is said to have guided the creation of the soul of the material world. Analogously, many Christians believe that this material world must surely be a work of profound beauty, because it was made by God.

As Murdoch’s character Max Lejour says (in Chapter 12): ‘Plato tells us … We can see wisdom only darkly. But we can see beauty quite plainly, whoever we are, and we don’t need to be trained to love it.’ That is, we respond *instinctively* to the presence of beauty both in nature and in works of art. Thus, if the mathematical patterns in the World Soul can contribute to the *beauty* that is embodied in a work of art, then our souls will respond subliminally—even if the presence of these mathematical patterns never rises to the surface of conscious awareness.

**Digby 23**

What, then, are the bewitching numbers that are intricately woven into the Platonic World Soul? The *Timaeus* says that, in setting out to create the world, the Demiurge began by mixing together *six* metaphysical ingredients in a bowl. (These ingredients were: two kinds of Being, two kinds of Sameness and two kinds of Difference.) He then extracted from the resulting mixture *seven* initial ‘portions’.

Just as seven fence posts will need to be connected by six stretches of barbed wire, so too did the Artisan’s initial seven portions inevitably create six gaps, or *intervals*, that separated the initial portions. Each of these intervals will be measured by a *ratio* in which one of these portions stands to the other. Within each of these six intervals, the Artisan then interpolated two further portions, which stand in new ratios to the earlier portions. One of these new portions will be measured to be an *arithmetic* *mean* and the other one a *harmonic* *mean*.

The words in the *Timaeus* 36a give the formal definition of what arithmetic and harmonic means are: ‘in each interval there were two middle terms, one exceeding the first extreme by the same fraction of the extremes by which it was exceeded by the second, and the other exceeding the first extreme by a number equal to that by which it was exceeded by the second’. Most people will find this difficult to follow. Nevertheless, the monks who copied Digby 23 understood it well, and explained it in three elegant diagrams that they carefully inscribed in the margins.

The first of these marginal images sets out a diagram of the initial chain of seven ‘portions’ that the Artisan is said to have extracted from his ‘bowl’. In this image, the seven initial portions are marked by seven numerals, which are set out in the form of an inverted Roman ‘V’, or a Greek lambda. The image looks very like the Eiffel Tower. There are gorgeous, coloured, on-line images provided by the Bodleian Library for pages 49-52 of MS Digby 23 (and these initial patterns are hugely embellished (in an appendix to the entire manuscript, on pages 102-110):

**The First Digby Lambda**

*i*

*ii iii*

*iiii ix*

*viii xxvii*

These numbers are also illustrated (not in the *Timaeus* order, but in the order 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 27) in the margin of page 52 of MS Digby 23. In this sequence of seven ‘portions’, there are three ‘double intervals’ (which are punctuated by the numbers 1, 2, 4, 8), and three ‘triple intervals’ (punctuated by the numbers 1, 3, 9, 27). In Plato’s text, what are most important are the ‘portions’ and the relationships among them. What are important are not the *numerals*, nor even the *numbers* that these numerals represent, but the *ratios* that hold among these numbers. The importance of these ratios (as opposed to the numbers themselves) is clearly registered in the margins of the Digby manuscript, when the first diagram is followed by a second diagram. In this second diagram, each of the initial seven Digby numbers has been multiplied by 6 (to clarify, Roman numerals like ‘*vi*’ have been replaced by Arabic numerals like ‘6’):

**A ‘revised version’ of the First Digby Lambda**

**6**

**12 18**

**24 54**

**48 162**

Here, the *numerals* and the *numbers* have been changed, but the relationships, the *ratios*, among these numbers, remain the same as they were in the First Lambda. Having multiplied all the initial numbers by six, it is then possible to introduce all the required ‘arithmetic and harmonic means’ ̶ without resorting to any ugly fractions:

**The Second Digby Lambda**

**6**

8 9

9 12

**12** **18**

16 27

18 36

**24** **54**

32 81

36 108

**48** **162**

This encapsulates what will be called ‘the Digby interpretation’ (or ‘the (7+12)-interpretation’) of the initial structure of the Platonic World Soul.

