

**First Breath:  
Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle**

**I**

Of that lost moment when our kind fresh moved, ill -torn  
From failing forest, cursed to hunt with stealth and wit  
Upon fertile Savannah plains; when consciousness  
Through emptiness first seeped and stirred primeval man  
From bare -breathed existence, to pause and upward glance,  
To catch the seasons strewn across the belt of heaven.  
Edwin peered back through mists of greedy time to search  
That unctuous age, with seeded thoughts now pregnant made,  
By intense reverence bred of revelations new;  
He saw a daily fire cross a vaulted sky  
Vast times before his bridled fires were taboo welt,  
Then, falling like a subject lord, grace -filled he knelt.

**II**

Out -pouring virgin praise for regularity,  
To mark the years in that new garden, stones were set:  
Slabbed monoliths fine -hewn and dragged by stubborn men  
To build a henge or pyramid and scar their earth  
With high honour for the divine lights of heaven.  
Prolific tribes fixed seasons from the orbiting marks,  
With repetitious Zodiacal starry signs;  
Or else compiled by radiant moon's soft ebb and flow  
Their priestly calendars for crop and harvest time;  
Some turned the astral symbols for their artful guile  
Acclaiming of themselves rules others laboured for -  
With forecast, swelling grain replenishing their store.

**III**

And all this time as crops swelled plump, and wars were fought;  
While children cried and horses tamed to steer a plough;  
With fires kept and cooking done about crude hearths  
Not knowing if their solemn labours might yield fruit  
In times yet unimagined to their rustic days,  
Some few lone men tracked and marked their observations.  
Great Empires feed on calendars for rote and tithe;  
First with precision Babylonians captured time  
And caged it, extruding years by seconds counted,  
With stark eclipses noted well and marvelled at,  
To keep the fleeting instant for generations,  
Until their torch passed on, down succeeding nations.

**IV**

Though no one man could dare compute the course of heaven,  
Yet some there were who puzzled at the wayward signs:  
Slight noted shifts within the ordered span of lights;  
While agile planet wanderers would errant run,  
Charted by watchful men through scores of centuries.  
Egyptian goddess Isis named bright Sirius,

Whose dawn approach foretold the rising, fertile Nile:  
Yet even she would lag two weeks each thousand years,  
Until too tardy to predict a flooding land.  
This long, through dynasties of Pharaohs, did it take  
To chart numerous regressions in the mystic seven,  
And note a perturbation in the spin of heaven.

## V

Now bloody war, allied to self -interested states,  
Becomes the backdrop to an envied, thrusting age,  
Natal by degree to visionary men  
Who mark the spheres of heaven with geometry:  
Dividing lands by straight -edged rule and compasses  
To straddle continents and touch the distant stars.  
They lay a measure to the ceaseless, strutting moon,  
Computing breadth and height above this fractious earth  
From records past of lonely men. These gods of Greece  
Who leave convention's haven far beneath contempt,  
Do dare ascend the awesome slopes of ignorance,  
Generating concepts, like true monarchs, by their stance.

## VI

Edwin's swift stare across the screens of history  
Discovered holy Buddha knelt in gentle prayer;  
And marching on, Confucius the mighty one,  
Compelling Eastern followers to contemplate.  
So all -persuasive was their power, Edwin fell swayed,  
And lingered long by these mystic tempting scenes  
Of fixed serenity and idle certainty,  
Contented there to dwell within those fragrant gardens.  
Then Cheryl called, and broke the spell; rebuking him  
With plucked notes from her old guitar. She strummed a chord  
Enticing harmony from simple stretched -gut strings  
Lifting his reverie on humble music's wings.

## VII

Cheryl held fixed the year, then spun location's dial  
Transporting Edwin unto rapturous paradise:  
The isle of Samos. Young and sweet with honeyed streams  
Gushing cool and quiet past Queen Hera's temple;  
Jealous wife of Zeus and Queen of Heaven, here honoured,  
Till now returning honour through Pythagoras.  
His boyhood heard the sea -strong rhythm's pounding pulse;  
While tuned lyre strings called softly to his ear,  
And matched the plectrum nodes which Cheryl calmly plucked:  
Linked octaves, fifths or major thirds by length of string!  
These pleasing harmonies and intervals of sound  
Were held in perfect ratios - and by digits bound.

## VIII

So small the step from music, to disgorge a law  
And torch the cobwebbed timber of a secret realm;

For our earth might still encoat her sheen in beauty,  
Or sprightly dance on insects' burnished wings; her tents  
Could yet pour love and pride, emotion rage or joy  
Into our hearts, or sink in deeps of mourning sorrow.  
This movement of the strings graced movement in the heavens -  
Caught on crystal spheres to tinkle rhythmically.  
The gods themselves came tumbling to this perfect wheel:  
No fragment may escape when science wields his key;  
Nor even may we hide in death's rough bloated grange -  
Pythagoras taught, "All we know is number's range."

## IX

Embracing by eclectic power the hope of man,  
Philosophy bade body, soul and mind unite;  
Cosmology and medicine latched to counting frames  
By fusing maths with music and that heavenly light,  
Revealing sacred law in geometric form:  
Religious pentagram and cabal rite conjoined  
To natural number and the cosmic influence.  
As triangle and squares could magic sides equate,  
This axis-line of music bridged the far flung stars  
Rekindling now in Titan's heirs that holy spark:  
*Ekstasis* birthed through science in the conscious mind -  
That music infinite, eternal, hence divine.