**Plato’s imitates the Demiurge**

Not long after the description of the World Soul in the *Timaeus* 35b-36b, the text also presents the reader with a ‘micro-narrative’ that distils the entire pantheon of hundreds of Greek gods into a thumbnail sketch that explicitly names only *nine* of them:

Gaia and Ouranos gave birth to Okeanos and Tethys; and from these came Phorkys, Kronos and Rhea and all the others in those early generations of the gods. Then from these came Zeus and Hera and the others whose names we know, and the children of these.

Plato, *Timaeus*, 40*c*-41*a*.

This thumbnail theogony begins with Gaia and six of her children, four males (♂) and two females (♀). It is possible to lay out these seven divinities, mnemonically, on the Digby Lambda, as follows:

**Lambda** **«Seven Gods»**

1. Phorkys (♂)

2. Rhea (♀) 3. Kronos (♂)

4. Tethys (♀) 9. Okeanos (♂)

8. Gaia (♀) 27. Ouranos (♂)

In the Lambda sketched above, females are associated with even numbers and males with odd numbers. Relatively more senior divinities are placed lower down, and more junior divinities higher up. There are iconic earth-divinities at the bottom, water-divinities above the earth, and air-divinities above the waters. At the top, Phorkys does, initially, appear to be something of an anomaly. He is one of four so-called ‘Old Men of the Sea’, which does not immediately associate him with the element of fire (to follow the associations of the others with earth, water and air). And it is somewhat surprising to find such a seldom-mentioned divinity included in such a very short list of the major divinities. Nevertheless, despite that one apparent anomaly, this little group of seven gods, when arranged on the World Soul, stands as a remarkably neat summary of their genealogy.

In Plato’s sketch, these initial seven divinities are then followed by the descendants of this first generation. These descendants cluster around a second family group, which went under the name of ‘the Olympians’. Of these, only Zeus and Hera are explicitly named in this passage in the *Timaeus*. But Plato could have relied on his readers to know that the core family group of the Olympians was canonically memorized in a list comprising the Twelve Olympians. This Olympian family began with the six children of Kronos and Rhea:

**Lambda "Children of Kronos and Rhea"**

1.

2. Hera (♀) 3. Zeus (♂)

4. Demeter (♀) 9. Poseidon (♂)

8. Histia (♀) 27. Hades (♂)

Again ̶ as with the generation comprising Gaia and her children ̶ we have earth-divinities at the bottom, water-divinities above them, air-divinities above that, and an apparent anomaly at the top. And again, we have more senior siblings assigned to larger numbers, younger siblings with smaller numbers; and females are assigned to even numbers, males to odd numbers.

Over the centuries, different authorities fashioned different canonical lists of the ‘Twelve Olympians’. For example, some authorities excluded Hades from the list ̶ perhaps because he lived in the Underworld and not on Mount Olympus. Nevertheless, setting aside differences over a few details, it was generally agreed that, one way or another, the canonical core of the Olympian family should be numbered as twelve. According to Apollodorus (1997, pp. 162-6) one standard list in late antiquity included six females and six males:

♀: Aphrodite, Athene, Artemis, Hera, Histia, Demeter,

♂: Apollo, Ares, Hermes, Hephaistos, Poseidon, Zeus.

All this fits the Digby Lambda like a hand into a custom-made glove.

**Hesiod imitates the Demiurge**

Plato is not the only writer to have summarized the genealogy of the gods in a kind of *micro*-*narrative*. Centuries before Plato wrote the *Timaeus*, Hesiod had written an epic poem called the *Theogony*, which assembled an extremely influential and comprehensive catalogue of virtually all the Greek gods. The *Theogony* opens with an ‘invocation of the Muses’ and a foretaste of what they have inspired Hesiod to recount in what is to follow. And, within that introductory invocation (in lines 11 -21) there is a very brief list of the following (7 + 12) = 19 names:

***Seven males*:**

Zeus, Apollo, Poseidon, Iapetos, Kronos, Helios, Okeanos,

***Twelve females*:**

Hera, Athene, Artemis, Themis, Aphrodite, Hebe,

Dione, Leto, Eos, Selene, Gaia, Nyx.