## X

Through number's timeless dance the Brotherhood achieved  
Religious contemplation of the mysteries;  
Attunement of the strings to intervals of scale  
Brought spiritual release through cerebral delight.  
Each fervent theorem conceived by mortal man  
Marks his rebirth like some eternal deity.  
Such science theories formed the wonders of the world,  
Fresh-firing hope within the frame of all who seek  
That greater, lasting world of deep, unending truth.  
Geometry draws us away from worldly death:  
*Katharsis* - purging of the soul, its pain removed;  
Behold the 'ah' of art; the sigh of science loved.

## XI

But from this Golden Height, which freed our globe to slide  
Among God's lamps with measured orbit, spin and weight,  
Two men arose, who screwed it down again in clay:  
The mystic, Plato, foe of natural science,  
Thought: "All is shadow, without substance, grain or form.  
Therefore, observing it by eye, no point is served,"  
Condemning man to be shut up in caves again,  
To watch but flickering shadows on the wall of life.  
Next, Aristotle, arrogant observer, taught:  
"Now all is known. Investigation can add naught  
To what I have recorded. Change goes against God,  
And hence is kept below heaven's luminary rod."

## XII

Vainglorious, opinionated sorcerers!  
Traducing Ptolemy to err by Plato's words:  
"All motion must in perfect circles run," he said,  
"To move at steady speed, their course lathe-turned in Heaven."  
While Aristotle took man from the farthest reach of God,  
Constraining him within this inner sphere to die:  
The Fall in permanence by devolution came,  
With ultimate defeat below man's feet in Hell;  
Above, 'The Prime Mover' lay locked beyond man's gaze.  
With Christ, the breakdown was complete: the Dark Age brought  
Divorce of reason from belief, contempt for thought.

(c) John Marr

### References

#### **Pythagoras**

*Russell, Bertrand (1961) History of Western Philosophy*

(p.49) Pythagoras was intellectually one of the most important men that ever lived, both when he was wise and when he was unwise. Mathematics begins with him, and in him is intimately connected with mysticism. The influence of mathematics on philosophy has ever since been both profound and unfortunate.

Native of the island of Samos, flourished about 532 BC. Polycrates became tyrant of Samos c. 535 BC. Pythagoras visited Egypt and learnt much wisdom there. Ultimately established himself at Croton in southern Italy.

(p.50) He may be described as a combination of Einstein and Mrs Eddy. He founded a religion of which the main tenets were the transmigration of souls and the sinfulness of eating beans.

(p.52) For Pythagoras, the passionate sympathetic contemplation was intellectual, and issued in mathematical knowledge. In this way, 'theory' gradually acquired its modern meaning; but for all who were inspired by Pythagoras, it retained an element of ecstatic revelation.

(p.53) Modern definitions of truth, such as those of pragmatism and instrumentalism, which are practical rather than contemplative, are inspired by industrialism as opposed to aristocracy. [but]...it is to gentlemen that we owe pure mathematics. The contemplative ideal, since it led to the creation of pure mathematics, was the source of a useful activity; this increased its prestige, and gave it a success ...it might not otherwise have enjoyed.

(p.53) Most sciences at their inception have been connected with some form of false belief, which gave them a fictitious value. Astronomy was connected with astrology, chemistry with alchemy. Mathematics was associated with a more refined type of error. ...it appeared certain, exact, and applicable to the real world; moreover it was obtained by mere thinking, without the need of observation. Consequently, it was thought to supply an ideal, from which every-day empirical knowledge fell short. It was supposed, on the basis of mathematics, that thought is superior to sense, intuition to observation. If the world of sense does not fit the world of mathematics, so much the worse for the world of sense.

(p.216) (Aristotle, 'On The Heavens'): Things below the moon are subject to generation and decay: from the moon upwards, everything is ungenerated and indestructible. The earth, which is spherical, is at the centre of the universe...The heavens are perfectly spherical, and the upper regions are more divine than the lower. The stars and planets...motion is due to that of spheres to which they are attached.

This theory provided many difficulties for later ages. Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo had to combat Aristotle as well as the Bible in establishing the view that the earth is not the centre of the universe, but rotates once a day and goes round the sun once a year. The Aristotelian belief, though accepted by medieval Christians, is a product of the pagan worship of sun and moon and planets.

(p.224) Archimedes, a younger contemporary of Aristarchus, says that Aristarchus brought out a book consisting of certain hypotheses... 'that the fixed stars and the sun remain unmoved, that the earth revolves about the sun in the circumference of a circle, the sun lying in the middle of the orbit'. Cleanthes

thought it was the duty of the Greeks to indict Aristarchus of Samos on the charge of impiety for putting in motion the Hearth of the Universe (i.e. the earth).

(p.225) Copernicus perhaps came to know something, though not much, of the almost forgotten hypothesis of Aristarchus, and was encouraged by finding ancient authority for his innovation. Otherwise, the effect of this hypothesis on subsequent astronomy was practically nil.