Hesiod’s text comes from a deeply patriarchal society; and in that context it is noteworthy that this thumbnail sketch contains almost twice as many goddesses as gods. However, patriarchy is nevertheless affirmed − because the males can be aligned with the seven primary positions in the World Soul and the females with merely the twelve means that mediate among them.

**The Digby *Timaeus* and *The* *Song* *of* *Roland***

Are there any other literary texts that can be mnemonically aligned with the World Soul in a manner analogous to the illustrations that can be found in the texts of Hesiod and Plato? Yes, there are, and here is one example.

*The Song of Roland* is an epic poem (or song) about Charlemagne, who was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800 CE. After more than a century of oral transmission this epic was finally written down; and by far the best written version of this poem is one that survived for centuries in, as far as we know, a single manuscript in Oxford, namely the manuscript catalogued in the Bodleian Library as ‘Digby 23’. That is, *The Song of Roland* survived in a manuscript copy that was found, by Michel in 1835, bound together in the same volume with Plato’s *Timaeus*. And this version of *The Song of Roland* does contain numerical patterns closely analogous to the patterns in Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Plato’s *Timeaeus*.

Just as *seven* and *twelve* are salient in Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Plato’s *Timaeus*, so too are they salient in *The Song of Roland*, which opens with the lines:

*Charles the king, our emperor great,*

*Has been a full seven years in Spain. lines 1-2.*

*The information conveyed in these lines is repeated many times:*

*It has been a full seven years since we came to Spain line 197.*

*You have been in this land for seven years line 266.*

*The mighty emperor in his great majesty*

*Has been a full seven years in Spain lines 2609-2610.*

*He’s been in this land already seven full years line 2736.*

In addition, we are introduced (in stanza 8, lines 104-107) to a list of the proper names of the seven closest companions of Charlemagne. Soon after meeting these *sevens*, we are also given a list of the proper names of Charlemagne’s *twelve* barons. These twelve are listed in stanza 12, which has 12 lines. One of these barons is Ganelon, who has a vicious dispute with Roland that provides the premise for the entire *Song* *of Roland*:

‘My lord,’ said Ganelon, ‘this is all Roland’s work:

I shall bear him ill will for the rest of my life,

And Oliver, because he is his companion.’ *Stanza 24, lines 322-24*.

In historical studies, imaginative re-enactments (so-called thought experiments, if you were) can sometimes be enjoyable and rewarding. And sometimes these re-enactments might throw up new ideas that can later be either corroborated or disconfirmed *post facto*. In that spirit, let us consider one possible mnemonic alignment of Charlemagne’s twelve barons with the twelve portions that were introduced as harmonic and arithmetic means in the Second Digby Lambda. However, in this imaginative re-enactment, the seven initial Digby numbers will be replaced by corresponding musical notes. The *Timaeus* has repeatedly been associated, over the centuries, with a notion of ‘the music of the spheres’. Its numbers might therefore aptly be associated not only with the heavenly bodies but also with musical notes.

A musical note has a frequency and a wavelength, both of which can be measured by numbers. (Relative wavelengths of musical notes are easier to understand than relative frequencies, because wavelengths can be directly correlated with the relative lengths of vibrating strings that are playing that note.) Hence each of the Digby numbers or ratios can be correlated with a corresponding musical note. For instance, if the note G were assigned a wavelength of 6 units (under some designated measure of length), then 12 units will measure the wavelength of the note an octave below G; 18 will measure the wavelength of the note C a fifth below that; and so on. Thus, if we transform the Digby Lambdas by replacing numbers by notes, it is possible to rewrite these diagrams in the following form (the notes are given the standard names A. B. … G; and transposition down in octaves will be denoted by sub-scripts):

**A First Musical Digby Lambda**

**G**

**G (1 octave)** **C (1 octave)**

**G (2 octaves)** **F (3 octaves)**

**G (3 octaves)** **B-*flat* (4 octaves)**

The ‘double and triple intervals’ then become ̶ musically ̶ transpositions of notes up or down in *octaves* and *fifths*, respectively. Given this Musical Lambda, the twelve ‘harmonic and arithmetic means’ can also be translated into musical notes. And Charlemagne’s twelve barons could then be mnemonically aligned with those twelve ‘musical means’:

**A Second Musical Digby Lambda**

**G**

Ogier D C **Roland**

**Oliver** C G **(1 octave)** Turpin

**G (1 octave)** **C (1 octave)**

Tedbald D **(1 octave)** F **(2 octaves)** Richard

Ascelin C **(1 octave)** C **(2 octaves)** **Gerer**

**G (2 octaves)** **F (3 octaves)**

Miles D **(2 octaves)** B-flat **(3 octaves)** **Ganelon**

**Gerin** C **(2 octaves)** F(**3 octaves)** Henry

**G (3 octaves)** **B-flat (4 octaves)**

‘Gerin’ and ‘Gerer’ are strikingly similar names: and in the mnemonic Lambda above they are assigned to the very same note. Analogously, Oliver and Roland are, as you might say, ‘on the same wavelength’: and they too are assigned to the very same note. By contrast, the discord between Roland and Ganelon is the driving force behind the entire story: and their notes are C and B-flat (transposed three octaves), which are musically discordant with one another (that is, when superimposed these two notes generate audible interference beats in the natural harmonics).

This is only an imaginative historical re-enactment. It should be acknowledged that, given only the evidence to hand so far, there might never have been anyone in history who ever had any thought of associating Charlemagne’s twelve knights with musical notes. What a ‘historical re-enactment’ generates is not a proof. But it can sometimes generate a hypothesis that is worth testing.

***The Unicorn***

In Murdoch’s *The Unicorn*, unlike *The Song of Roland*, we do have easily verifiable and unambiguous textual evidence, internal to the work itself, that the author did explicitly think about Plato’s *Timaeus*—and that the author thought about the *Timaeus* while writing this very story. The *Timaeus* is explicitly cited as the subject matter for the life’s work of one of the central characters, Max Lejour.

I am not able to cite any evidence that Murdoch embodied any distinctively *musical* correspondences of the kinds that have been illustrated in the thought experiment described above. But there is ample evidence that she did at least embody *numerical* correspondences that closely resemble the ones that are found in *The Song of Roland*.

*The Unicorn*, like *The Song of Roland*,is replete with readily observable groupings of *sevens* and *twelves*. There are 35 Chapters in *The Unicorn*. The Chapters in *The Unicorn* are grouped into Parts, which are numbered from One to *Seven*. Part One is divided into Chapters 1 to 7; Part Two is divided into Chapters 9 to 14. And so on.

The literary technique used is that of ‘third person limited’, and the point of view alternates in a way that aligns closely with the division into Parts and Chapters. For instance, Part 1 is written from the point of view of a woman, Marian Taylor; Part 2 is written from the point of view of a man, Effingham Cooper; and so on. In Chapter 1 the reader sees the arrival of Marian Taylor at Greytown Junction from her point of view. In the final chapter we see Greytown Junction from the point of view of Effingham Cooper, and we see Marian Taylor only in the distance, at the far end of the railway platform, getting into a second-class railway carriage. This illustrates the way in which Murdoch’s use of this technique of ‘third person limited’ can carry a powerful emotional impact.

In Chapter 1 we are introduced to the proper names for *seven* fictional characters:

(1) Mr Scottow; (2) Marian Taylor; (3) Jamesie Evercreech; (4) Geoffrey;

(5) Mrs Crean-Smith; (6) Max Lejour; (7) Effingham Cooper.

The number *seven* not only numbers salient groupings of central protagonists, it is also mentioned frequently by the characters themselves:

Chapter 4:

‘They are seven years old’ [said of shoes that appear new because they have been seldom used];

Chapter 5:

‘How long has he been here?’ / ‘Seven years.’

‘You say Mr Scottow came to this region seven years ago?’ /

‘Oh, no. He came to Gaze Castle seven years ago’ …

… So he too had fairy blood.

‘Fell over the cliff and lived. Seven years ago.’;

Chapter 7:

‘That was seven years ago.’

‘… since that time seven years ago.’

‘You mean ever since, seven years?’

‘Yes. And they think that at the end of seven years something will happen to her.’

‘Why seven years? Just because that’s the time things go on for in fairy tales? But it is the end of seven years now!’;

Chapter 13:

‘…will he set him free after seven years?’;

Chapter 26:

‘… the breaking of the seven-year vigil …’;

Chapter 28:

‘What were you doing all these seven years if you were not “using me”?’

There are no such salient and explicit references to *twelve* in *The Unicorn*. And groupings of twelve are nowhere near as obvious as groupings of seven. But nor are there are any explicit references to *twelve* in Hesiod’s or Plato’s micro-theogonies. And significant groupings of twelve are much harder to spot in Hesiod’s and Plato’s micro-theogonies than they were in *The Song of Roland*. But they are there, nevertheless. And the same is true of Murdoch’s *The Unicorn*. After being introduced to seven character-names in Chapter One we are introduced to twelve more proper names of ‘characters-or-pets’ in the remainder of the novel, six females and six males:

♀ ♂

(i) Violet Evercreech (ii) Freda Darsey (vii) Strawberry Nose (viii) Tadg

(iii) Alice Lejour (iv) Elizabeth (ix) Philip Lejour (x) Peter Crean-Smith

(v) Carrie (vi) Mrs Scottow (xii) Denis Nolan (xii) Sandy Shapiro.

Has this list been engineered merely by the *ad hoc* wishful thinking? The inclusion of the proper names of pets (‘Strawberry Nose’ and ‘Tadg’) might initially prompt suspicions. But the inclusion of these names is far from *ad hoc*. In many of her novels Murdoch does regularly includes one or two pets in her cast of characters. For example, in her first novel, *Under the Net*, a dog and a cat, Maggie and Mister Mars, clearly function as two of the prominent and recurring characters in the narrative (especially Mister Mars, who is a film star). And in *The Unicorn* a much-loved goldfish Strawberry Nose is introduced with the words, ‘What have you got there, Denis? Or should I ask, who have you got there?’

Murdoch’s groupings of proper names of *persons*-*or*-*pets* is also mirrored by the groupings of proper names of *places-or-cars*. In Chapter 1, we are introduced to *six* proper names for places:

(1) Greytown Junction; (2) Greytown; (3) Gaze Castle;

(4) Blackport; (5) the Scarren; and (6) Riders.

And to these six place-names there is good reason add one more significant proper name that is also written with initial upper-case letters:

(7) the Land Rover.

Later in the novel ‘the Land Rover’ is joined by ‘the Humber’, ‘the Morris’ and ‘the Austin Seven’ (yet another *seven*). In dramatic action in Chapter 17, the four named cars all become crucial to the plot—and keeping track of the named cars turns out to be almost as important as keeping track of the names of the major human characters. It is not *ad hoc* to add the proper names of cars to the list of items that Murdoch correlates with the numbers on the Platonic World Soul.

In addition to the *seven* proper names of places-or-cars in Chapter 1, there are *twelve more* in Chapters 2 to 35:

*Places-or-cars that characters occupy*: *Other places that are merely mentioned*:

(i) the Morris (ii) the Humber (vii) Paris (viii) Rome

(iii) the Austin Seven (iv) the University (ix) Madrid (x) Spain

(v) Devil’s Causeway (vi) New York (xi) Marrakesh (xii) Tangiers.

Deliberately documenting, in this manner, a long series of reincarnations of the World Soul would be a highly technical enterprise. It might perhaps be described as a ‘memome project’.

**Conclusion**

Over the centuries, there has evidently been a growing series of literary works that richly embody the mnemonic patterns described in Plato’s *Timaeus*. These works could all be linked together, figuratively speaking, in a golden chain of materially distinct embodiments of one and the same Platonic World Soul.

The material differences among these material incarnations are important. Each is interestingly different from the ones that have come before. Sometimes what we love most about works of art are the ways in which they all deviate, each in their own ways, from the simple underlying patterns that they all share. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that, despite superficial differences, many and diverse works in a Platonic golden chain are all embodiments of the same underlying pattern. And that is worth knowing. Each link has its own individual beauty; but the chain, too, has a beauty of a different kind, over and above the mere sum of the beauties of each of the individual links. Embodiment is important; but the soul is important too.

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